

An Africander collection

[BOOK REVIEW]

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Of the many challenges that the editors of Duke University's new **South Africa reader** faced was the obvious one: what, amongst so wide a range of contemporary and historical material, should be included? The problem is exacerbated by the book's stated remit, as outlined in the book's subtitle, "History, culture, politics". This announces an expansive agenda and confers upon the editors the responsibility of including key selections from each of these three areas. Of course, every literary scholar or intellectual interested in South African history and culture will have quibbles regards what has not been included and what has. Some observations in this respect open up onto broader issues related to the efficacy of critical historical juxtaposition and the need to recover rather than merely reproduce history.

The book's list of contents is both generally chronological and yet themed, divided into a series of sections that enabled selections to be successfully clustered. The first section, for example, is "African worlds, African voices", the last is "Transitions and Reconciliations". While this mode of dividing texts generally works, it leads, perhaps inevitably, to the prioritization of recent history. For example, the book's last text, a journalist's report on the successes and failings of the 2010 FIFA World Cup comes off rather poorly by comparison with the richness of many earlier texts, such as Solomon Plaatje's **Mhudi**, included in the book's first section, or "An African woman at the Cape: Krotoa", penned by Julia C Wells, in the book's second section "Colonial settlement, slavery and peonage". That being said, there certainly are a variety of bold selections that the editors have opted to include amongst older historical materials, including W W van Ryneveld's "The necessity of slavery" and Piet Retief's "Manifesto". Particularly notable given its role as a progenitor of a form of Afrikaner (and subsequently African) Nationalism, is Francis William Reitz's searing indictment of British Imperialism, "A century of wrong", which ends, memorably, with the words "Africa for the Africander". This term, "Africander", and the

obvious resonance of Reitz's call with the later Africanist demand "Africa for Africans" makes for a wonderful moment of historical juxtaposition. One cannot help but wonder if the notion of the "Africaner", an effective contraction of "Afrikaner" and "African", might one day attain the status of a broad political context. It is in moments like this that the **South Africa reader** succeeds in a type of historical juxtaposition which pushes the reader to re-evaluate given texts and historical meanings. Incidentally, I was happy to see that the Francis Reitz piece was followed from a wonderful piece by his son, Deneys Reitz, "A Boer commando". Reading this extract in a volume that included also the likes of Mohandas Gandhi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Can Themba and even – how could he have been excluded? – Julius Malema, was an odd experience. It brought home to me the degree to which I still participate in a kind of mental partitioning of these literatures, assuming, somehow, that they should be politely demarcated rather than – as is the case here – overlapped, read side by side.

A few omissions are worth noting in the book's fourth and fifth sections "Apartheid and the struggle for freedom" and "From Soweto to liberation". Bloke Modisane is nowhere to be found, which poses the question: how not to include "Blame me on History"? A worthwhile inclusion would have been an extract from J M Coetzee's compelling essay "Geoffrey Cronje: The mind of apartheid". (Coetzee, rather notably, is not included at all in the volume.) More tellingly yet, there is nothing by Anton Lembede, the pioneer of African Nationalism and first president of the ANC Youth League, whose writings proved crucial not only to Africanist intellectuals the likes of A P Mda and Robert Sobukwe, but to the formation of the PAC in 1958. True enough, Robert Sobukwe is included – a brief article describing the Pan African Congress – as is the Black Consciousness militant Khotso Seatlholo ("Students and the Soweto Uprising"). Omitting Lembede is notable however inasmuch as the editors would have hoped to avoid cataloguing merely the most well-known struggle activists and authors. This would have been a persistent editorial challenge: to both include the necessary historical material, and yet to provide excursions of the well-beaten historical path. With a project such as this, a key aim should lie with resuscitating the importance of neglected and yet nonetheless vital historical voices, hence my regret about Lembede.

This being said, I was unfamiliar with Cosmas Desmond's "The discarded people" – an article whose historical relevance has grown rather than diminished with time, and I was delighted to find a short extract from Govan Mbeki, "The peasants' revolt", included. Here the book certainly succeeds, and against those who would complain that key historical texts have been cut in length, "sampled" rather than adequately contextualized, it gives us manageable doses of important South African texts we might never otherwise get around to reading.

The Sections on apartheid and the struggle for liberation include selections from many of the key political names one would expect to find in, Steve Biko, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, F W de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo, Oliver Tambo and Desmond Tutu, and from some names one might not expect, amongst them K D Matanzima, P W Botha and Andries Treurnicht, whose "Never give in" makes for sobering reading. The editors have done their duty in including a number of historical documents and manifestos in these sections, including, the ANC Youth League's "Programme of action", the "Freedom charter", the "Women's charter", Mandela's "Inaugural address" and so on. They have also done well to include obviously reactionary and disconcerting texts, pieces which are disconcerting to read but which deserve their place in a book such as this which aims to exhibit crucial documents in the history of the country. The authors have also been astute in selecting pieces by more obviously literary writers – Zakes Mda, Olive Schreiner, Rian Malan, Antjie Krog and Zoë Wicomb – placing them, sometimes out of obvious chronological order, in between the less obviously readable historical document, succeeding thus in ensuring the narrative momentum

of the book as a whole. Likewise worth noting here is the combination of different types of texts (essays, memoirs, political manifestos, speeches, struggle songs, even recipes) which likewise adds to the texture to the volume as a whole.

The editors also deserve commendation for the wonderful use of imagery throughout, that is, the use of historical photographs, artist's depictions, cartoons, maps – although more use could have been made of these – to illustrate the book's various chapters. As anyone who has attempted to fit historical images to existing (written) texts will know, this is no easy exercise. The chosen images need not to intrude upon or overpower the writing, but to harmonize with and illuminate the words. Such a balance is difficult to attain, but the illustration of various of the book's chapters has been attended to here with sensitivity. The book's special section "Everyday life in Soweto: The photography of Santu Mofokeng", written by Patricia Hayes, is obviously a standout example in this regard.

My lasting impression of the book is one of being "forced" to read a series of texts (such as those by Buthelezi, Hobhouse, Matanzima, P W Botha, Trollop and Treunicht – an eclectic cross-section of authors if ever there was one!). These are historical texts that, left to my own devices, I would have set aside on the assumption that they possessed little contemporary historical significance or were simply politically incommensurate with my own views. This is where the book succeeds: you find yourself reading authors that almost surely you otherwise would not have, and finding in such texts observations and ideas that are often more relevant than you would have guessed. It tells you, time and again: "This too is part of your history".