

Imperial Historians on South Africa in the Twentieth Century

Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok. Britain and South Africa since the Boer War*

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This important, if slightly odd book is made up of a series of studies linked to a common theme, the “special relationship” between Britain and South Africa, from the South African War to South Africa’s return to the Commonwealth in 1994. Ronald Hyam is a retired Imperial historian at Cambridge University, and Peter Henshaw, a Canadian, a former student of his who completed his Cambridge PhD in 1989. They have chosen to present their work as collaborative throughout rather than to divide the chapters by author, but in most cases it is clear which author wrote which chapter.

In the Preface, the authors state that because their book is heavily based on research in British archives (the first footnote explains that South African archives were not used because of a 50-year rule, but that has been gone for a decade), their perspective is mainly from the British, metropolitan side, and the main emphasis falls on the period up to South Africa’s departure from the Commonwealth in 1961. Though their main concern is with inter-governmental relations, Henshaw contributes chapters on “media opinion” (p 8): British reactions to apartheid and South African perceptions of Britain from 1945 to 1961. The authors mention that their selection of which topics to discuss was mainly “dictated by the weight of evidence surviving in the archival record”; the topics “reflect the issues which excited most attention at the time” (pp xi-xii). Should the historian be bound by what survives in the archival record, however? Surely the historian should consider the issues that are most significant? I return to this point at the end of this review.

Those who have been keeping up in the relevant literature will recognise a number of the chapters in this book. Chapter 2, which despite the sub-title of the volume is on the relationship in the years leading to the outbreak of the South African War, appeared relatively recently in Keith Wilson’s collection entitled *The International Impact of the Boer War*. The fourth chapter is Hyam’s well-known article on “African Interests and the South Africa Act”, published in the *Historical Journal* in 1970. The authors now include an “Afterword”, which rejects criticisms of the original article. Here, as elsewhere, they argue against an economic interpretation: both the political and the economic are important, they believe, and “it is simplistic to give precedence to economic factors” (p 101).

Chapter 5, a condensed version of Hyam’s well-known book on *The Failure of British Expansion*, first appeared in the *Journal of Commonwealth History* and in *Reappraisals in British Imperial History*. Henshaw is the author of the chapters that follow on economic relations between the two countries from the 1930s, disputes at the United Nations from 1946, and the transfer of Simon’s Town; these originally appeared in the *Historical Journal*, the *South African Historical Journal* and the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* respectively. Chapters by Hyam on the political consequences of Seretse Khama’s marriage, the geopolitical origins of the Central African Federation, and the departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth were first published in the *Historical Journal* and the *Journal of*

Imperial and Commonwealth History. After the chapter on “Seretse Khama and Ruth”, the authors criticise the way in which the authors of the relatively recent biography of Seretse Khama explain the reasons for British policy (p 196). Their chapter remains Eurocentric in its approach, however, and fails to refer to, say, Diana Wylie’s important book on Tshekedi Khama.

Here I focus on the four chapters that have not appeared before: the two on “media opinion”, the brief Epilogue, which analyses the background to South Africa’s return to the Commonwealth, and the first, entitled “The uneasy special relationship: dynamics and divergencies”. This introduces the views of the authors on the theme, and provides some context, though while the rise of apartheid is given brief treatment, there is no reference to crucial changes in Britain during the century. The authors are combative from the start. They dismiss revisionist interpretations of British policy that emphasise economic motives in the making of policy, and argue instead that considerations of power were fundamental. What is vital, they claim, is what the policy-makers thought they were trying to achieve (p 7). Shula Marks and other revisionists are not able to show that the mining magnates manipulated the British policy-makers. The South African War would probably have been fought even had the gold of the Witwatersrand not been discovered; it was, above all, a “regional geopolitical conflict” (p 9). Nor was gold all-important after the War, and there was no alliance between the mine magnates and government.

After rejecting much that has been written recently about the relationship between the two countries in the early twentieth century, the authors go on to argue that the Cabinet Memorandum of September 1950 is the “defining statement” of British concern for relations with South Africa, with its emphasis on strategic considerations. British policy was “essentially an ambivalent and paradoxical mixture of containment and co-operation”, with “strategic and geopolitical considerations” uppermost (p 18).

This is argued in detail in the chapter on the post-war years, which builds on arguments advanced by Hyam in the *Historical Journal* as long ago as 1965. There was no genuine magnanimity involved in the British Liberal government’s decision to grant self-government to the Transvaal in 1906. Much of the argument presented here takes apart what one of Hyam’s mentors at Cambridge, Nicholas Mansergh, argued in *South Africa the Price of Magnanimity* (1962), but that book is ignored rather than criticised, while Eric Walker, another Cambridge historian, is praised for pointing out that Sir Keith Hancock had erred in his biography of Smuts because he had not drawn upon Hyam’s *Historical Journal* article. The British government misjudged the arithmetic of votes in 1906, just as Smuts did in 1948, allowing the National Party to come to power.

Chapters 12 and 13, which Henshaw presented as papers at successive “British World” conferences, represent a shift of focus from inter-governmental relations to public views, traced mainly through newspapers. These well-written pieces provide important context for the changes in the relationship between the two countries under apartheid, but the discussion of, for example, Mrs Thatcher’s policy to South Africa, is very sketchy.

As has been suggested, while the volume very usefully brings together a series of solid case-studies, it is, at the same time, somewhat unbalanced. Even if it be conceded that “the Seretse Khama case ... altered the whole terms of the Anglo-South

African relationship” (p 34) - and that seems an exaggerated claim – why devote so much space to it, and none to, say, opinions in the one country of the other before the end of the Second World War? There are some cheap shots, such as the one directed from Cambridge at the “incompetence” of the Oxford professor of Imperial history who led Seretse Khama into a course of study that did not lead to a degree (p 169), and some odd comparisons, for instance that conflating segregation and apartheid is “as unhistorical as the tendentious claim that ‘gay people’ existed in ancient Greece” (p 34, note 89), or that Mandela’s inauguration in 1994 was “too much like a gathering of Edwardian high society” (p 343). It is now strange to read that one reason for South Africa deciding to rejoin the Commonwealth was the record of the Commonwealth “as a defender of cultural and human rights” (p 349). When Robert Mugabe was guilty of gross violation of the human rights of the people of Zimbabwe, it was Thabo Mbeki, to his shame, who pleaded with the Commonwealth to readmit Zimbabwe to membership. The authors are, in my view, not critical enough of British policy. They cite the advice given by Sir John Maud, the High Commissioner, in 1960, that Britain should “keep faith” with the African majority (p 36) but do not emphasise that, tragically, that advice was not taken in the decades that followed. It was only when Robin Renwick became British Ambassador in the late 1980s that it began to be, but neither he nor his useful memoir (*Unconventional Diplomacy in Southern Africa* (1997)) receive a mention here.

This book, then, does not constitute a comprehensive survey of the relationship between Britain and South Africa in the twentieth century. It is a somewhat idiosyncratic yet often highly stimulating review of selected aspects of that relationship. Many readers will hope that Henshaw, one of the leading new Imperial historians concerned with South Africa, will in good time give us a more rounded study of the relationship between the two countries through the twentieth century.

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