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THE MONTHLY REVIEW

Crossing the borderlands

● Marguerite Poland revisits one of SA's toughest frontiers and examines what it costs to reclaim one's self from historical destiny



MARK GEVISSER

A Sin of Omission, by Marguerite Poland, Penguin Books

When Marguerite Poland went to the Eastern Cape of her childhood in November to launch her new novel, she attended Sunday services at the Holy Trinity church in Nondyola, outside Fort Beaufort.

The little church – “a tumble of earth and stone and thatch” is how Poland describes it in *A Sin of Omission* – was built in 1865 by her great-great grandfather, when he was a 19-year-old Anglican missionary fresh from Warwickshire. It is now fictionalised as the parish – and place of reckoning for – the novel's tragic hero, who is based on its first black priest, Stephen Mtutuko Mnyakama.

Poland was deeply moved by how shipshape the church is nowadays, she told me, given the desolation she imagines for her fictional character Stephen Mzamane. He arrives there on horseback in 1878, “this forlorn unkempt wilderness” rather than “the Native College [in Grahamstown] with its high whitewashed walls”, which is where he would have preferred to be sent, as a teacher, after his return from training to be a priest in Canterbury.

He was one of eight or nine black South Africans dispatched to England during the 1860s and most of his compatriots died of consumption; those who returned to SA were seen as a bad influence (they learnt politics as well as the law of God). They were dumped in distant outposts such as Nondyola (Nondyoba in the book) and subject to the brutal racism of colonial SA – and the hypocritical church.

The black scholars sent to Canterbury were the handpicked children of kings and nobles; in the Eastern Cape they were rescued from the devastation of the cattle killing of 1856, “saved for God by the Bishop; salvaged by the Governor in the interests of Empire”, as Poland puts it.

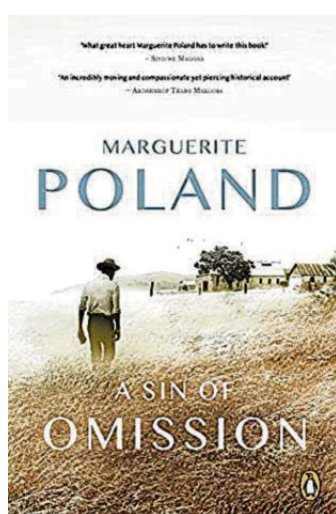
One Anglican cleric called the famine that followed the cattle killing an “unforeseen blessing”, Poland records, as it pushed the restive natives onto the mission stations and into wage labour.

Poland's Stephen (closely patterned on the real Mnyakama) was an outlier in the cohort. Having become separated from his brother while foraging near a mission station, “grey-tinged, a husk-child, motionless in the shadow of a bush”, he was picked up by the missionary who would become his harsh father-figure; the missionary was persuaded to keep Stephen (as he christened him) and his brother Mzamane when he discovered their father was an important counsellor to the Ngqika king.

While Mzamane was expedient and challenging from the start (“I'm only an Englishman as far as it suits me”), his little brother had been “a virtual hostage since he was nine years old”, he



Interwoven lives: Finding Stephen, a tapestry made by the Keiskammahoek Art Project, depicts the devastation of the cattle killing of 1856 and 1857, and shows a missionary coming upon the young Stephen. /Keiskammahoek Art Project



Marguerite Poland

later realises, “an ecclesiastical experiment, a pastiche of an Englishman. Only the remnants of his real provenance remained: his black face.”

For Poland, the “sin of omission” is that of the church that sent him to Canterbury to study but then abandoned him to an outstation where he was doomed to be, as Poland puts it, “Ndingumnyolo, The One Who Walks Alone.”

Stephen might be called Mfundisi Ngesi – “Master Englishman” – but he would always be a boy in the eyes of his parishioners, because ritual circumcision would cause him to be excommunicated from the church.

Much of the novel is rendered through the sharp repartee between Stephen and Mzamane, who is expelled from the Native College in Grahamstown for leading a protest and excommunicated from the church when he conducts a public affair with a married woman. So caught up is Mzamane in his own glory – he is a celebrated choirmaster and orator – that, like Stephen's white superiors in the church, he too cannot see his little brother. He remains dismissive of Stephen's choices and faith, even as he makes impossible demands upon him.

By giving us Stephen Mbulelo Mzamane's meticulously researched story in the face of all this, and by

imagining an inner life for him, Poland shows us what it means – and what it costs – to reclaim one's self.

Poland is a worthy descendant of Olive Schreiner in her heritage and passions: the Eastern Cape's natural and cosmic world; the relationship of faith to reason and worldly politics; the rights of women to set their own course; an understanding of small lives in the grand sweep of history.

At her best, Poland has the narrative powers of Jane Austen, particularly in her 1993 masterpiece, *Shades*, which is also based on the history of her antecedents. *Shades* tells the story of a family of white missionaries – and another of black workers – on a station at Keiskammahoek at the turn of the 20th century and then on the goldfields of the Witwatersrand, when there was less interest in making black men into God-fearing Englishmen and more into turning them into the “black gold” needed to work the mines.

Shades endures as a widely prescribed high school textbook and is being developed as a television series (full disclosure: I am working on it). But it is underappreciated as literature: it establishes Poland as one of SA's greatest novelists. After three deft interceding novels and a doctorate on the naming of Nguni cattle, published as *The Abundant Herds*, she now returns to



Faith frontier: Marguerite Poland (front, third from right) shows the tapestries to the Holy Trinity church congregation in Nondyola, with the old parsonage in the background. Archdeacon Nkosazana Maqoma stands between the two tapestries. /Bruce Howard

the frontier.

Similar themes suffuse *Shades* and *A Sin of Omission*, which present geographic and cultural borderlands and examine the way humans cross them or internalise them. For Stephen Mzamane, it is about how to negotiate the space between the amaqaba (“red-blanket people”) of his family and the amagqoboka (“learnt people”) of his new faith.

This is one of the richest tropes in SA literature, from AC Jordan's *Inqumbo Yeminyana* (The Wrath of the Ancestors) to Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*.

What Poland adds to the genre is a deep appreciation of the metaphysical – what she calls “the shades”, in both books – and the way the different cosmologies, Christian and Xhosa, come into conflict, alongside political systems. In both *Shades* and *A Sin of Omission*, the tragic characters oscillate across the line between these ways of understanding the world, as they try to make sense of the complex and brutal human relations around them.

A Sin of Omission is something of a prequel to *Shades*, set

20 years earlier, in the last, devastating frontier war of 1878. But if *Shades* is lush and expansive – it has the sweep of a 19th-century novel – *A Sin of Omission* is taut and telegraphic.

In the war, church bells were shattered by the Xhosa insurgents, we read, because “we will destroy the iron tongue of God”. This is surely a maturation of Poland's style, but it is something else too: the product of rage. There is the quiet and growing rage of the book's mild-mannered protagonist, and the white-knuckled rage of the author herself as she uncovers the injustices that befell the real-life person on whom he is based.

It is also a function of Poland's changing relationship to similar characters in both books. Both novels have a founding at their centre: in the former, his name is Benedict Matiwane, and he has been raised on a mission station much like Stephen Mzamane was 20 years before. Of later generation, Benedict has different options to Stephen: he finds his liberation through a printing press, joins the growing world of African pamphleteers and politi-

cians, and leaves the mission station in search of freedom. We imagine him alighting from the last pages of the novel to join Sol Plaatje and Pityana Ka Seme.

But Poland keeps her distance from Benedict: she does not presume to know him, and she hews far closer to the char-



Story keepers: Marguerite Poland in the Holy Trinity church in Nondyola, the setting for her novel, *A Sin of Omission*, which is based on real-life characters and events. /Bruce Howard

ty to his white brethren, and theirs to him.

“The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are.”

The African-American essayist Ti-Nehisi Coates wrote these words to his son in his 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*. They rang in my ears as I read *A Sin of Omission*, as did Coates's dire assessment that race relations in the US were irreparable given their violent foundations in the slave economy; foundations yet to be shaken. Was this true for SA too, I asked myself?

The question was particularly acute as I followed Stephen Mzamane's relationship with his fellow student at Canterbury's Missionary College, a warm-hearted but callow lad named Albert Newnham who follows his friend to Kaffraria.

Stephen and Albert's friendship is doomed, and the narrative advances along a series of misprisions, misunderstandings and missed meetings; all the consequence in large part of the racist society of which they are part and the deep inequality between them, even if they did frolic in Canterbury together. If they had managed to find each other in the novel, we might have been spared its tragic conclusion.

I thought about this as Poland told me about her visit to the Holy Trinity church in Nondyola in November, and why she was so moved by it. She described the vibrancy she found there, and told me how she had taken a series of tapestries made by the storied Keiskammahoek Art Project, off the themes of the book, to share with a community deeply interested in their church's history and legacy. Poland told me, too, about meeting the new deputy archdeacon of the Makhandla Diocese, a woman named Rev Nkosazana Maqoma.

Maqoma is a direct descendant of the great Xhosa king of the same name, and thus a descendant, too, of one of the other “black Englishmen” who left the Eastern Cape to train for the priesthood in Britain: King Mandiyoli Maqoma.

If the grandfather perished on Robben Island, the grandson died on foreign soil, of consumption. Poland has correspondence showing that George Mandiyoli Maqoma actually studied with her great-great-grandfather in Warwickshire; the deputy archdeacon knew nothing of this, and she and Poland had a long and lively discussion, at the little church in Nondyola, about how their antecedents would have known each other.

Poland is too subtle and modest to ascribe anything portentous or symbolic to this meeting. But after reading her novel – and its Coates-like suggestion that the racial wounds scored into this land are irreparable – her description of this meeting between two contemporary African women, one black and one white, felt a little like rainfall.

She had first heard the story she recounts in *A Sin of Omission* from a beloved great-uncle, “and I have always felt I have been told these stories because there was some purpose in it. It is a way of coming to terms with being South African; looking for belonging for me, too.”

For Poland, this reckoning has to do with a form of narrative restitution: not just of seeing the black priest who followed her great-great-grandfather at Nondyola, but of doing justice to his legacy too.