

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Radical History and the Struggle Revisited: *The Cambridge History of South Africa*

ARAN MACKINNON

Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, and Robert Ross (eds.). 2010. *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 1, From Early Times to 1885*. Cambridge, UK and New York, New York: Cambridge University Press. xx, 467 pp.

Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson (eds.). 2011. *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 2, 1885-1994*. Cambridge, UK and New York, New York: Cambridge University Press. xi, 724 pp.

The much anticipated Cambridge History of South Africa (CHSA) seeks to provide, as the editors of Volume 2 state, an authoritative survey of the history of South Africa from earliest times to 1994. This monumental work, in two volumes, is a once-in-a-generation summative collection of essays by many of the leading historians of South Africa. It carries on in the tradition of its predecessors, *The Cambridge History of the British Empire, Volume 7, South Africa, Rhodesia, and the High Commission Territories* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963), edited by Eric A. Walker, and the widely read two-volume *Oxford History of South Africa* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1968 and 1971) edited by Leonard M. Thompson and Monica Hunter Wilson. The new CHSA covers the major historical developments in a more-or less chronological manner, though there are differences of approach between Volume 1 and 2. Both volumes also provide an overview of the principal historiographical developments with particular emphasis on the editors' and authors' own significant contributions. They emphasize especially interpretations from the radical school that evolved under Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido at the University of London and at Oxford University respectively, and in South Africa at the University of Cape Town and then the University of the Witwatersrand. The overall approach of the project is, therefore, necessarily reflective, and so it tends to shy away from grappling fully with the still evolving post-apartheid historiography or to provide many sign-posts for the way ahead in South African history. As the editors acknowledge, however, much of the work on South Africa by professional historians has been dominated by the same political divisions that plagued the country's past. To their credit, the editors are acutely mindful of the limitations this poses for inclusivity of a broader range of voices. As the editors of Volume 1 note (p. xiv) the CHSA is "almost by definition" an emanation of the British establishment, and so the perspectives in the following chapters reflect the work of mostly white academics but with notable exceptions.

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Volume 1 opens, after a brief introduction, with a useful and insightful editors' discussion about the production and meaning of South African history, including how to interpret the limited evidence available from the pre-historical period. In a way that does not seem to emerge as clearly from Volume 2, this first chapter considers the implications and influences of the post-apartheid settings on our understanding of South African history. It also considers the broad range of sources that are available, including the rich body of oral, material and visual evidence. The editors also draw our attention to the development—led by Carolyn Hamilton, John Wright, and others—of South Africanists' considerable expertise in parsing out the ways that pre-colonial evidence was often mediated through colonial lenses. The balance of this chapter sets out, in chronological order, the major schools of historiography. This valuable discussion provides an important consideration not only of the types of self-conscious narratives produced since early times, ranging from rock art and recorded oral evidence through the various colonial categories of history to those created at the end of apartheid, but also the historical contexts they emerged from. While the focus of this discussion highlights the period under consideration in Volume 1, it provides some sobering thoughts that could equally apply to Volume 2. Chief among these is the posing of very salient and discomfiting questions for South African history and historians, and that is who owns both the production of history and the meanings to be derived from it?

The next seven chapters provide an engaging introduction to and analysis of the established treatments of the major developments in South African history to 1885. Chapter 2 by John Parkington and Simon Hall, leading scholars of pre-historical archaeological sites in South Africa, sets out the establishment and development of food producing communities in the region. Among the critical questions that Parkington and Hall address are the nature and completeness of the technology package that arrived with pioneering farmers and the extent to which the Central Cattle Pattern is a useful tool of analysis for historical change among pre-historical pastoralists. This chapter does an excellent job of explaining complex data and the nature of the excavations of important sites. The diagrams and maps, however, do not provide sufficient detail, nor is there enough discussion of them to assist the reader's understanding. It is also somewhat curious that the authors have elected to use the old standard Christian-centric dating system as opposed to the more current Common Era (CE) convention. This continues in Simon Hall's next chapter on the development of farming communities in the second millennium A.D. In this narrative, Hall guides us through the formation and expansion of identifiable hierarchal societies that can be tracked through pre-historical as well as written sources. An important theme of the chapter is the extent to which these communities made clear links, socially and commercially, with the wider world. He introduces the Shona-speakers and the Mapungubwe complex in the Limpopo valley, and then guides us through the expanding trade networks that eventually connected up with Great Zimbabwe before considering the emergence of the Sotho-Tswana communities of the South African high-veldt as well as the Nguni-speaking farmers of the eastern littoral.

Robert Ross's lively treatment of the Khoisan and European entanglements sets the stage for the first white colonial foundations in the Cape in chapter 4. Significantly, the maps are quite clear, and Ross pays close attention to the interplay of people and the environment. John Wright provides the next, critical chapter, on political transformations between the 1760s and the 1830s. Wright's keen but judicious treatment of the "Mfecane" debates here is a masterful synthesis of this complex and contested topic, although he is less concerned with the apparent meanings derived from the debate than with clearing a path through them. Martin Legassick and Robert Ross teamed up to craft chapter 6 on the slave and settler

economies that emerged in the Cape. It is here that we begin to see the clear furrow of radical and materialist history in the CHSA, and this very detailed analysis relies on what seems the almost inescapable geographic progression of settler history emanating from the Cape and projecting into the interior through trade, Christianity, and conquest. In chapter 7, Norman Etherington, Patrick Harries and Bernard Mbenga consider the new relations wrought by the ascendancy of imperial power over colonial and African societies. It is somewhat surprising, given the fresh perspective that Etherington provided in his critically-acclaimed *The Great Treks* (London: Pearson Education, 2001) that this chapter in the CHSA still refers to the binary of frontier relations in what is otherwise portrayed as an open, fluid period of social and political relationships. The chapter does, nevertheless, pay significant attention to questions of race, identity and science, as well as the familiar narrative of imperial history.

The final chapter in Volume 1, Paul Landau's compelling synthesis on the theme of "Transformations in Consciousness" is somewhat out of keeping with the previous chapters' chronological progression. Landau takes a thematic approach to understanding, "what ordinary people were saying" about themselves and how they thought they could affect their world. This chapter is perhaps more anthropological, even philosophical, than historical, but it does reveal a great deal about how some people articulated their understanding of the major historical forces of the period prior to industrialization. Overall, this volume covers most of the important developments in the history and historiography and serves as an important reference work. It would have benefitted from better, larger maps and diagrams, as well as an annotated bibliography—Volume 2 has at least a full bibliography, but it does not appear to cover both volumes—and review of at least some of the better, well-established online resources now available.

Volume 2 is a longer and somewhat more comprehensive synthesis covering the period from 1885 until 1994. It includes statistical tables as well as a bibliography. The starting date is linked to what the editors see as the motors of South African history, the domination by European settlers through conquests, mineral discoveries and the advent of industrial capitalism. As with the first volume, it seeks to reflect past scholarship and historiography. The editors state this volume is the culmination "above all . . . of the so-called radical or revisionist historians and their successors since about 1970." (p. 1) While this period was undoubtedly a high-water mark of South African history, and the contributors to Volume 2 are among the preeminent scholars of the field, in the CHSA they remain focused on the period prior to the formal end of apartheid. It is lamentable that these important and very influential historians have not sought to provide some more solid sign-posts for the consideration of history after 1994 or to engage more fully with the important realms of public history and heritage which have recently exploded. There also appears a hesitancy to consider these emergent fields or the wider popular efforts to lay claim to the production of history and historical memory. A discussion of heritage and historical memory, for example, is afforded just six pages in the final chapter, though some of the implications of these approaches appear throughout many chapters. The overall arc of Volume 2 follows a different approach than Volume 1 with thematic chapters, some of which have considerable chronological overlap, and others that are focused on specific thematic topics such as demography or the economy.

The introduction to Volume 2 provides a broad and very useful consideration of the historiography. Here, the editors pay particular attention to the politically-inspired nature of the radical and Marxist interpretations. Indeed, it is hard to imagine appreciating, let alone

understanding, South African history and historians over the past fifty years without a clear recognition of its central role in political activism from all sides of the spectrum. They also provide the context for the emergence of important new threads of social and feminist history, but there is less attention to the historiography of both rural and urban developments than one might have expected. Given the considerable body of works on environmental history related to South Africa, especially in terms of settler capitalism and perceptions of African management of the environment, it is somewhat surprising that there is not more space devoted to this important area of study.

The chapters in Volume 2 move from thematic to chronological developments covering what the editors see as the motors of South African history: the domination by European settlers through conquests, mineral discoveries, and the advent of industrial capitalism. It also seeks to explain how various identities were forged through both agency and domination. The first chapter, by Saul Dubow, provides a very engaging and sweeping narrative on the nature of South African identity. This is, essentially, a historiographical analysis of the ways historians and South Africans themselves have thought about social and economic categories such as race, class, nationalism, and citizenship as well as ideas about belonging and community. As with Paul Landau's somewhat similar chapter in Volume 1, Dubow's could have served well as the summative concluding chapter for Volume 2, especially if it had been expanded to include more consideration of the post-apartheid period. Stanley Trapido's posthumous chapter 2 considers the forces of imperialism and settler capitalism in a classically radical fashion. Here one is reminded not only of Trapido's insightful and cutting analyses, but also of his great passion for the struggle. His contributions will be missed.

Shula Marks, who not only shaped many of the seminal arguments and analyses that are the foundation for the CHSA but also trained many of the historians who also contributed to these foundations, wrote the next two chapters spanning the period from 1880-1910. These chapters cover the important yet complex relations among race, class, gender, and consciousness as well as emergent nationalism among blacks and Afrikaners in the prelude to the South African war and the forging of Union. Ever insightful and sensitive to questions of agency as well as the powerful forces of domination and subordination, Marks captures the essence of the period by stating that "Everywhere, colonial and colonized subjects were actively engaged in complex cultural choices, although some had more 'choice' than others." (p. 105). In chapter 5, Bill Freund nicely captures the radical interpretation of the rise of white domination by considering the challenges to and limits of the segregationist state from 1910-1948. He notes the contradictions inherent in the Union government's efforts to create a hegemonic order that could reconcile the demands of white supremacists and industrial capitalists. This is followed by Philip Bonner's chapter covering the nature of South African society and culture for the same period. While this chapter does an excellent job of covering both developments in both urban and rural areas, it seems perhaps less concerned with popular culture than it is with class.

In chapter 7 Deborah Posel considers the nature and dimensions of the "Apartheid Project" from 1948-1970. In addition to explaining how the meaning and evolution of apartheid have been understood, Posel makes the important point that at its core, apartheid was about the politics not of just defining but also of managing population groups and demography. As with all the chapters in Volume 2, the authors remind us that the shaping of white domination was a deeply ambiguous and uneven project, and that, more importantly, understanding its persistence requires recognizing the interaction of the

successes and failures of the state. In chapters 8 and 9, Anne Mager and Maanda Mulaudzi, and Tom Lodge respectively address popular responses to apartheid from 1948-1975 and the resistance that led to tentative reforms from 1973-1994. Mager and Mulaudzi's chapter analyzes the ways that the majority of South Africans came to understand the struggle, and the relationship they had with their political elite leadership. Of particular note in this chapter is the attention to both women and consumer culture in the resistance movements. Tom Lodge's insightful chapter explores the limits of change in the relationship between the political and economic transformation of the country. His analysis of the trade union movement and the connections with popular resistance is particularly engaging.

Perhaps less consistent with the scope and purpose of the CHSA, though certainly still expertly crafted, is chapter 10 by Charles Simkins on the changing population. This brief chapter, while replete with interesting and important data, seems somewhat disconnected from the main flow of the radical narrative and provides rather less analysis than is needed to show the relationship between history and demographic change. In chapter 11, Nicoli Nattrass and Jeremy Seekings provide a masterful overview of the nature and progression of the economy. While the analysis here remains focused on key economic indicators, it also provides a nuanced look at people's lives intersected at so many points with economic developments. Of particular importance is the way Nattrass and Seekings illuminate an understanding of poverty in all its manifestations. The penultimate chapter by Tlhalo Radithlalo is a lively and detailed consideration of the ways South Africans expressed themselves culturally through literature and the arts. This insightful chapter is too brief and the CHSA could have benefitted from its expansion, especially into an analysis of the post-apartheid period. Similarly, the final chapter by Albert Grundlingh, Christopher Saunders, Sandra Swart, and Howard Phillips is also all too brief given the important topics covered. Indeed, this important summative chapter only cursorily considers the recent and possible future historiographical developments in the major areas of the environment, heritage, resistance, and health. It is somewhat surprising that the CHSA did not provide more scope for a consideration of what the authors show are the longer established analyses of these topics, especially the history of health, and, as noted previously, environmental history, both of which have deep roots in the pre-1994 period.

In the final analysis, the CHSA is a welcome and authoritative culmination of historical scholarship from the seminal period of apartheid. It reflects the very considerable and important contributions of leading academics from a period when history and politics were so deeply connected to the struggle to transform South Africa. As such, the CHSA is also clearly bound by the historical confines of that period. It will remain for the next generation of scholars to grapple with South African history after the end of apartheid.