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**Plymouth Brethren and the Occupation of Katanga, 1886-1907**

Robert I. Rotberg

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Robert Rotberg gives an interesting insight into a small but significant part of Brethren mission history which is also the history of the demise of a large African kingdom and the beginning of colonial rule in southern Congo. He describes the wealth and power of the ruler, Msiri, over a vast area of land whose influence extended not simply over subject peoples and Arab traders but also the Brethren missionaries who worked in his kingdom. Rotberg charts Msiri's sudden downfall as his country erupted into civil war at the same time as British and Belgian colonial powers were vying for control over the area. The Belgians gained that control and began an iron-handed administration.

The Brethren missionaries, F.S. Arnot, C.A. Swan, W.H. Faulkner and, from 1891, Daniel Crawford, are portrayed as bystanders and pawns during these twenty-one years of rapid change. Msiri was a totalitarian ruler who used the missionaries for his own ends. They had few opportunities to evangelise and attempts to educate brought little interest. Instead they were a symbol of prestige for Msiri. They were also his scribes, doctors, barbers (!), builders, trading managers and 'gofers'. The missionaries stated that they wished to remain neutral in affairs between the Belgians and the Katanganese but Msiri's death at the hands of soldiers of the Belgian Katanga Company meant that the Brethren were free to evangelise as they wished to do. This was not the only change. Rotberg points to a shift in the attitude of local people. They saw all white people as chiefs and so, for the first time, gravitated to the missionaries who, they believed erroneously, could help them with the authorities. Now the Brethren found that they became local dispute settlers, councillors and a refuge for the displaced. This temporal authority was as little liked by Crawford as the subservient role they had played in Msiri's court. Others were less critical. They felt that the respect accorded them could work in favour of the Gospel. Colonial rule had brought stability and autonomy which enabled them to develop mission stations and schools.

This article demonstrates the ambiguity of missionary and colonial relationships. Whilst the Brethren had not sought European intervention when it arrived it appeared to make their task easier. Whether this was really the case could perhaps be assessed by discovering the opinions of the local population—an aspect which this article barely touches. Rotberg gives a generally sympathetic description of the Brethren missionaries but he concludes that 'The Brethren had forfeited a very real opportunity to influence the course of Katangan history' (p.297). It is unclear, however, what alternative action he thinks they could have taken. Given the political machinations of colonialists and Msiri, and the belief of the Brethren missionaries that the Christian task of evangelism was not to be mixed with politics of any kind it is difficult to see how things could have been different. The Brethren pioneers would have had to have been other than they were to have seized the initiative in political relations.

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