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The class of '79

(Auckland Park, Jacana Publishers, 2014, 159 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4314-1086-6)

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When Lesego Rampolokeng took the stage at the University currently known as Rhodes in 2012 to perform his public lecture, *writing the ungovernable*,¹ he had the following to say about the current historical disposition of the country: “my generation break-beaten into line / obscenity-heritage / pornography pageantry ... superstars, asteroids/arse-steroids & haemorrhoids / all things I try to avoid / now) time’s stuck a fist so far up my rectum / it’s waving Amandla out of my mouth / (what a boneless slogan to chew)”. Rampolokeng is here throwing a looming shadow over the bright colours of the South African rainbow and the heroes and icons it produces. He is questioning the history and the narrative that has continually been re-told as the story of the glorious end of apartheid, complete with heroes, waving fists, and limp Amandla slogans.

This specific trend in South African historical writing has seen a resurgence in recent times with the publication of several books dealing with the so-called

¹ L Rampolokeng, “Writing the ungovernable”, *New Coin Poetry*, 49(1), 2013.

“non-racial” struggle against the National Party government’s institutionalised and legally codified racial laws: apartheid.² Janice Warman’s latest book, *The class of ’79*, falls squarely into this current trend of historical writing. Warman presents the narratives of three individuals that were involved in the ANC and/or later the UDF opposition to the government’s policy of apartheid. These individuals – Marion Sparg, Guy Berger, Zubeida Jaffer – were also all part of Rhodes’ Department of Journalism graduating class of 1979.

The book proceeds by collecting interviews and anecdotes related to the individuals that it claims to study. If the book is evaluated and analysed merely on what it sets out to achieve on this level then it can be deemed a successful book. It collects oral and anecdotal evidence on the three protagonists’ anti-apartheid activities and relates them back to the eponymous Rhodes University journalism class of ‘79. The book is divided into three main chapters dealing with each figure: Sparg, Berger, and Jaffer. The preface is divided into two sections entitled respectively *The Beginning*, and *Johannesburg* while the book ends with a section entitled *Sussex*.

The section entitled *The Beginning* gives us a glimpse into the method employed by Warman when she narrates her time in Rhodes, as part of the class of 1979. Warman refers sympathetically to the work of the ‘new journalists’ Joan Didion, Thom Wolfe and Truman Capote. Apart from this briefest of allusions to a literary tradition, there is no clear methodology that explains the author’s choice of material and process of compiling information. The reason for choosing these three specific individuals are explained anecdotally in the opening pages as having to do with Warman’s own experiences at university and her loose affiliation with the subjects of the book. This anecdotal form of explanation is a feature of the whole text and thus instead of argued and researched historical critique, the author employs a range of literary techniques and tropes to carry her text: confessional writing, new journalism, personal narrative, interviews, profile and feature writing.

In the absence of such a methodological clarification, it can only be assumed that the choices made by the author are of a personal and haphazard nature. Although this method can be effective, it does present a serious problem when historical, intellectual, and anti-colonial trajectories are combined

2 M Burton, *The Black Sash* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2015); D Cornell and K van Marle, *Albie Sachs and transformation in South Africa: From revolutionary activist to constitutional court judge* (Abingdon, Birkbeck Law Press, 2014); B Keniston, *Choosing to be free: The life story of Rick Turner* (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2014); G Moss, *The new radicals: A generational memoir of the 1970s* (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2014).

and commented upon in such a haphazard way without any argument or citations. There is a telling paragraph in this regard, dealing with the Pan Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement, on pg 50. Warman attempts to make a comment on the BCM's organisational strategy and tactics and states that, "[d]espite its leader Steve Biko's own support for non-violent action, influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, it [BCM] leaned towards more militant and radical solutions". A claim like this would need to, in any situation, be justified and argued against the already existing body of literature on Biko and the BCM and the influence of thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Anton Muziwakhe Lembede, and Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. Gandhi's involvement in the anti-colonial struggle in South Africa, the Bambatha revolt being a case in point, is dubious to say the least and invoking him in the same paragraph as the Africanist movement, and the same sentence, as BCM and Biko has to be treated with suspicion. Warman then follows that specific passage with a lengthy discussion on Guy Berger's anti-establishment politics and his influences. There is a conceptual, political, and historical problem in using Biko and BCM as a foil to ultimately discuss white anti-apartheid activists; white liberals in Biko's words.

The book's inability to function as an accurate historical text does, however, not take away from its role in re-telling and creating memory. Any text – be it a work of visual art, writing, film, photo – tells not only the story of its chosen subject but it also tells the story of the one choosing the subject. The role of the author of a work can most easily be discerned by considering the choices made in the text. As mentioned earlier, the lack of methodological reflection makes the choices made by the author all the more important. Choice does not only play a structural role in the narrative but also, in the case of Warman's text, functions as a literary trope. The role of choice and the decision to act in a certain way – or to not act in a certain way – is a recurring theme throughout the book and in the interviews with the three protagonists. Warman seems fascinated by the choices made by Sparg, Berger, and Jaffer that is seemingly against the established dogmas and truths of their respective communities and families. Warman does, however, fail to contextualise and properly historicise these choices within a broader political and social history. How is it, for example, that certain people were able to choose to partake in an anti-apartheid struggle and some were forced into it by the colour of their skin, forced into revolt by birth?

The fault lines inherent in the post-apartheid rainbow myth are beginning to show clearly and decisively after 21 years. These are not the same sentiments shared by Warman when she asks each of her interviewees “was the struggle and the sacrifice worth it?” What is emerging on the campuses, streets, and public discourse in South Africa is a fundamental question of the stakes of liberation and freedom and the legitimacy of the dogmatic history of the anti-apartheid struggle for “non-racialism”. In this regard, several questions we can take from Rampolokeng need to be posed to any contemporary historical texts: is it a work in “obscenity-heritage” and “superstars” that once again waves the boneless slogan of Amandla or is it a contribution to a much needed deepening of the historical archive? Warman’s text, unfortunately, seems to answer in the affirmative to the first set of questions.

A history of Zimbabwe

(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 277 pp. ISBN: 978-1-107-68479-9)

Alois Mlambo

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Alois Mlambo’s many works (single, co-authored, and edited books ranging from studies of industrialisation, white immigration, to structural adjustment, and the wide-ranging *Becoming Zimbabwe* edited with Brian Raftopoulos; and scores of articles ranging from the history of Zimbabwe’s civil aviation to the Cold Storage Commission to sanctions against Rhodesia, student politics in the 1970s, and university policies and practices after 1980) have positioned him extremely well to write this accessible *tour de force* of what has added up to create today’s well-known superficially but poorly understood Zimbabwe. This important book is the result of decades of intense research and writing – scores of theses have been scoured, thousands of pages of primary documents from archives to government bureaus have been scrutinised, and every secondary source imaginable has been interrogated – to make a clearly written

text suitable for undergraduates sparkling with more originality than most of that genre. Indeed, after reading Mlambo's *A History of Zimbabwe* (that he uses the indefinite "a" instead of the definitive "the" is a testament to his modesty) one concludes that this sober, objective and "very" comprehensive account is a thousand times better than the bluster that has often passed as Zimbabwean history and historiography in the past.

Mlambo slips by the racist rants of early Rhodesian rambles (evident far too easily today on websites from such entities as the Rhodesian Embassy in Iceland) with barely a nod to the reactionaries – but pays strict attention to the pre-colonial past. He all but ignores the enthusiastic hurrahs of the nationalist cheerleaders (Zimbabwean aficionados may insert the historians who best fit in the blanks; those who have only a passing interest need not bother). Yet the patriotic historians' bitter critics who thought something more progressive might ensue are confined to the nooks, crannies and detours of the current ruling party's road to power that they thought might open new vistas (*A History* only spends 10 pages on the "ambiguities and contradictions of the liberation struggle" [p. 164], but the fact that he names that war *Chimurenga/Umvukela* instead of just the first word signals that he will not confine the Zimbabwe African People's Union and its stalwarts memorialised in the preface on "notable figures" to non-history's dark dungeons, and the oft cited Machingura/Mhanda's *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* suggests Mlambo's serious thinking about real possibilities – or perhaps just serious factionalism – within the nationalists' internecine fighting). Fancy post-colonial theories are trashed because ignored although the literary and musical contributions to nationalism and post-nationalism (*A History* does not use the latter phrase) are considered duly; esoteric or contrarian historiography deeming timelines of no utility is also dispensed to dustbins.

What emerges is historical materialism worn lightly: this book is a keen appreciation of the effects of Zimbabwe's economic warps and weaves – much of which is conditioned by *political* decisions at key moments, so the book is in the realm of "political economy" – on the majority of its people, millions of whom now eke out a living far away from their homeland. Mlambo's stark statistics tell the story when needed. It's a pragmatic volume, with little time for the ideological chimeras informing the fantasies of structural adjustment through to *Third Chimurengas* and the inchoate opposition to it (was the Mugabe government *ever* "Marxist" though – p. xxiii?), but keenly aware of the socio-economic and cultural tensions leading, in the absence of the

material forces needed to overcome them, to their catastrophic consequences. It covers the colonial era through its federalist efforts and into the doomed Unilateral Declaration of Independence as even-handedly as the last decade and half of calamity: what counts most are jobs and roads – industrialisation and the infrastructure supporting it. Thus the book is not pessimistic: in the *longue durée* that in other hands might be called the “national democratic revolution”³ Mlambo’s very last words opine that “there is every reason to hope that ... Zimbabwe will succeed in becoming a united, democratic and prosperous country” (p. 259) in spite of his long list of polarising factors in the last two pages and the crises in most of the rest of the book, culminating in the ruling party’s murderous frenzy when it lost the March 2008 elections (the recounting of which, by the way, concludes seventeen of the best pages on Zimbabwe’s post-2000 crisis one will read for a long time).

Perhaps it is the steadfast political neutrality of this book that makes its last hope seem forlornly fragile: if one looks back to the mini-biographies of the “notables” (biases and oversights often come out in timelines and choices of VIPs) and checks out Emmerson Mnangagwa, for example, one will neither know that he was in charge of security when the *Gukurahundi* war against ZAPU killed thousands of Ndebele people nor that he is quite likely to be Zimbabwe’s next president. Thus we are hoist by the historians once again on the petard perplexing so many students of society and especially those of ones passing through tumultuous transitions: what counts, historical structures or agents of history? Where do they meet and how? If the answer is not in this book (can one only pose counterfactuals about the role of particular people in political history, i.e.: what would be the case if Robert Mugabe had not been able to climb the pole to power and keep it?) its reading is absolutely necessary for those concerned with that dialectic in Zimbabwe today and soon become part of this long and complicated history.

3 Alois Mlambo, “Two perspectives on the National Democratic Revolution in Zimbabwe: Thabo Mbeki and Wilfred Mhanda”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 30(4), January 2012, pp. 119-138; “A decade of disquieting diplomacy: South Africa, Zimbabwe and the ideology of the National Democratic Revolution, 1999-2009”, *History Compass*, 8(8), August 2010, pp. 752-767.

The Boer War

(Johannesburg, Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2015, 446 pp., notes, bibl.,
index. ISBN: 978-1-4314-1049-1)

Martin Bossenbroek (Translated by Yvette Rosenberg)

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Martin Bossenbroek's *The Boer War* is a particularly well-written general overview of the South African War 1899-1901 which aims to explore the oft neglected Dutch perspective of the War. In addition, the War is explored more broadly from the perspective of the Boers and the British. It manages to confidently join the ranks of the likes of Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* and Bill Nasson's *The War for South Africa*.

What sets it apart from the others is its approach. Bossenbroek took the decision to explore the War from the perspective of three protagonists: William Leyds, Winston Churchill, and Deneys Reitz. In this way the author adds a crucial human element and allows him to explore different perspectives in the overall narrative. Often the reader finds the weight of the narrative relieved through judiciously inserted personal experiences and comments, which manages to provide the reader with a unique glance at how different individuals perceived their world.

In the first part of the narrative the young Dutchman William Leyds is the keystone of the narrative. Bossenbroek skilfully and seamlessly weaves Leyds into the broader historical context and uses him to connect the narrative to the Dutch perception of the Boers. Before the first Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881 the Dutch public were rather ambivalent about their "Boer cousins", but after the surprising victory of the tiny Transvaal against the British in 1881, the Dutch rediscovered their "cousins" in South Africa and became avid supporters of the Boer republics. The Boers were subsequently incorporated into the broader wave of Dutch nationalism sweeping the Netherlands. Even before the war of 1880-1881 ended the Dutch's positive image of the Boers was fuelled by various prominent Dutch academics; most notably by Pieter

Harting, who was a famous professor at the University of Utrecht. Afterwards the Dutch also provided more than morale support. The ZAR employed Dutch teachers and administrators, and the Dutch also played an especially important role in the development of the South African Republic's (ZAR) rail network, which culminated in the completion of a line to Lourenço Marques in 1895.

Leyds is also the focal point through which the events leading up to War are explored. In 1884 he accepted the position as State Attorney of the ZAR. He later became the State Secretary as well and eventually rose to the position of Special Envoy to Europe by the beginning of the war. He was therefore at the centre of the political events leading up to the War and was often involved in the various diplomatic manoeuvres which preceded hostilities. The narrative includes the most prominent theories regarding the origin of the war and manages to discuss the various factors in a balanced and comprehensive manner. Just before the beginning of the War, Leyds was appointed Special Envoy to Europe, where he believed he could be of more use. He soon realised that although the Dutch were enthusiastic supporters, they would never intervene in any meaningful way should hostilities erupt. The other powers could also not be relied on. The first part of the narrative ends on the eve of the War with Leyds' growing feeling that the British were not interested in conciliation and that war appeared inevitable.

The second part of the narrative swings to the young, energetic and glory-seeking Winston Churchill, whose adventures forms the fulcrum of the British perspective, and once again reveals Bossenbroek's talent at integrating the larger narrative into the personal experiences of his chosen subjects. Churchill is an inspiring choice around which to form the narrative, since he was in South Africa from 30 October 1899 and moved around quite frequently in his pursuit to write memorable articles as the war correspondent of *The Morning Post*. His attitude was also suitably imperialistic, militaristic, patriotic, and stingingly critical of the local generals and politicians. His adventures in South Africa introduce the reader to a variety of important aspects surrounding the British offences during the conventional phase of the war. The material is not groundbreaking, but includes perspectives from the most influential works on the War and proves an effective overview of the main events and considerations during this phase of the War. Churchill left South Africa shortly after one of the last conventional battles at Diamond Hill on 11-12 June 1900. Leyds is not entirely forgotten, however. Every once in a while the narrative shifts away from

Churchill to Leyds, who was trying to organise diplomatic intervention and a negotiated end to hostilities. The Dutch perspective, however, slowly recedes into the background; no doubt because they were unable to provide more than morale and humanitarian support during the hostilities.

The last part of the narrative orbits young Deneys Reitz through whom the Boer perspective of events is explored. The author uses Reitz's perspective to discuss the main events of the last phase of the war, including the concentration camps and the increasingly important role of Africans serving in various capacities with the British forces. The British had taken Pretoria on 5 June 1900, and the Boer forces, especially the Transvalers, were dejected. However, Christiaan de Wet and others were ushering in a new phase of the war and managed to reignite the Boer fighting spirit. The war subsequently dragged on and Reitz was an active combatant throughout and eventually landed up with Jan Smuts and his campaign in the western part of the Cape Colony, and was present when the Boers finally decided to agree to peace at Vereeniging on 31 May 1902. In-between the narrative focused on Reitz, it shifts to Leyds and even to Churchill to provide an overview and context of affairs abroad. Dutch attempts to broker peace in January 1902 eventually allowed Lord Kitchener and the Boer leaders to successfully negotiate peace. This was at the expense of the Africans, who soon lost all hope of ever gaining a measure of political recognition, and ultimately set the scene for the rise and fall of the Apartheid government.

Bossenbroek clearly managed to achieve his stated aims, although the perspectives of the Dutch are largely overshadowed by the general narrative which deals with the main events of the War, and this may disappoint some readers hoping for a more substantial discussion of the Dutch outlook. There are few glaringly obvious problems in this thoroughly researched narrative, but some readers might be a little concerned by the author's tendency to sometimes confidently "reveal" the thoughts of his main protagonists. This is certainly an excellent literary and dramatic device, but no-one really knows for certain what went through the mind of an individual. When General Buller, for instance, boarded the *Dunottar Castle* on 14 October 1899, it is doubtful whether he kept repeating the phrase "Do not go north of the Tugela" over and over in his mind (p.138). Regardless of some minor concerns, this is an engaging, comprehensive, and excellently paced overview of the War, and despite knowing how the conflict ends, the reader will eagerly look forward to each new chapter.

From protest to challenge: A documentary history of African politics in South Africa 1882-1990, Vol. 1, Protest and hope, 1882-1934

(Auckland Park, Jacana, 2014, 584 pp., bibl, 2 maps, index. ISBN: 978-1-77009-880-0)

Sheridan Johns (Revised and updated by Gail M Gerhart and Sheridan Johns)

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From protest to challenge is a useful collection of documents providing insight into the struggle of the South African black, including coloured and Indian, community to obtain equality with their white compatriots in South Africa. It is a deceptive read; which, to be honest, depends on your approach to the book. I tend to read books cover to cover without flicking through to see what is coming, so I was quite taken aback when the main narrative came to an end after 87 pages. The remainder of the book consists of the documents referred to in the first part, a useful chronology, bibliography and index. It is a revised and updated edition of a series first published between 1972 and 1977. New themes have been added to that of the first edition such as religious separation, African workers and their allies, postwar concerns, resistance and repression and the formation of the Communist Party. In addition, the latest edition contains 99 documents as opposed to 51 in the first, but unlike the first edition where the documents are interspersed between the main sections of the book, in the latest edition they are all collated at the end thereby making it a little more cumbersome for flicking to a document if you want to follow a point up as you are reading, but easier to search if you only require the primary material.

Martin Legassick⁴ noted in a review of the first edition that the material had been collected from South Africa during field visits in the early 1960s. This explains why most of the documents in the collection are from government archives and published sources. This results in a specific slant of the material and is the reason why I could not quite shake the feeling that this was another

⁴ M Legassick, "Review article: Records of protest and challenge", *Journal of African History*, 20(3), 1979, p. 451.

“white” history of the struggle, raising the question “How would a ‘black’ history read?” and in particular, “How would a South African black history read?” Asking these questions is not to devalue the quality and content of the book, but rather to challenge how historians and others determine which documents to include and how these shape our reading of the past. This is particularly pertinent for the period covered by this volume, namely 1882 to 1934. These are important years in South Africa’s history and this first volume provides the context for those dealing with the later years of struggle. Specifically, it was a time when few were literate and those who were tended to write and think in English; a point identified by the compilers and supported by the inclusion of numerous documents by the emerging black political leaders of the day.

For scholars of the history of these years, the names appearing in the text are well-known: Sol Plaatje, John Tengo Jabavu, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Charles and John Dube, Isaac Wauchope, Abdullah Abdurahman and Gandhi amongst others. So are the events around which the documents are drawn: The Anglo-Boer or South African War of 1899-1902, Union in 1910, the 1913 Land Act and voting rights. The book provides some insight into the development of the various political parties, although not surprisingly most attention is given to the dominant African National Congress and its links with the Communist Party. The interplay between the different parties is addressed as are relations with white liberals. In the essays which contextualize the primary material, various quotes from the documents are used to emphasise points and tempt the reader to engage with the documents. To some extent this negates the need for including the documents, however, their inclusion, despite some having been shortened, allows the reader to see the quote in context and to confirm the interpretation or draw their own conclusions.

In the Preface to the Second Edition, the compilers set out why and how they came to produce the book addressing to some extent the questions and points raised above. Recognising the link between South Africa’s struggles around equality with that in the United States places this book in a unique position for those interested in examining the interconnectedness of thinking and the exchange of ideas. Although this is not a dominant feature of the book, the astute scholar will be able to draw appropriate conclusions. Similarly, a comparison of the two editions of *From protest to challenge* can provide historians with some insight into how accounts develop as new material becomes available. It does not appear that any documents from the

first edition were left out of the second edition but rather additions made, thus allowing the scholar to create their own impressions where texts might seem to contradict or conflict with each other.

To conclude: Despite the feeling that this was a “history done to us”, the 99 documents provide an incredibly valuable source for those unable to access South African archives. The sign of any good book is that it stimulates thinking and this book achieved that as its structure and contents made me reflect on my own prejudice as an historian of Africa.