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**Review of "Madagascar and the Protestant Impact" by Bonar A. Gow and  
review of "Madagascar in History: Essays from the 1970s" edited by  
Raymond K. Kent**

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## Madagascar

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and defeats in the coastal and hinterland states had on the perceptions of European power among the peoples of the savanna regions.

There are a number of topics which Dr Mbaeyi touches upon but does not expand – the finance of the military forces, armaments, carriers, the African rank and file, and proposals for African naval officers – but these omissions do not detract from the usefulness of his volume. It is unfortunate, however, that text and bibliography are marred by careless proof reading.

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## MADAGASCAR

*Madagascar and the Protestant Impact.* By BONAR A. GOW. London: Longman and Dalhousie University Press, 1980 (Dalhousie African Studies Series). Pp. xvii + 266. £14.50.

*Madagascar in History. Essays from the 1970s.* Edited by RAYMOND K. KENT. Albany, California: the Foundation for Malagasy Studies. Pp. xvi + 354. No price marked.

Madagascar is a fascinating country for historians, and it is already served with an abundant literature. Nor does it have such a forbiddingly unusual history as many Africanists have been led to believe, as Raymond Kent points out in his introduction to *Madagascar in History*. Here are two books which will serve to widen interest in the island.

Bonar A. Gow's *Madagascar and the Protestant Impact* deals with the enormous influence of Protestant missions in that country in the nineteenth century, a subject which has been strangely neglected. The title is rather misleading. Working mainly from the published and manuscript sources left by British missionary societies, Dr Gow provides a history and an analysis of the activities of British missionaries and their administration, from 1818 to 1895. He scores some notable successes here. He is good on inter-mission politics and disputes, although he fails to mention an important Norwegian work on the subject.<sup>1</sup> He is ruthless in revealing the racism, arrogance, and sheer snobbery of the missionaries in question, showing a good eye for detail and illustrative anecdote. Sometimes, however, his criticism is merely facile.

One theme of the book, summarized in the conclusion, is that most of the British missionaries were too rigid in refusing to make concessions to Malagasy traditional religion, 'or to Malagasy social customs or behaviour patterns' (p. 234). Point taken. But, as Dr Gow points out, these customs could include magic and the wearing of charms (p. 108), or the practice of polygamy and 'immorality' (pp. 87–9), which in missionary jargon meant sexual misconduct. All this sexual licence sounds like good fun. The fact remains that it is contrary to the Ten Commandments, not to mention St Paul. On a number of other issues as well, Dr Gow is a little too keen to expose the hypocrisy or narrow-mindedness of the Victorians.

Perhaps the least satisfactory part of the book is its explanation of how the Protestant churches were perceived and used by the Malagasy. Here Dr Gow does himself an injustice. He is clearly aware of the political use which was made of the church by the Merina government, and indeed he gives a good account of its administrative structure (pp. 197–216). This eventually led to the church being roundly detested by many of the poorer classes, as Dr Gow again hints (pp. 220–1).

<sup>1</sup> F. Birkeli, *Politikk og misjon* (Oslo, 1952), with a summary in English.

Yet the missionaries are again upbraided for wishing to exercise too close a control over a church whose more repulsive aspects were not of their choosing.

Ultimately, Dr Gow is rather too immersed in the world of his primary sources. And so he misses the chance to explain some of the most instructive episodes in Malagasy church history. His account of the persecutions under Ranavalona I, of the conversion of the queen and prime minister of Imerina in 1868-9, and finally of the reasons why the Protestant churches came to occupy such a flagrantly political role, are reminiscent of the accounts produced by the missionaries themselves. They are not fully convincing nowadays. A symptom of Dr Gow's unfamiliarity with the Malagasy side of the question is his constant misspelling of Malagasy names. The town of Ambatondrazaka, for example, is correctly spelt on page 90, but appears in two incorrent forms on the map facing page 53 and on page 228. So too with other names (e.g. p. 81). At his best, Dr Gow is well worth reading and consulting, but his book is really about British missionaries in Madagascar and perhaps it would have been better if he had stayed in that narrower field.

Raymond K. Kent casts his net much wider in his collection of recent essays by fourteen scholars of five nationalities. Their subjects vary from archaeology, which throws light on the periods for which written sources are not available, to contemporary history. This is bound to appear uneven. The highlights depend on the reader's particular interests.

After some judicious opening remarks by Professor Kent, the collection opens with Henry Wright and Susan Kus on the archaeology of ancient Imerina, and Jean-Pierre Emphoux on that of northern Androy. Anything on archaeology in Madagascar is welcome. Wright and Kus are interesting because they combine archaeology with other disciplines in a technique known as 'regional survey'; Emphoux because he explores a region even less touched by the archaeologist's trowel. Two other essays in the collection embody original field-work, David Hurvitz on cattle ear-marks among the Anjoaty (a less esoteric subject than you might think), and Maurice Bloch on the implications of freedom for different groups of ex-slaves. Perhaps Yvan-Georges Paillard's study of post-independence politics could fall into the same category of field-work, since so much of it necessarily depends on information he gathered while living and working in Madagascar.

The other essays are all based on written material or are, in one or two cases, a reiteration of written work. Thus Jean Valette, Simon Ayache and Faranirina Esoavelomandroso all cover ground which has been investigated elsewhere, with only slight differences of interpretation. True, it is useful to publicize what is already known. But Valette's contribution is especially disappointing in that it incorporates hardly any of the advances made since the 1960s. Alain Delivré takes further his earlier, brilliant, work on oral tradition, a theme considered by Lee Haring in the form of folklore. Raymond Kent, on seventeenth-century religion and state-formation, Gerald Berg, on the system of talismans in Imerina, and Vincent Belrose-Huyghues on images of Madagascar in English literature, all make interesting contributions.

Some studies, such as those by Ayache, Delivré, Esoavelomandroso and Belrose-Huyghues, appear to be of some elegance. Unfortunately much of this is lost, and the responsibility must lie with the editor. Professor Kent has done a fair job of organizing the contributions. He has also translated seven of them from French. The resulting translations are often awkward, and combine with an extraordinary number of printing errors to produce a book which is not easy to read. English is not Professor Kent's first language, and translation and proof-reading are thankless tasks, but it is a pity to spoil the ship for a halfpennyworth of tar.