

Scandinavian-Canadian Studies Études scandinaves au Canada



Sybille Bauer and Juliane Egerer. Vom Schüler einer christlichen Kolonialschule zum Wotansverehrer

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Volume 31, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111580ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/scancan257>

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Publisher(s)

Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada

ISSN

0823-1796 (print)

2816-5187 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lüthi, T. (2024). Review of [Sybille Bauer and Juliane Egerer. Vom Schüler einer christlichen Kolonialschule zum Wotansverehrer]. *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies / Études scandinaves au Canada*, 31, 1–3.
<https://doi.org/10.29173/scancan257>

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Sybille Bauer and Juliane Egerer. 2023. *Vom Schüler einer christlichen Kolonialschule zum Wotansverehrer: Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte im schriftlichen Nachlass von Wilhelm L. G. Elmenhorst*. Göttingen: Wallstein. 299 pages. ISBN: 978-3-8353-5481-4.

“From a Student at a Christian Colonial School to a Worshiper of Wotan: German Colonial History in the Written Estate of Wilhelm L. G. Elmenhorst”—what a title. In their most recent collaboration, Sybille Bauer and Juliane Egerer present an intriguing and yet jarring case study of early twentieth-century knowledge production in the German Empire and Colonial Deutsch-Südwestafrika (DSWA), now Namibia. In nine chapters, the co-authors tell the story of Wilhelm Ludwig Geverhard Elmenhorst’s (1890–1964) life from an interdisciplinary perspective. The study focuses on Elmenhorst’s estate, now mostly kept at the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg. Three interviews conducted with members of Elmenhorst’s family complement this already rich material. The result is a rather unique study on a unique combination of subjects: German colonial history and the reception of Old Norse mythology.

Bauer and Egerer’s study has its roots in a specifically German style of writing about history and literature. The initial discussion of the theoretical framework begins by presenting ideas by Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). The reader, and the international reader especially, might be somewhat perplexed by this immediate twofold idealization of the subject based on German nineteenth-century historicism and mid-twentieth-century hermeneutics. When the authors further expand on these ideas through (mostly German) narratology, the interdisciplinarity pursued between history and literary criticism turns out to be of an orthodox strand. The absence of current postcolonial and related cultural theory is regrettable. However, their approach also has its distinct strengths and gives important insight into the discourse of the German Empire and the DSWA.

The study’s focal point is the biography of Elmenhorst. Just who is he? We might have never known his name were it not for his son, Jens Elmenhorst, who contacted Egerer in 2015, looking for someone who might be interested in the written estate of his father. After a first review of the material, Egerer called in Bauer, and they applied together for a grant from the Gerda Henkel Foundation, which supported work on the book from January 2019 to December 2022. One could rhetorically ask why anyone should be interested in the estate of a hitherto unknown person. Implicitly, the authors seem to follow the tradition

of Italian *microstoria*, which meticulously analyzes a local and seemingly unimportant case study to then further illuminate the global “big questions.” In the case of Elmenhorst, this approach works remarkably well.

The cosmos of this twentieth-century German Menocchio is highly idiosyncratic. Within the space of the book’s nine chapters, we follow him through various stages of his life. Born into a family of merchants in Hamburg, he briefly studied at the Deutsche Kolonialschule or German Colonial School (DKS) in Witzenhausen and the University of Leipzig before immigrating to the DSWA in 1911. There, he worked as a traveling merchant and casual laborer before he enlisted as an interpreter for the German Colonial *Schutztruppe* [Protection Force] during the Great War. Before and after the war, he repeatedly tried to establish a farm but ultimately failed. Throughout his whole time in the DSWA, he wrote lofty poems such as “Stolz auf mein Volk und stolz auf meine Ahnen” [Proud of my people and proud of my ancestors], in which he uses “Norse” imagery to glorify the Herero and Namaqua genocide committed by German forces (cf. 82–84). In 1924, he returned to Germany, where after just one and a half years he received his PhD for his thesis *Das Haus in Südwest-Afrika* [The House in South West Africa]. A colonial revisionist, opponent to the Weimar Republic, and lifelong anti-Semite, he joined the NSDAP in 1933. In 1941, he and his business partner established a chemistry company with factories in occupied Bielitz (now Bielsko-Biala, Poland) and Hamburg, where he employed Soviet forced laborers and must have been witness to various war-related crimes. Never able to reflect on his actions and worldviews, he died in 1964.

It is easy to see how Elmenhorst’s CV relates to the big questions in the historiography of the twentieth century. The authors deserve full credit for a diligent study that reconstructs every step taken by Elmenhorst, contextualizing his writings and career with the help of a vast corpus of relevant literature. Through a very specific and singular case study, the reader learns a great deal about German history in general, and German reflection on the past—or the lack thereof—in particular. A further merit of the study is its unapologetic honesty. Throughout the book, Bauer and Egerer call out Elmenhorst’s views and choices and contrast them with historical facts. It becomes crystal-clear that Elmenhorst’s actions were not without alternatives.

However, hindsight is a wonderful thing. This hindsight highlights the problems of Bauer and Egerer’s hermeneutical approach. The study’s declared goal of explaining Elmenhorst’s inability to reflect critically on historical events (cf. 23) fails at this precise point. There is no “sense” in Elmenhorst’s actions that lives up to twenty-first century standards of critical reflection and our view of “historical reality.” However, Chapter 6 offers a glimpse of the intrinsic logic of the discourses that Elmenhorst inscribed onto himself. Analyzing Elmenhorst’s manuscript *Eddische Lieder* [Eddic songs], Egerer takes a close look at his reception of Eddic poetry and the role it played in the construction of his

German colonial identity. The impact of academic scholarship on his writings is remarkable, and while Egerer frequently points out the unscholarly nature of his methods, Elmenhorst remains eerily close to the scholarly discourse of his time. This problem becomes most pronounced when Egerer briefly recycles the German narrative of a matter-of-fact philology personified by Andreas Heusler (cf. 151). This somewhat scientific notion of philology as a stalwart bulwark against *völkisch*, nationalistic, anti-Semitic, and *lebenreförderisch*-oriented reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is a pleasant story. One could and should suspect that it is a myth of immediate post-war Scandinavian Studies in Germany. A closer look reveals that all the aforementioned aspects of reception can be found in Heusler's work and many of his renowned colleagues' writings as well. We as scholars start to tread on thin ice here. The interplay of scholarship and ideology is delicate and requires our continuous attention, necessitating a reckoning with both the past and the present. Bauer and Egerer have presented us with a brilliant study and fascinating material that gives us the opportunity—and the stimulus—to do just that.

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