

An evocation of the everyday life and personality of a community

John Seakalala Mojapelo, *The Corner People of Lady Selborne*

Hidden Histories Series, Unisa Press, Pretoria, 2009

272 pp

ISBN 9781-86888-560-2

R332.00

John Seakalala Mojapelo's *The Corner People of Lady Selborne* is a fundamentally well-intentioned book. It is certainly a necessary one, providing a vivid account of the social and political life of a close-knit community. The distinct atmosphere and sense of community identity that Mojapelo's book evokes for Lady Selborne is heartening to encounter today, in a time when the self-identity and cohesion of many South African communities seem to be growing weaker by the day.

Like Sophiatown, Lady Selborne, formerly situated only nine kilometres from Pretoria's city centre, was razed to the ground as part of the apartheid government's forced removals programme in the 1960s. Its residents were relocated to Ga-Rankuwa, Soshanguve, Eerstrust and Laudium. The removals disintegrated what had been a close-knit community with a distinct identity; a community that had been in existence since 1905. A "white" suburb, Suiderberg, was established on the site. Only in 2002 was Lady Selborne "resurrected" (as Mojapelo puts it) as the Pretoria suburb of Lady Selborne Extension One.

The Corner People is clearly a labour of love for Mojapelo, himself a resident of Lady Selborne from his birth until the late 1960s. The book deals with Lady Selborne's life from its establishment on the farm Zandfontein in 1905 to the last forced removals, taking in – in almost exhaustive detail – the moves made by its residents to consolidate their rights to the area and the apartheid government's countermeasures. The bulk of *The Corner People*, traces the community's fight against being legislated out of existence and the simultaneous growth of political activism among its residents. In this respect, *The Corner People* is an invaluable record of the grassroots growth of anti-apartheid feeling and political awareness in the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, the last portion of Mojapelo's book follows the community's displaced residents, and closes with the "resurrection" of Lady Selborne as a suburb and community in the post-apartheid era. The final chapters deal with the land-restitution claims made by former residents in the late 1990s, the difficulties claimants encountered in dealing with residents of the suburb of Suiderberg, and their growing impatience with officialdom's lethargy in improving facilities and service delivery in the early 2000s. Unfortunately, the ambient circumstances in the former Lady Selborne have not improved.

While the portions of the book dealing with Lady Selborne's political life are undoubtedly valuable in their particularity, the real strength of *The Corner People* lies in its evocation of the everyday life and personality of a community. Indeed it could be said that the political history of Lady Selborne is, though inarguably tragic, not particularly unusual: hundreds of communities across South Africa suffered a similar fate under the apartheid regime, and are currently encountering much the same problems in reclaiming their heritages. What sets Lady Selborne apart is *The Corner People's* constant reiteration of the fact that this community was not merely inhabited

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by people of different groups and races, but that they were in every sense of the word neighbours, and that the forced removals destroyed not only a multi-racial settlement but also a neighbourhood possessing a vital, much-loved life of its own. Mojapelo's personal experience of the vanished community is a major factor in this evocation; it is the author's personal depth of feeling for Lady Selborne and his sense of hurt and outrage at what became of it, that stands out most clearly from the pages of *The Corner People*, and may well be what sets it apart from more "academic" histories of communities destroyed by forced removals.

That said, *The Corner People* is by no means the best-produced book in its field. Mojapelo's enthusiasm for his topic gives the text a much-appreciated vibrancy, but the book as a whole is repetitive and at times indifferently edited. These shortfalls are, it is true, more of a nuts-and-bolts issue than anything else, and do not detract from the book's strength as a record of Lady Selborne. However, they are something of an irritation to the reader, and could have been solved by a simple proofread. At times too, Mojapelo's personal investment in the history of Lady Selborne lends his image of the community a rosy glow that is probably as far from the reality as was the apartheid regime's description of the township.

Essentially, though, John Seakalala Mojapelo's *The Corner People of Lady Selborne* is an accessible, heartfelt and solidly detailed history of the politics and inner life of a community. Any student of forced removals and the long-term effects they have on the residents of demolished communities will appreciate *The Corner People* for its detail, enthusiasm and breadth of scope.

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