

**An absorbing eyewitness account of a pivotal period**

**E.J. Kärström, *Eighteen Years in South Africa: A Swedish Gold-Digger's Account of his Adventures in the Land of Gold (1877-1896)*, edited by I. Rudner, translated by I. Rudner and J. Rudner**

Africana Publishers, Cape Town, 2013

229 pp

ISBN 978 0 620 58140 0

R195.00

If ever there was an eyewitness to history, that distinction falls to the unnamed narrator in E.J. Kärström's account of South Africa in the late nineteenth century. Translated from the original Swedish, Kärström claims that it is a faithful rendition of the narrator's exploits during a pivotal period in South Africa's history. Unsurprisingly, from the outset, this raises questions of authenticity, yet this is nevertheless an absorbing piece of literature which vividly recreates fascinating people, events and places.

The book itself is composed of very brief chapters of between one and three pages in length, each describing an episode in the narrator's travels through southern Africa. Interspersed with these chapters are black and white photographs and sketches illustrating the account. Opening in a manner reminiscent of the fictional *Robinson Crusoe*, the narrator describes his childhood in the Swedish village of Askersund which instilled in him a love for adventure and the ocean. Acting on this impulse, he took up positions on various cargo vessels eventually reaching the coast of South Africa where his ship, the "Ellen Bruse", was unceremoniously wrecked off the coast of East London.

This auspicious beginning marked the start of a series of rollicking adventures as the intrepid hero traipsed all over the subcontinent in a personification of the nineteenth century explorer depicted in the *Boys Own* stories that were voraciously consumed by the reading public during this period. The emphasis here is on the young, single European unburdened by the fetters of family and financial responsibility who is free to make his fortune in a land that offers ample opportunity to do so. The narrator's accounts of his work in railroad construction, in diamond and gold mining and as a member of the infantry in various volunteer regiments, illustrate this belief.

Beyond this individual perspective however and, with the benefit of hindsight (and a century of historical change), the text becomes a valuable account of the process of colonisation in South Africa. From the outset, the narrator displays an ambivalence regarding the existing race relations in southern Africa. His early exploits as a volunteer involved in the Xhosa uprising under Chief Sandile, the Anglo Zulu War, as well as the conflict with the Basotho in Mafekeng, predisposed him to view indigenous groups as a hostile enemy needing to be subdued. Yet he also displays contempt for the products of the "civilising mission":

The native who comes directly from the kraal is a willing worker and keen to learn his work and satisfy his 'baas' in every way. The so-called civilized or Christian native speaks English, sings hymns, apes the whites in manner of dress, and also apes the lower-class whites in bad habits. He is usually unsuitable for hard work and considers it beneath his dignity to use hoe and spade (p 37).

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His words also stem from a period of expansion in South Africa where public works and mining required a docile black labour force with little place for the aspiring black middle class. Throughout his adventures, his companion is the erstwhile Bambo, a minor Zulu prince whose search for true love is a source of much humour in the narrative.

The world created here is a homosocial one. Where women do appear, they serve as the foil for Bambo's amorous pursuits. The narrator's own attempt to attain domestic bliss is subverted by a Boer patriarchy disapproving of his wanderlust and empowered to speak for the prospective bride as women "did not have the intelligence to differentiate between good and bad, and matters always had to be decided by the elders" (p 49). Yet this is also a world where relationships and identities are fluid. The incipient signs of racial domination and economic inequality that would culminate in apartheid are evident, particularly in the narrator's accounts of the brutality and arbitrary justice meted out by the Royal Charter Company in Rhodesia. Simultaneously, however, Bambo is able to pursue white women with little consequence and becomes the first black man to work his own claim on the diamond fields.

From the perspective of the historian, the vision painted of South Africa is an arresting one. The discovery of diamonds in the Kimberley area and, subsequently, gold on the Witwatersrand paved the way for the industrial development of the region and this is very much in evidence in the book as railway lines are built, ports developed, new technologies are making their appearance in the mining industry and sidelining the small speculators in favour of monopolies with sufficient capital to invest in an expensive enterprise. There are get rich quick schemes and speculation, small towns on their way to becoming bustling cities, accounts of larger than life figures such as Cecil John Rhodes, Paul Kruger and Barney Barnato and all the dramatic tension associated with great transformation. It is South Africa in the process of becoming and makes for a riveting tale.

Other than pure entertainment value, the strength of this work lies in its graphic portrayal of a lost world, usually only recreated in South African historiography. The first person narration, with its necessarily blinkered perspective, allows the reader to interrogate the assumptions of race, gender and imperialism that permeated nineteenth century South African society; assumptions that were to have a lasting impact on notions of equality, inclusion and nationhood.

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