

Brian Warner (ed.): *Lady Herschel Letters from the Cape 1834-1838.* Friends of the South African Library: Cape Town, 1991. 172 pp. Illus. R38,00 (exclusive). ISBN 0869680986

The Cape letters of Margaret, Lady Herschel, wife of the celebrated astronomer and polymath Sir John Herschel, are a very fine addition to this new series, published by Friends of the South African Library, Cape Town. Judiciously edited and annotated, this volume holds great interest for a wide range of readers, including, of course, local and regional historians.

For those particularly interested in astronomy, the references to Sir John's astronomical observations of Cape skies are clearly of great interest. For non-scientists like

myself, those reference are enormously enhanced by Professor Brian Warner's very clear, unfussy explanations of celestial phenomena and the instruments of the astronomer.

Botanists can share the sustained love and enthusiasm of the author for Cape flora, especially via the eight colour plates of Lady Herschel's drawings of Cape flowers magnificently reproduced. The architecture, climate and topography of the Cape Peninsula, particularly of Cape Town (especially pp. 25-27, 31, 36, 45) and also of Stellenbosch and Paarl (pp. 53-55) are vividly conveyed. Complementing these descriptions are Sir John's own very fine, sensitive drawings, made with the aid of a *camera lucida* (a process also clearly explained by the editor; p.10).

For the historian, a careful reading of this volume unearths material of immense value. Occasionally the significance of Lady Herschel's observations reaches even wider than the nineteenth century Cape. A striking passage in her description of the voyage out to South Africa is just one example. This is where the regular family nanny, Mrs. Nanson was indisposed and how, without a substitute in the person of any ayah, Lady Herschel comments, 'I didn't know what would have become of us' (p.19). Thereby is conveyed with disarming - and characteristic - frankness one most important aspect of nineteenth century English upper class survival, far too often taken for granted.

Once settled in Cape Town, Lady Herschel notes some of the subtle shadings of upper-class Cape society, and, therefore, also some of its snobbishness (p.37) and yet its also quite spontaneous good neighbourliness (p.44). Also of great value to the historian of Cape Town are the family's household accounts, a representative sample of which forms the appendix to this volume (pp. 158-163).

Perhaps of greatest - and more general - interest are her political observations over a period of years that were some of the most crucial in the history of the Cape. These were the years of Slave Emancipation, Sixth Frontier War and the Great Trek.

Lady Herschel was no impartial observer. As a firm supporter and friend of Dr. John Philip, she championed the cause of the oppressed with a single-mindedness that betrays her upbringing as the daughter of a Scottish Presbyterian minister. The 'tyranny' of whites 'over the black population' was, according to Lady Herschel, something predestined; it was the result of 'the inborn aversion a white has to a black' (p.88). This is strong language - but to put it into context - it was provoked by a particularly glaring exposure of white exploitation, when 300 Khoi in the Uitenhage district who had fought as white auxiliaries in the 1834/5 war were "rewarded" for their loyalty by being forced from their homes and ripening fields so as to accommodate the demands of white farmers for more grazing (pp. 88-89).

Those among modern historians who argue that the roots of violence in southern Africa originated with the white

intrusions of the nineteenth century will find much to corroborate in Lady Herschel's observations. White 'heroes' and 'martyrs' like Lieutenant Charles T. Bailie, a casualty of the 1834/5 conflict, still a much revered figure in settler historiography today, are sharply cut down to size. According to Lady Herschel, Bailie got his just deserts. I quote:

"The private history of this gent won't appear in your English Papers. He was the son of a settler, & employed by the Wesleyans as one of their *local Preachers*, but when the red coats came near his location, "from the love of the thing" he joined them, & made use of his knowledge of the haunts of the Caffers, to hunt them down like wild beasts (p.82).

There, then, is a brief glimpse of some of the impact of this important collection of letters. Lady Herschel's observations on the clever spoiling tactics of the Xhosa (pp. 71 & 81), the sensationalism of the colonial press which exaggerated black atrocities (p.81) and camouflaged the scorched earth methods of the colonial troops (p.84), and her portrayal of the Great Trek as just another form of white 'encroachment' on the black (p.147) are all examples of a contemporary's perspective that cannot be ignored by historians. Lady Herschel's letters, therefore, represent a very important, if controversial, source for the reconstruction of South Africa's strife-torn past. The sweet, girlish countenance of Lady Herschel, as painted by Alfred Chalon and reproduced on the cover (and frontispiece) of this volume belies a mind whose opinions are as explosive today as they were then. This certainly is a case of "don't judge a book by its cover"!!!

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R.L. Watson: *The Slave Question: Liberty and Property in South Africa.* Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg. 274 pp. ISBN 0819552216

This book is more than just another investigation of slavery at the Cape: it is about the link between an inconspicuous anti-slavery movement at the Cape in the 1820s and 1830s and the failure of early South African liberalism.

Apparently targeting an American readership, Watson constructs his stimulating arguments regarding the human rights problem and antislavery activity at the Cape in three parts stretching over eleven chapters. His arguments, based on information extracted from recent works of history and his own reading of early 19th century Cape newspapers, petitions, memorials, and related government correspondence, centres around the fear felt by Cape residents towards a forceful antislavery movement that would undermine the fundamental rights of property.