



Unlocking social puzzles: Colony, crime and chronicle: An Interview with Charles van Onselen

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Abstract

In this wide-ranging interview, the historian Charles van Onselen discusses his recent book, *Showdown at the Red Lion: The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1959–1910* against the backdrop of his previous work. He explores social formation and the consolidation of state-power in southern Africa through the empirical optic of social banditry and the role of individual outliers. The theoretical framing is drawn from historical sociology. The role of political authority across the Indian Ocean, particularly in Australia, is also considered, as is the rise of technology, the role of the Irish and the place of masculinity in the project of Empire building. The exchange also touches briefly on civil-military relations in contemporary Africa and on inter-disciplinarity in graduate studies.

Keywords

African militaries, global processes, historical sociology, imperial world, Ireland, masculinity, social banditry, southern Africa, sovereignty

Charles van Onselen is an acclaimed South African scholar whose meticulous research and innovative methods transformed southern African historiography. A graduate of Rhodes University, and St Antony's College, Oxford University, he has taught at the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Pretoria, and leading universities in Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. He has held numerous grants and scholarships, as well as visiting fellowships at Cambridge, Harvard, Oxford and

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Besides publishing extensively in leading historical journals in America, England and France, van Onselen has authored six books which trace at their roots some of the social and economic processes that have transformed the subcontinent over the past two centuries. These include a two-volume study entitled *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, which won the 1984 Trevor Reese Memorial Prize in the field of commonwealth and imperial history awarded by the Institute for Commonwealth Studies at London University. This was followed by the monumental *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (1996), which won the 1997 Herskovits Prize from the African Studies Association of America, the 1997 *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award for non-fiction, and the 1998 Bill Venter Literary Award. In 2002, a panel of African scholars voted *The Seed Is Mine* as one of the 100 best books to emerge from Africa during the 20th century.

In this interview, which took place on 30 July 2015 in Johannesburg, van Onselen talks to Peter Vale about his most recent book: *Showdown at the Red Lion: The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1859–1910* (2015)

PV: How do you see this book fitting into your oeuvre?

CvO: I've long been interested in politics as crime and crime as politics, and I find these themes are particularly interesting in what were formerly colonial settings. The state arrives late in many such settings, and much of their history is dominated by the emergence of popular political movements and their eventual crystallization into political parties. For some those are crucial dimensions, but for me they are not. I'm more interested in people who are on the margins of formal politics, have inchoate political agendas, and are possessed of a political consciousness that does not necessarily express itself through political parties.

The Small Matter of a Horse (2008 [1984]) was a study of African prison gangs in South Africa in which I asked whether, given the repressive situation and the peculiar institutions in which those gangs became manifest, one should view their activities as acts of (black) resistance with a narrowly defined agenda, or whether their actions had wider political import. From that early work I developed a broader interest in social banditry.

Showdown at the Red Lion looks at some of the first victims of British colonialism and imperialism: the Irish. Ireland stood in relation to England and the Industrial Revolution much as did the (apartheid) Bantustans¹ to industrializing South Africa. In British eyes, Ireland was a rural backwater, dominated by people who spoke a different language, had a different culture, and somehow needed to be drawn into the modern British imperial world and colonial project. But the Irish, like countless rural black South Africans, resisted that onslaught.

One of the more appealing things about the Irish is the longevity of their resistance to outside forces – political, economic and social – that sought to dominate them. But some of those people also moved out once the imperial world expanded, and came to occupy new spaces in Australia, New Zealand and, of course, South Africa. Donald McCracken (1991) and others have documented the Irish presence in South Africa in its formal political

dimension to excellent effect, but I'm more interested in the Irish as awkward, unmanageable, resisting, independent-minded actors in British colonial and imperial settings.

The Red Lion, then, is an extension of an earlier book, *Masked Raiders* (2010), which offered a broader background to *Showdown*. It is a case study of one man who, for one small part of his life, in one very particular setting, was perceived as something of a local hero, a social bandit; but he was often far more criminally inclined than he was towards social banditry.

PV: So, you're interested, really, in the way that authority seeks to discipline outliers?

CvO: Absolutely . . . and in teasing out the relationship between crime and politics, especially in the southern African setting, even if South African history per se is seldom my principal focus.

I'm attracted to the ways in which global processes wax and wane, and play themselves out in local settings. Even in contemporary South Africa, the interaction between crime and politics and politics as crime can be found almost everywhere. For some reason or another, analysts often seem to don spectacles of restricted view when looking at these things, and then to compartmentalize them as being either 'politics' or 'crime' when in fact they are, more often than not, both.

PV: The book also deals with changes in technology and how this plays an increasingly important role in social disciplining. Could you say something about this?

CvO: The late Victorian and early 20th-century periods were dominated by the emergence of railways, which harnessed steam power for domestic land-bound travel, and the steamship that made time and distance shrink in extraordinary ways. Then, of course, from the 1880s onwards, this was supplemented by the dramatic extension of the worldwide telegraphic system.

That enabled not only the physical movement of people, but also the transmission of ideas and information – primarily commercial data, but also criminal intelligence. What interests me is how marginalized elements in the metropole used the railways, the steamship and the telegraph to get themselves to outlying areas, and fashion new lives for themselves. Many – perhaps most – did so as ordinary, law-abiding citizens. But others, who had already been seriously marginalized, such as Jack McLoughlin, used the same systems – railways, steamships and the telegraph – to assemble networks as they carved out new kingdoms of the imagination, of the mind, that transcended formal colonial boundaries.

The state then used some of the very same instruments, albeit gradually and more slowly – because criminals always run in advance of parliament and police budgets – to modernize and adapt to the new dispensation. Criminals often use new technology before the state does, because they are fleeter of foot and more imaginative than the bureaucrats and states that the red-tape men serve.

But those adaptive, modern technologies do eventually arrive in the way that your question implies. Thus you saw passports, photographs and the development of fingerprint technology introduced. The net effect of that was, once again, to shrink the world for those in search of freedom or alternative lifestyles. The telegraph, for example, very soon became an instrument for inter-colonial intelligence-gathering and transmission between the metropole and the colonial periphery.

The very first criminal data transmitted by telegraph between the colonies related to fraudulent bankruptcies – in other words, it was driven by underlying commercial and financial concerns. It was not about murderers, rapists or highwaymen and robbers. The state was, in the first instance, more interested in the growth, spread and protection of mercantile capitalist interests than it was about more alarming orthodox criminal activities of a continental or intercontinental nature.

PV: ... involving the relationship between capital and the state?

CvO: Exactly; it was about empire and the imperial project. So it's not just a question about the development of technology or the ways in which criminals appropriate it, but about the state's slow response. It is about the sequence in which things are done, and what the state's priorities are when it comes to the communication of criminal intelligence.

PV: You also appear to illuminate a paradoxical relationship between the military as an instrument of state control, and its connection with crime. You seem to be telling the reader that crime is embedded in the military in a different way; that in the military network, especially on the edges of the empire, crime survives and thrives.

CvO: That is indeed one of the central themes and, I think, a relatively neglected one. From the time of the Napoleonic wars the armed services in the UK served as a 'mop or sponge' when it came to structural unemployment. Industrialization meant that there were a large number of people hovering on the edge of formal employment and a criminal universe; they occupied the lower echelons of the working class and, as the economy and economic opportunity closed or lagged, they were driven to consider joining the army or the navy.

The Irish, for example, were always disproportionately well represented in the British army, to a remarkable extent. By mid-Victorian times, fully half the British Army was Irish. The military trained and imposed discipline in the classic fashion, but it also educated and socialized economically marginalized people, instructed them in the use of arms, encouraged co-operative behaviour, and told them how to identify and attack selected targets. In that way there was a crossover between military discipline, intelligence-gathering, and staking out targets – in assaulting, removing or neutralizing objectives. There was an open conversation, albeit one conducted in subliminal terms, between formal military demands and the underlying criminal propensities of some of its conscripts.

Jack McLoughlin presents one with a superb example of this. When he arrived at Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg, he and numerous members of his cohort already had criminal records. What the British Army taught them was how to reconnoitre the countryside, how to ride horses, to understand how the rural police functioned, to work out where the lines of intelligence and communication lay, and how to appropriate them and turn them to other, nefarious, ends.

McLoughlin and others from Victorian Manchester had been transported across the world by the army or the navy to newly developing settings, and the logical thing, once there, was to desert, to find your way to the urban industrial areas – and, if you were an aspirant law-abiding citizen, to seek employment. But if you were on the social margins

of society, it was more likely that you would turn your new training to good effect in the local underworld.

PV: Have you thought about what this means today, where the military and state security, once again, are such major features of African politics?

CvO: I haven't. But I am interested in the African context where large numbers of Africans are mobilized for military service in liberation struggles, but are seldom absorbed back into the economy or society in emerging states in meaningful or productive ways.

In the case of southern Africa, for example, a significant number of ex-MK² and ex-ZANLA³ fighters have found their way into cash-in-transit robberies. In essence, what one is witnessing is a transition from a military situation to a post-independence economy with a lack of formal employment or other structured outlets. Africa is filled with armed conflicts, civil wars, and other violent contestations of power. Africans are constantly being mobilized in military or paramilitary fashion and then, once the situation has been 'normalized', they go on to exercise a strong political influence. In the intervening period, many get tired of waiting, peel off, and get involved in criminal activities. Seen from that perspective, what I have tried to do in *Showdown* is to better integrate our understanding of crime, the military and politics.

PV: How can we teach our students to gain interdisciplinary perspectives? How do we give them an optic for viewing these sorts of dynamics when they're trained in, say, history, sociology or psychology?

CvO: There are two points to be made if you're addressing this at the tertiary level. First, I'm not sure that it is a good idea, early on, to try to consciously pass on these interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary skills to undergraduates. The most successful practitioners of interdisciplinary enquiries and research are those who started out in a fairly formal way, mastering one or two disciplines, because that provides one with the basic grammar and rigour of a particular perspective that is intellectually manageable. Once those basic skills have been mastered, it is easier, at postgraduate level, to say: 'Do you see how confining a single disciplinary perspective can be when trying to understand complex processes?'

The real questions and answers do not lie within the logic of a single discipline – they are best sought and found where disciplines meet. At the master's level, the best one can do is to offer students outstanding examples of interdisciplinary studies, expose students to them, and allow them to get excited through reading. This is not best done by asking, in formalistic or didactic fashion 'Did you appreciate the multi-disciplinary approach in that piece?', or suggesting that they have to adopt a trans-disciplinary approach. What you need to do is to make them fall in love with the richness of multi-disciplinary approaches, seduce them with examples of work that are convincing because of the depth and breadth of the insights they offer. Eric Hobsbawm was a master economic and social historian with a brilliant understanding of sociology and the nature of political consciousness. But he never compartmentalized his insights in chapters or essays – he folded them into single, persuasive explanations.

His work on *Bandits* (1969) is magical – it is a display of intellectual fireworks introducing the reader to the notion of ‘social banditry’. There is no point in asking what parts of Hobsbawm’s writings are anthropological or sociological in nature. What one needs to do is to expose the student to this masterpiece and get him or her to exclaim, ‘I’m so excited by the concept of social banditry that I want to research, test and write such ideas myself.’ Once that happens, the student will soon ask: ‘What goes into creating an integrated, persuasive explanation? How does one go about getting forensic light to fall upon a crystal in ways that allows it to show off its different facets to greatest advantage?’

PV: One of the back stories in your new book is about the cultures of masculinity that run through this late Victorian and early Edwardian period. Clearly, the army is, as Irving Goffman called it, a ‘total institution’, and the great British schools were part of that too. Is this central to the story you are telling, both for the creation of the state and for individual lives?

CvO: The first thing to notice about the English production of masculinity in this period is that you’re talking about an imperial power in which masculine activity, in the form of war-making, becomes central to national identity, and helps drive the engine of empire. Of course, public schools and the army are central to this at one level. It’s not so much that the public schools and the army are separate institutions – it’s the two coming together that is important in the sense that the officers and gentlemen come from the public schools, and the cannon fodder from the working class. In that context, masculinity too can mutate into hyper-masculinity, in ways that make for the sorts of sexual ambiguities that characterize male bonding and emotional proximity in English public schools.

The armed forces could deepen friendships and camaraderie, but they could also help develop them into relationships that would now be termed ‘gay’. Historically, they would simply have been classified or dismissed in pejorative terms as being ‘homosexual’. There was therefore a domestic dimension to the development of same-sex relationships, but they could also be nurtured in in some imperial institutions – barracks, camps, prisons, ships, or the men’s single quarters on the mines.

In the imperial world, the first people to emigrate in significant numbers were male. The folded-in priority of masculinity and masculine culture is there right from the outset. In outlying colonial settings it is reinforced in communities where women are either largely absent, or at a premium. Once there, it is folded further into the development of colonial culture with a heavy emphasis on masculinity, and a propensity to see women either as idealized Madonnas or marginalized whores.

Some of the resulting manifestations of masculine culture are easily recognizable. The importance of hunting, shooting and organized sports in those types of settings is obvious, and its roots run deep in colonial cultures. The fact that rugby and its manifestations of raw masculinity retain such central positions in Australian, New Zealand or South African culture is no accident. It is underpinned by the male colonial experience in the southern hemisphere, as developed in the age of Empire.

PV: I hear you saying that this continues, notwithstanding more tolerant approaches to sexuality and gender in recent times.

CvO: Yes. What is interesting is how slow colonial societies are to start accommodating gender ambiguities. The propensity, especially early on, seems to be to over-formalize, over-regulate and overstate, using phrases such as 'she is a real lady'; 'he is a real man'; or 'he is a real gentleman' – with the emphasis on 'real'. In those settings, society is slow in coming to terms with those who are on the margins, have different sexual identities, or whose gender loadings are at variance with the mainstream, hyper-masculine, imperial and colonial orthodoxy.

PV: You don't say much about the role of the church and of religion. Is this because it did not turn up in the research, or because you think it is relatively unimportant?

CvO: It's not that I wasn't looking for it, or that I wasn't sensitive to the importance of its role. The Madonna–whore dichotomy, for example, is obviously rooted in the church and religion. But we do need to come to a new understanding of, and sensitivity to, the history of religion as played out in the metropole and on the colonial periphery. I am aware that this raises extremely complicated issues.

My current, post-*Showdown* research centres on South Africa as the site of a primarily Calvinist and Protestant-based industrial revolution. This takes place adjacent to a Catholic enclave in the form of Moçambique. So, when trying to understand historical patterns of working-class recreation – involving alcohol, prostitution, opium and gambling, for example – there is a powerful nexus linking Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) with Johannesburg. This is a primary axis of development when considering issues of social control as related to the sale of prohibited substances, or providing illegal sexual services.

Seen in that way, you have a repressive Calvinist, Protestant state articulating with an adjacent Catholic enclave. Moçambique and Lourenço Marques is a southern African 'Sun City',⁴ many years before the actual Sun City was developed in a South African Bantustan. It's part of the same set of reasonings that makes for casinos and other recreational outlets in the Indian reservations in the United States. And once you adopt a macro perspective, you can see patterns of African, Coloured, Asian, Chinese, and Indian recreation in greater southern Africa as being linked to an even greater Calvinist–Catholic nexus.

So yes, it is important to look at religion within the state. But it is at least as important to look at religion in adjacent states, in the wider colonial worlds, and along with their comparative moral, ethical and religious orders, so as to see and understand how even broader patterns emerge. Thus an individual African might have been classified as an alcoholic in early South Africa, but if you look at the number of colonial Moçambican Africans who were alcoholics on the Witwatersrand in the 1890s, you cannot do so without understanding the excess production of potato spirit in Prussia, or knowing that Lourenço Marques was the favoured point of entry for huge quantities of rotgut funnelled to African workers in the gold mines of Johannesburg.

Nor can one understand the patterns of prostitution in southern Africa until you've understood the opening of the Suez Canal and the passage of marginalized Jewish women from Eastern Europe, and marginalized women from France and Germany, making their way south and disembarking at Lourenço Marques. Lourenço Marques

and Johannesburg became primary nodes along the axis used by sex workers to ply their trade.

In Maputo you can still find the graves of 50 or 60 Jewish women, buried under their working names, who were prostitutes around the turn of the last century. They were marginalized women who wanted to escape the anti-Semitic Tsarist regime, women who had taken refuge in prostitution in order to survive. You can't understand them without understanding the sociology of Judaism, the political economy of the Tsarist regime, or Lourenço Marques as a more tolerant Catholic setting with its own links to socially repressive Protestant South Africa.

PV: At the end of the book, in the acknowledgements, you talk about globalization as 'an old fellow' who has recently returned. Why did we miss the conversation around globalization in, say, the 1880s and 1890s, and only rediscovered it after the ending of the Cold War?

CvO: I suspect it is because in the earlier period, between 1880 and 1920, we were so obsessed with the state project, the assemblage of the state and its apparatuses, constituting governments and delineating boundaries, that it cast a huge intellectual shadow.

I can't authoritatively speak about colonial Australia or New Zealand, but in South Africa we insist on seeing social, political or economic processes running through the entire subcontinent, from the Congo south, and compartmentalizing them into 'the history of Rhodesia', 'the history of Swaziland', and so on. That is a daft way of looking at something that is inchoate and loose for most of that period – that is sometimes almost a fiction. But intellectuals have generally adopted formal geographic boundaries as units of analysis. In countries burdened by daily mantras about 'nation-building' and 'state formation', that doesn't really make any sense. Analysts cannot have it both ways – that is, to constantly rabbit on about the ills of 'nation-building', 'social cohesion', 'regionalism' and 'tribalism' and simultaneously adopt 'the state' as a neutral, problem-free unit of analysis. Since when do academic minds have to produce national passports to cross the 'state' boundaries imposed by colonial powers?

PV: Southern Africa experienced a pre-Westphalian moment and a Westphalian moment, and is now experiencing a post-Westphalian one. What was the place of the Cold War in all of this?

CvO: The Cold War plays a huge role. In southern and central Africa, the Cold War question was not solely about whether or not you were constituted as an authentic liberation movement, but whether the movement was affiliated to Beijing or to Moscow. The 'free world' had to ask itself why so few liberation movements attached themselves openly to Europe or the United States.

Under those circumstances, the state that got a vote at the UN, and where it came from and where it was going to, became disproportionately important. It encouraged patterns of thinking that were insular, silo-like. And, yes, I do think that in the case of the white South African regime 'the state' had a strange and reactionary relationship with the United States. This was a sad, abnormal relationship between two countries with great disparities in military and political power but very similar ethical, moral and political

standings when it came to troubled histories of race relations. South Africa and the United States discovered each other partly because of, and partly despite of, this during the Cold War. It is a fraught, tense, and unpredictable relationship, yet it endured for reasons that had little to do with questions of social justice, notions of racism, indefensible moral dispensations, or similar issues.

PV: This book is located in the British Empire and in the imperial project, but some of the most important issues you raise are actually American issues, like Republicanism, which is muted but is certainly there.

CvO: This comes through the Irish, and their admiration of things American during the era in which the book is set.

PV: Absolutely. One of the things we don't understand sufficiently is the Republican impulse among Boers, as manifested in the various Boer states.

CvO: You're right. There is a central theme of America as a model republic for the Boer states, as reflected in the constitutions of the South African Republic as well as the Orange Free State.

PV: Two other things I found really interesting was the arrival of the prosthesis, in the wake of the American Civil War, and the earlier arrival of cyanide. In one sense, they fashion the story of Jack McLoughlin, by enabling gold to become so important in South Africa.

CvO: As regards the prosthesis: here again we have to see things in more than one way – that is, war as war, as in the Civil War in that instance, or industry as constituting a site of warfare replete with the working classes as fatalities or the walking wounded. In the colonies, industry – and especially primary industries such as mining – was at war with workers. In southern Africa, it took the lives of tens of thousands of African labourers. It also took the lives or otherwise mutilated the bodies of thousands of white workers through hidden diseases such as silicosis. The chances of losing an arm or a leg were far more pronounced in colonial and imperial mining projects than they were in secondary industry in the so-called developed world. Johannesburg was not Birmingham or Manchester – it was a centre of gold mining, with coal mining nearby.

The horrific injuries suffered by soldiers in the American Civil War were compensated for, in part, by the development of prostheses in places like New York. Once the war was over, producers of prostheses had to find new, albeit smaller, markets for their products. Mining towns, especially in colonial mining towns, offered an attractive alternative, especially in the case of white workers, because black workers could not afford those sorts of luxuries. In this regard, Jack McLoughlin again offers us a fine example of thinking beyond the boundaries of the state, because he links the world of immigrant workers and the American Civil War to Johannesburg and southern Africa. That said, McLoughlin's prosthesis is obviously also – and more importantly – about his identity; his self-image, and the image he wanted to project, and his idea of masculinity.

You ask about cyanide and gold recovery. There is a huge economic depression in Johannesburg between 1890 and 1892; a quarter of the white population leaves, and the place is reduced to a shadow of its former, frontier self. Then, along comes the

MacArthur–Forrest recovery process in which cyanide is used to separate gold from the metallic matrix that has been holding it ransom. That starts the boom that leads to the Jameson Raid⁵ and, ultimately, the Anglo-Boer War.⁶ It is cyanide that rescues the South African gold mining industry.

This technological progress was most important for Irish immigrants in South Africa. It is the successful recovery of gold and the refining process that criminals such as Jack McLoughlin and various members of the ‘Irish Brigade’ rely on in order to make a living as safe robbers. But, since we are interested in crime as politics and politics as crime, that same backdrop presents us with another interesting example central to Irish history as it is linked to southern Africa.

Arthur Griffith, who went on to become the first Irish president, almost certainly stole gold from a refinery on the Witwatersrand to fund the Irish Republican Army. So we again revert to the question: where does crime end and politics begin? The organizing genius behind the treasonous Jameson Raid was the American John Hays Hammond, a mining engineer on the Witwatersrand who, in 1908, almost became the American vice-president. A little later no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi, another man of Johannesburg, was worried that illicitly acquired gold on the Rand might be funding the struggle for Indian independence. Seen in this way, we can appreciate that the introduction of cyanide on the Rand not only transforms the economic fortunes of the mining industry but also gives rise, indirectly, to political developments of global importance. It might be small, it might be marginal, but it certainly helped shape their world view.

PV: But this comes together with the power of stock exchanges as these emerge across the world. Have we underestimated how important Johannesburg was in the global public imaginary at this time?

CvO: Absolutely – all the way to villages in the Far East. By the mid-1890s, downtown Johannesburg had a Chinese Quarter of close on 2000 people supposedly of Cantonese origin. In much the same way that the Chinese went to the Australian, Californian and New Zealand goldfields in the mid-19th century, so in the 20th, Chinese came to South Africa, not as free labourers but as indentured workers. So where gold fits into culture – as a store of value, or a life opportunity – its influence extends to the far corners of the globe.

PV: Were societies such as Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand fundamentally different, or were they simply clones of an imaginary of what it was like to be British?

CvO: I think they are spectacularly different. For a start, consider the ways in which the political consciousness of white South Africans was configured by the economic, political and social realities of the region. It takes place against a huge hinterland of indigenous peoples, present in very large numbers, and it takes a series of eight or nine frontier wars⁷ fought over the better part of two centuries in order to conquer them, dispossess them, and turn men and women into labourers in an industrializing economy that has a central role in world trade, as underpinned by gold and diamonds.

All of that – the drive to turn indigenous peoples into servile workers in primary industry – makes for a rather different mindset than it does in Australia, where the Aboriginal struggle against colonial occupation is on a different scale, and seeking a

rather different outcome. New Zealand is a more interesting case and, of course, you've got the continuities with Sir George Grey serving in the colonial administrations of both New Zealand and South Africa.

Māori resistance and the colonization of New Zealand was a taxing experience for all concerned. When it comes to the experience of subjugating indigenous people, all three of these cases – Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – differ so markedly that they defy ready comparison other than at the most banal of levels.

What interests me more, and this is something that plays itself out in the book we are discussing, is the political imagination of the Irish and how this can be traced in South African or Australian history. As soon as the classic South African-Irish – or Irish-South African – criminals get into trouble with the law here, their exit point is almost always colonial Lourenço Marques. That is so because there is no extradition treaty, and there are the British–Portuguese and Calvinist–Catholic differences exist between the two neighbouring states.

But after those accused of serious crimes or convicts flee southern Africa, they fan out into the Indian Ocean world. After McLoughlin staged a robbery in Manchester, he left and made his way to Australia. Like the British imperial authorities, he saw Australia as a colony that had been established for criminals, or otherwise marginalized peoples. But what is interesting is how some white South African males, those who also operate on the margins, appropriate the same metropolitan view of Australia, and come to consider it primarily as a criminal safe haven in the late 19th and 20th century when Australia has long since become a mainstream colony of the type encountered within the British Empire.

PV: But South Africa seems vital to Australians in terms of their own myth of nationalism and the making of the Australian state, most notably because of the participation of Australian troops in the Boer War – this, too, seems under-theorized.

CvO: Absolutely. To what extent does the South African experience inform the making of an Australian identity? And to what extent does this give it a disproportionate and longer-lived affinity with Britain and the Empire? In other words, the Boer War kept intact the umbilical cord between Britain and Australia which it did not do in the same way as between Britain and South Africa.

PV: In the book, you play with terms like 'commonwealth', 'federation', 'union' and 'state', all of which were gaining currency in the period you are examining, but you don't deal with these issues in any depth.

CvO: You might fold in 'Dominion' as well ...

PV: Sure. While your characters were living on the grubby side in South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, the constitutional discourses were restructuring understandings of empire, dominion and state. How do you think this higher political conversation influenced those at the margins?

CvO: Not very much, other than through opportunistic considerations as to where jurisdiction began and ended, what those different legal domains entailed, at what moments they opened or closed, and how folk could best position themselves within them. It was

largely pragmatic and opportunistic. What is interesting about federation, dominion, state or union – those sorts of associations – is how debates around them were formulated so as to accommodate parts of an empire which, having reaching its apex, was already being challenged by settler nationalism. The challenge was to see how you could provide terminology and a political architecture that kept the basic unit within the broader family while recognizing a distinctive, separate identity at the same time. Here again there is a great work to be written about political consciousness and the relationship of settler states with the imperial power and with each other.

We look at that Indian Ocean world and often view New Zealand, Australia and South Africa as part of a loosely constructed triangle. But I think it's really a quadrilateral that stretches north too, and we need to include Canada. The really interesting book would be about how was the political architecture of empire formed and then dissembled? And how did those processes play themselves out in Canada, Australia, South Africa or New Zealand? What was it that was peculiar to each of those settings? For all sorts of reasons, we could group Australia and New Zealand together, but South Africa is pretty well *sui generis* in that triangular family. Canada has great indigenous populations, but lies adjacent to what was clearly becoming the informal imperial master of the entire world: the United States of America.

Insofar as we are talking about Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa, *Red Lion* is focused largely on the Indian Ocean world. The conventional thing to do is to look at the formal organization of empire and then explore the relationship between Whitehall and Pretoria, Whitehall and Canberra, Whitehall and Wellington, and so on. But there is another nexus that emerges through the movement of labour, trade unions, criminals, religion and missionaries, which operates largely independently of Whitehall and of Britain. There are cross-cutting relationships and experiences being formed and transformed within and between the colonies that are hugely interesting and exciting to research.

Again, you can do those just with the Indian Ocean basin cases, but if you include Canada we could arrive at a piece of comparative, historical and political sociology that would be enormously exciting and enlightening.

PV: Your work presents itself as historical sociology – but how would you characterize it?

CvO: I'm trying to do several things, and we could talk about what those things are. First, though, I would say the sharp distinction between history and sociology is a largely artificial one. I think it was EH Carr who once noted that: 'The more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both.'

PV: It was EH Carr . . .

CvO: Well, if that sounds like stuff from the old left, then I have to admit that I am well into that – because I am old, if not of the left.

Sociology, taken on its own, tends to offer one a snapshot at a particular moment in time – it provides you with the space to study process and structure at your leisure, and to explore all the connections that go with it.

History, on the other hand, offers you a moving picture and allows you to explore beginnings and endings and the crucial ways in which those two polar extremities are linked and connected. But I'm with EH Carr, in that, for me, what you are trying to do is produce a seamless product. The really great practitioners succeed in making their work so seamless that you are no longer concerned as to whether you are reading history or sociology because, in truth, you are reading both. But I would want to complicate that further by suggesting that one needs to aim at triangulating individual life experience (Goffman has a lot to say about that) with process and structure over time. When all that is put together successfully, you start getting closer to real meaning, and an approximation of the truth.

In biography, what interests me are two questions: to what extent does the subject act on history, and to what extent is history acting on the subject? It's where those questions intersect that you have authentic, deeply cognitive interactions. For me, the really magical moments in history come when you are dealing with the creative tensions that arise from ambiguity, contradiction or irony.

Those are at the joints of things, and to understand how things move, you have to understand the joints. So if you can isolate something that at first glance looks paradoxical, that's not the weakness of the situation, that's its strength – but you have to pull it apart. When you look at and understand irony, the son of paradox, you are close to insight. Likewise, when you confront something contradictory, you need to identify precisely where the fulcrum of the problem lies that renders it contradictory. At such points, one finds meaning.

For me as a historian, such moments – when you are dealing with ambiguity, contradiction, irony or paradox – are hugely exciting. I like to think that *Showdown* is filled with such moments that play themselves out in vastly different settings over many decades.

PV: Thank you for speaking to *Thesis Eleven*, and congratulations on the book.

Notes

1. Under apartheid, South Africa was Balkanized into a white 'heartland' and a number of fragmented territorial entities known as Bantustans, which were meant to become sovereign states for various African groupings, and the bulk of Africans living in 'white' urban areas were meant to return. The migration of workers from these places to the white 'heartland' was their defining economic feature.
2. Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was the armed wing of the African National Congress.
3. The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was the military wing of the Zimbabwe National Union, one of several movements which fought against colonial rule in the former Rhodesia.
4. Sun City is a luxury pleasure resort, incorporating a casino, about two hours' drive from Johannesburg. Built in the 1970s, when the area still formed part of a Bantustan, it became popularly associated with unbridled pleasure, bordering on hedonism. Among others, it incorporated a casino, which was prohibited in 'white' South Africa at that time.
5. The Jameson Raid was a botched military incursion into the Transvaal Republic by jingoistic supporters of the then prime minister of the Cape, Cecil John Rhodes, from 29 December 1895 to 2 January 1896.

6. The South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War) was fought from October 1899 to May 1902 between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The war and its outcome prepared the ground for the formation of the Union of South Africa in 2010.
7. A generic term for a series of wars (from 1779 to 1879) fought between white settlers and indigenous Xhosa peoples in the eastern Cape region of South Africa.

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