

Are barbarians in need of civilising, or are civilisers the true barbarians?

*A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction
and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal*

By Peter Delius

(Heinemann / Ravan / James Curry)

Price: R71,50

Civilising Barbarians

By Leon de Kock

(Witwatersrand University Press / Lovedale)

Price: 105

Review: Finuala Dowling

Say it, savour it: barbarian, barbaric. From Sir Garnet Wolseley blasting his way to victory over the proudly independent kingdom of Sekhukhuneland in 1879, to the necklacing of “witches by comrades in 1986, few words can so righteously be spat out to designate indignation at brutish behaviour.

In fact or in spirit, the two books under review – Leon de Kock’s *Civilising Barbarians* and Peter Delius’s *A Lion Amongst the Cattle*, begin with Wolseley’s threat to wean a subaltern tribe from “the ways of savage life into complete submission to a civilised so sovereignty”.

The ironies simmering beneath the first viscount’s boast are best summarised by De Kock’s introductory question: “Were the barbarians in need of civilising, or were the civilisers the true barbarians?”

Yet *A Lion Amongst the Cattle* and *Civilising Barbarians* are not otherwise deeply intertwined bedfellows.

A Lion Amongst the Cattle is a sequel to Delius’s published PhD thesis, *The Land Belongs to Us*, and continues the story of the Pedi of Sekhukhuneland.

His argument centres around two rebellions. Whereas once a chief had been a chief by the grace of the people, Delius shows how the Pedi revolt in Sekhukhuneland in 1958 was a direct consequence

of meddling by Bantu Affairs in the delicate mechanism of chiefly lineage.

This rebellion throws light on the spate of witch-killings which took place in 1986 when a powerful youth movement acquired jurisdiction over Sekhukhuneland. Between February and April 1986, 32 people were clubbed or burnt as “witches”. Delius contextualises rather than condemns this “barbarism”.

A Lion Amongst the Cattle is not just a history. It is also a moral fable warning of the dangers of state intervention in arbitrary, top-down, eco-reverent attempts at reconstructing the region.

It is a chronological account, drawing on oral sources, of how the Pedi lost their cattle, land and system of leadership to migrancy and empty promises, to illegitimate authorities and petty bureaucracies, puppet chiefs and misguided conservationists.

Ironically named “betterment” programmes, cattle-culling and even restrictions as to the number of donkeys owned was required by the state. The attrition of stock came to stand for the attrition of a way of life.

Delius’s narrative of repression and resistance is disrupted by a bizarre turn of events. In the face of an all-too-evident enemy, people turned on themselves with malicious accusations of witchcraft.

Suspicious fell, naturally enough, on the “Rangers” – supporters of Bantu authorities – but soon spiralled into a mindless orgy of envy directed against people whose crops had not failed or whose goats had multiplied.

Delius invokes the “dual theory of causation” to explain this spine-chilling “barbarism”. While the state was responsible for arrests and deportations, the way in which these misfortunes fell on particular individuals rather than others, was the work of witches. An old man made a good living from collecting firewood. Apart from witch-

craft, what else could explain his prosperity in the face of such universal privation?

One might be tempted to give the obvious answer that industry brings prosperity, but Delius avoids paternalistic judgements. Instead, he pursues the more rewarding argument that the cheekiness of the *basemane* (uninitiated boys), once a positive feature of Pedi culture, got out of hand. The youth, unrestrained by school and dressed in the little brief authority that successful resistance gave them, now sat in judgement over their elders.

The average age of the necklacers was 19; the “witches” were predominantly female, and over 60 years old. Many comrades “saw” the offending witches (always, miraculously, the very people they had suspected) on the “TV screen” (white sheet) of a local sangoma whose up-to-date methods were widely esteemed. Victims of their relatives begged for mercy, but no quarter was given. A widow collecting the bones of her husband from the ashes of a successful witch-burning, would be ignited in her turn.

De Kock warns us against making apartheid a scapegoat. In his introduction to *Civilising Barbarians*, De Kock fires salvos at, *inter alia*, “South Africa’s supposed rebirth”, “the country’s popularity imagined regeneration” and militant anti-colonial rhetoric”.

De Kock is once again willing to take on the establishment. In this instance, he defies the prevailing view that Afrikaner nationalism is the origin of all evils.

Civilising Barbarians – another PhD thesis – is not likely to detract from De Kock’s controversial reputation in South African publishing. The more reserved were offended by his effusive introduction to the poetry anthology, *The Heart in Exile*, where he spoke, with the visionary passion of a Nongqawuse, about a nexus between South African history and poetry.

Similar, *Civilising Barbarians* straddles history and literature. De Kock investigates the way the English taught by the missionaries, “not only buttressed, but extended the work of a haphazard yet ulti-

mately murderous imperialism in the country”.

De Kock’s own use of the English language presents its own set of problems. In this publication, he is still speaking to his academic examiners and peers, inadvertently duplicating the missionary’s imposition of an inscrutable language.

Our enjoyment of *Civilising Barbarians* depends on how well you can understand sentences such as: “The fictions of Western humanism, in the postcolonial view, have been embodied in signifying economies whose assumptions of immanent truth need to be decentred and destabilised, in keeping with the notion, drawn from poststructuralism, of the deferred nature of meaning in language.”

However, the subtle ways in which English and its complex ideological baggage (in which everything seems to be binary, from the regulation trousers covering the privates, to good and evil, light and dark) pervaded the native consciousness, make fascinating reading.

Reading history as cultural text, De Kock analyses the way missionaries and colonisers made history up as they went along, casting themselves in the roles of conquering heroes, hard-pressed to transform these “brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful and superstitious” buffoons.

He reads Robert Moffat’s *Missionary Labours* as popular fiction, in which “failure and futility in the scorching heat of the northern Cape became narrativised as heroic endurance and unflinching perseverance”. And though David Livingstone himself may have shrugged off a lion attack as a matter of little consequence, De Kock points out that “he became emblematic of the crusading missionary quest-hero”.

De Kock’s discourse analysis is trenchant; his own discourse, where it is couched in thesis-speak, tends to defer one’s pleasure in his insights. He is indebted to the work of Jean and John Comaroff in the field of colonialism, and my well be infected by stylistic contagion.

Delius, by contrast, prefaces his quotation from the Comaroffs with an apologetic reference to “their own special dialect”, and speaks of the difficulties involved in trying to write a history which could reach general readers – as well as people living and working in the region.

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