

## Review

### Charles van Onselen (2007) *The Fox and the Flies: the world of Joseph Silver, racketeer and psychopath*. London: Jonathan Cape

Julie Parle

parlej@ukzn.ac.za

The release in early 2007 of Charles van Onselen's *The Fox and the Flies: the world of Joseph Silver, racketeer and psychopath*, was accompanied by a media campaign more usually associated with a new paperback thriller by an internationally best-selling fiction author, than that of a hefty hardback of more than 600 pages of serious historical scholarship. Journalists were taken on a reading weekend where the book's finale was revealed; reviews quickly appeared in the commercial press; van Onselen himself appeared on M-Net's *Carte Blanche*; and, if the number of people I know who bought the book is any kind of yardstick, it sold fast in South Africa. Launched in the USA later in the year with the new subtitle 'The Secret Life of a Grotesque Master Criminal', *The Fox and the Flies* is getting a lot of attention. Of this, many historians may be somewhat envious. For, can a work of serious historical scholarship which does not have as its main subject a major figure – such as Stalin, Hitler, or even the more saintly Mandela – but rather a thoroughly nasty 'nobody' become a potential best-seller? Has van Onselen succeeded in achieving the dream of any historian and publisher: that of successfully combining in-depth academic research with popular, even sensationalist, appeal?

Perhaps. If van Onselen's conclusions are correct – that in Joseph Silver (whose real surname was Lis, which means 'fox' in Russian) he has uncovered the true identity of Jack the Ripper – then he will have solved one of the greatest criminal mysteries of all time and thus the book will be of enduring interest to 'Ripperologists' and many others who would not otherwise be interested in the life and mind of the hitherto unknown Joseph Silver. For an

historian to have correctly identified the ‘master murderer of the age’ (421) would also be no small feather in the cap of the historical profession and a vindication of its methodologies.

In the Appendix, ‘Clio and the Fox: the hunt for Joseph Silver and his hidden pasts’, van Onselen describes for us the lengthy, painstaking, and sometimes serendipitous processes by which he assembled the several-thousand piece jigsaw which, put together, illustrates the worlds of Joseph Lis/Silver. The first piece of the puzzle came to his attention in the 1970s when his eye was caught by a report in the *Standard & Diggers’ News* from the late 1890s which mentioned a meeting of the ‘American Club’ in Johannesburg. Presided over by Silver, this was a ‘pimps’ club devoted to organised prostitution and white slavery’. At the time, ‘researching [the] ways in which class, colour and commercial sex were reconciled in a racially segregated mining community [van Onselen was more] interested in processes than personalities, [he] was nevertheless sufficiently intrigued to jot down his name’ (486). How van Onselen continued to track Lis/Silver from his birth in Russian-Poland in 1868 where his family, like many Jews, lived in a bitterly hostile climate, across several continents and then to his presumed death in a military prison at Jaroslaw, in Poland in 1918, itself makes a fascinating story and an object lesson in both the thrill and the slog of historical research.

In the 50 years of his life, Lis/Silver experienced and perpetrated violence, betrayal and duplicity in multiple ways. In 1884, aged 16, he found his way to London, where we know that he became involved in pimping and theft. We know too that he arrived in America in the late 1880s. It was here, in 1891, after being released from prison that Lis took on the name Silver. It was not his only alias. From North America he moved to the Cape Colony, the Rand, German South West Africa, and then back to continental Europe and then crisscrossed the Atlantic between Argentina, Chile, New York, and London, finally returning to a Central Europe ravaged by the conflicts of World War I yet still offering pickings for smugglers and scavengers. Lis/Silver lived a parasitic life of stealing, double-dealing, elbow-deep in corruption, petty theft, and racketeering. He was a syphilitic bully, and a sodomiser of unwilling men. After the rape of a fellow male prisoner at the Fort in Johannesburg, his name entered the lore of South African prison gang the Ninevites who ‘to this day designate those responsible for procuring their “boy-wives” in prison as *AmaSilva*’ (179). Lis/Silver also had often violently misogynistic relationships with women off whom he lived and whom he

sometimes destroyed. An informer, at different times he was ‘a criminal-policeman’ and ‘a policeman-criminal’ (488). Never a terribly successful criminal, however, he did time in some of the world’s most feared prisons. Spending his life steeped in crime and treachery, Lis/Silver was largely surrounded by women and men who simultaneously colluded, betrayed and double-crossed him. These are the ‘flies’ of the title.

All this might add up to no more than a sordid tale if it were not for van Onselen’s skill in providing us with a vivid portrayal of an expanding Atlantic world where whores, thieves and profiteers followed the allure of gold and get-rich-quick schemes and who skipped town when they were no longer able to outrun the law, or, perhaps just as frequently, to continue to control the bent cops and politicians into whose ranks they had wormed their way. Johannesburg emerges from this history not so much as a gold town on the far periphery, but as an artery of the emerging new world, increasingly connected not only to Europe but also to the Americas. Through a combination of luck, crime and chutzpah, Lis/Silver was able to move around this world: but he was never able to disappear entirely. Indeed it is largely through glimpses of his quarry in police and immigration records and other snippets caught in the growing international documentary and bureaucratic machinery that van Onselen is able to piece together the ‘career’ of his fox and run him to ground. And it is recounting this world which van Onselen does masterfully, and which provides the texture to understanding Silver and many like him for whom the late nineteenth century expansion of transport networks and communications meant that exploitative international capitalism was inextricably linked with corrupt politics, intercontinental crime, and trafficking in women.

Meticulously detailed, the prose is generally fast-paced and van Onselen is especially gifted at sketching the big picture of the turbulent fin-de-siècle and of the cities and towns where Silver washed up. Unfortunately, however, when it comes to describing his main protagonist, van Onselen’s style can be overblown and the metaphors of hunted/fox/author/subject are overdone. One of the strengths of the book is in the attempt to bring psychological theory together with material analysis in ‘an archaeology of the mind’ to show that Silver’s psychopathology was forged in a particular time and context. However, if psychopaths are as much made as they are born, is it really helpful, then, to describe Lis/Silver as ‘evil incarnate’ (7) and as a ‘man-beast’ (485)?

On the possibility that Lis/Silver was the notorious serial killer of

Whitechapel, I remain agnostic. Van Onselen tells us: ‘I never went looking for Jack the Ripper – *he* always came looking for *me*. It was not I who tugged at Silver’s sleeve to ask if there was any chance that he was the Ripper; it was Joseph Lis who, through his consistent attempts to conceal his presence in London 1885-88 aroused my suspicions’ (505). But Lis/Silver’s ‘consistent attempts’ might, to another reader, be seen as the author’s post-facto interpretation of the gaps in the remaining evidence of Silver’s whereabouts in the late 1880s and especially during the crucial months of 1888 when the ‘canonical five’ murders usually associated with ‘the Ripper’ occurred. More worryingly, there are plenty of instances in the text in which entirely acceptable speculation based on scholarly hindsight has been written instead as narrative fact. What, for example, are we to make of the following passage which occurs quite early in the book (72), and which describes the state of mind of Joseph Lis as he left Ossining on 12 October 1891?

The train charged down the valley but it could not go fast enough for him, he wanted Sing Sing, New York and the United States behind him. The idea flashed through his mind that he should perhaps return to England. A few cousins he could trust had recently abandoned Poland but run out of funds in London. Perhaps he should join them? They were, after all, part of his own family, real flesh and blood. But the horrors of Whitechapel were all too recent, part of a personal history he wished to conceal for ever.

It could be argued that ‘the horrors of Whitechapel’ would have been known to any resident of London of the time, but this would be disingenuous as here and elsewhere van Onselen implies so much more.

Absence of evidence in this case is not evidence of presence. Van Onselen knows this and is far too good a historian not to admit, ‘even if Lis were in Whitechapel at the time of the murders there is no incontrovertible evidence linking him to the killings’ (424). But, by the time he closes the formal chapters of the book, van Onselen believes that he has proved his case ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. In the rather jarring final section entitled ‘Jury Duty’ he insists that we – ‘members of history’s jury’ – find ‘the accused’ guilty or not guilty. Drawing more on gothic horror than on the more measured tones of Clio, he instructs us: ‘Condemn him, but grant the man-beast a final wish – that his remains be left undisturbed in some far-off grave and that he continue to be known, for all time, as “Jack the Ripper”’ (485).

Van Onselen reminds us that it requires ‘courage and conviction to cross

the frontier of coincidence and press on beyond plausibility to reach historical truth' (485). It does indeed, but has he pushed too far? The circumstantial evidence is strong; the psychological profile powerfully suggestive; the Old Testament exegesis provocative; and the scholarship impressive. For me, however, the jury is still out. Moreover, it is not a verdict that I find particularly important to reach. Rather, it would be a great pity if this historical work is assessed in terms of whether or not 'the Fox' is 'the Ripper'. If Silver is not Jack, then he was a nasty enough individual in and of himself; his victims were no less damaged; the worlds in which he lived not so far from our own; and the telling of his story no less significant.