



M. YOUNG (ed.). *The reminiscences of Amelia de Henningsen (Notre Mère)*. Maskew Miller Longman: Cape Town, 1989. 341 pp. Illus. R47,35 (inclusive). ISBN 0 636 01256 5.

This edited version of the memoirs of Notre Mere was originally an M.A. dissertation in the Department of History, Rhodes University, and has now been published as the tenth volume in the Grahamstown series. The format is unchanged with a long introduction, the memoirs which cover almost 100 pages, copious notes both to the introduction and to the memoirs, letters, extracts from newspapers and from the *South African Catholic Magazine*, short biographies, a list of ecclesiastical terms and a comprehensive bibliography. An index has been added.

Amelia de Henningsen was born in Brussels in 1822, the daughter of a Danish naval officer and his aristocratic wife. The parents were well connected and able to afford to give their seven children an excellent education. After the 1830 revolution in Belgium, the family had to seek a new home in England and the children's education continued there. In 1843, after considerable soul searching, Amelia decided to join the newly-founded congregation of Religious of the Assumption as a postulant. She received the habit in 1845 and was given the name Sister Mary Gertrude. Her enthusiasm for the foreign missions caused her to respond to the appeal of Bishop Aidan Devereux, who visited Europe in 1849 in search of religious sisters to work as teachers in his newly-created vicariate of the Eastern Cape. Eventually, in August 1849, seven Assumptionist sisters sailed for Port Elizabeth to become the first sisters to set foot in Southern Africa.

Pioneer bishops everywhere relied on religious sisters as part of their mission method and Devereux was no exception. The sisters were to open schools for the daughters of middle-class parents who were able to pay fees, and for the children of the poor who were not. Bishops seldom provided any real information about the country the sisters were going to, the town chosen for their work or about the community living there. More often than not the sisters had only the haziest idea about the geography and climate of the new country, and certainly most of the unpleasant facts were kept from them. The Assumptionist sisters were no exception and they found life in Grahamstown in the 1850s anything but easy, with too little money and too few sisters to teach all the subjects demanded.

Sister Mary Gertrude (Notre Mère) wrote her memoirs in 1904 at the request of Bishop Hugh MacSherry, after she had worked in the Eastern Cape for 55 years. Her style is pleasant and easy to read and she concentrates on the development of the Catholic Church in the Eastern Cape, the personalities of the bishops and priests with whom the sisters worked and the colonists whose children they educated. The memoirs provide no new insights or opinions about the events through which she had lived — frontier wars, the mineral revolution, the Anglo-Zulu and Anglo-Boer wars — although they do reveal the poverty and insecurity in a frontier settlement like Grahamstown.

Notre Mère was an intelligent and extraordinarily courageous woman who had to overcome numerous difficulties particularly in the early years. While a number of her colleagues were unable to adapt to the conditions in the colony and returned to Europe, she persevered, learnt from her mistakes and finally became a well known and much loved figure.

The introduction, while repeating some of the information in the memoirs, provides an interesting account of the development of the Assumptionist congregation and the expansion of the Catholic Church in the Eastern Cape. It also gives a frank and impartial view on the contributions and personality of Notre Mere, her weak as well as her strong points, and avoids the temptation of hagiography.

Notes to both the introduction and the memoirs are well produced and useful. However, the notes to the introduction are placed between the memoirs and the notes to the memoirs, irritating the reader who continually consults the wrong set of notes. This volume is nevertheless a welcome and an unusual addition to the literature on the Eastern Cape.

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