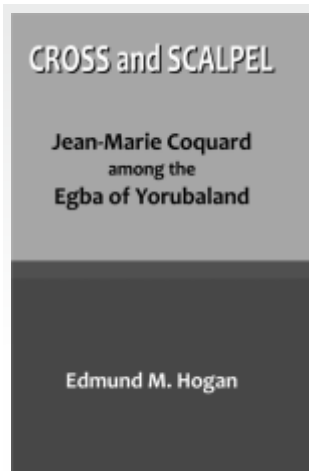


## Book Review



### **Cross and Scalpel: Jean-Marie Coquard among the Egba of Yorubaland**

**Author:** Edmund M. HOGAN

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**Reviewer:** Michael McCabe, SMA

*This is a thoroughly engaging and beautifully written account of the life and ministry of a remarkable Catholic missionary who laboured among the Egba people of Southern Nigeria for almost 40 years, spanning the closing decade of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries. Jean-Marie Coquard, who hailed from Brittany in Northern France, began life as a sailor in the merchant navy from 1873-1882. Following rejection by the Sacred Heart missionaries of Betharram in 1885, he joined the Society of African Missions (SMA) and was ordained a priest in 1890. He immediately embarked on the Society's mission in West Africa, taking up a medical apostolate in Abeokuta – an apostolate already initiated by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries – and opening the first Catholic hospital there. With only two trips abroad, the first in 1896, to Brazil to collect funds for a minor seminary in the Benin vicariate, and the second in 1907, to attend an SMA General Assembly in France, he was to remain in Abeokuta until his death in 1933 at the age of 74.*

*Without any formal training, Coquard gained an apparently well-deserved reputation as a doctor and surgeon among the local people and even among the Protestant missionaries and British representatives in the region. His medical skills, acquired mostly from personal study combined with practical experience, were honed later during a five week's apprenticeship at the prestigious Hôtel-Dieu hospital in Lyon in 1899. The surgeons who trained him also provided him with medical equipment and funds for his hospital. Though small of stature, Coquard was a man of enormous energy, intellectual acumen, boundless self-confidence, and considerable*

*practical and administrative skills. In addition to his prowess as doctor and surgeon, he functioned as an engineer, architect, fund-raiser, superior of the Abeokuta mission and SMA "visitor" – a position which made him responsible for the spiritual and material well-being of the SMA members in the vicariate. He was also a superb chronicler with a capacity to bring an event to life with a few telling phrases. Indeed the book contains several wonderfully illuminating passages from his letters and "Chronique d'Abeokuta".*

*Coquard's missionary career was remarkable not only because he survived 25 years in Africa without a break, but principally because of his achievements: the founding and administering of Sacred Heart Hospital, "one of the best built hospitals in West Africa" (p. 434) – a hospital with maternity and child care facilities; the establishment of a leprosarium; the promotion of education though acquiring land for the building of schools for both boys and girls; and the transformation of a precarious Catholic mission into a thriving enterprise – achieved mainly through the success of his medical apostolate.*

*While his portrait of Coquard is a generally sympathetic one, Hogan does not overlook his protagonist's shortcomings. "A stubborn individualist with a contentious streak" (p. 243), Coquard's self-belief and tendency to self-promotion bordered on arrogance at times, especially when his position in his beloved hospital was threatened. This led to frequent clashes with his superiors, both on the home front and on the mission. Lacking in diplomatic skills, he could be abrasive in his exercise of authority. He failed conspicuously to establish harmony among his confreres, many of whom were behind various unsuccessful attempts to have him removed from the Abeokuta mission. At the same time, he was capable of winning the friendship and support not only of the local people, but also of the British colonial representatives and Egba chiefs – a support and friendship which proved vital in promoting the interests of the Catholic mission. Coquard's work was so highly regarded by the British that in 1929 "he was invested with the Order of the British Empire (OBE) at a ceremony presided over by Sir Frank Baddeley, then the officer administering the Nigerian Government" (p. 421-422). After his death, the Egba people honoured him by naming a locomotive after him in 1935 and, in 1954, erecting and a life-size bronze stature of him in front of his original hospital building.*

*Hogan's lengthy – over 500 pages – biography is the fruit of meticulous research of mostly primary sources. With the professional acumen of the trained historian, he situates Coquard's life and ministry against the background of the political (international and local) and ecclesiastical factors at play, prior to and during his long sojourn in Abeokuta. The value of the book is augmented by several brilliant pen pictures of the leading characters in the story and further enhanced by ten appendices, over thirty pages of end notes, a select bibliography, a chronological table, a list of *dramatis personae*, and a name index. Cross and Scalpel offers, not only an engaging account of the life and times of a remarkable missionary, but an illuminating insight into a seminal stage in the history of Catholic missionary expansion in Southern Nigeria.*