

25 January



Fr CHARLES CROONENBERGHS

3 March 1843 – 25 January 1899

One of the original eleven who came up in 1879, Croonenberghs was born in Hasselt, Belgium and joined the Society in 1863. He did some teaching in Belgium before coming to South Africa in 1879. Together with Henri Depelchin, the superior of the Zambezi Mission, Fr Augustus Law and Br de Sadeleer he reached the outskirts of King Lobengula's capital at GuBulawayo on September 2. At first the king did not want them. He was not interested in education for his people, and claimed he had enough missionaries in the form of the London Missionary Society.

But the Jesuits bought a house from a trader anyway and gradually won the King's consent. Croonenberghs was a skilled painter. He and the others, now joined by Br Nigg, made themselves useful to the king. They set about overhauling the royal wagon and when it was complete it caused a great sensation. 'When Lobengula saw the device, he uttered a cry of admiration and squeezed Fr. Croonenberghs hand so hard that he nearly fainted. All were in ecstasies.' Lobengula decided to grant the Jesuits permanent residence and granted them the right to travel in his territory towards the Zambezi. Croonenberghs then painted a picture of Lobengula presiding over a ceremony for the First Fruits and later, the Great Dance. The originals were lost though a copy of the Great Dance is now housed in the National Archives of Zimbabwe

But the mission was going nowhere. Lobengula repeated his decision that no one should take up the Christian religion. The Jesuits gave medical care and grew their own food – and waited. Croonenberghs remained at the mission for five years (1879-84) where he provided a steady base for missionaries passing through or recovering from fever. He found it frustrating that he could not do more. But by just being there, and keeping good relations with king, he provided a healthy base from which the missionaries. could move out and explore possibilities.

As we know, nothing came of it though Prestage later had more success with the king who granted him a site, which became Empandeni Mission, in 1887, the year the mission at Bulawayo closed. Croonenberghs, meanwhile, had left in 1884 and after a year at Kalkfontein in South Africa, went to America to collect money for the mission. He published an account of his experiences, *Trois Ans dans l'Afrique Australe*, in 1882. After his trip to America he returned to Belgium where he died in Verviers in 1899.