

Book Reviews

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Boekresensies

Personal and panoramic

Patricia W. Romero, *African Women: A Historical Panorama*

Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 2015

359 pp

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In *African Women: A Historical Panorama*, Patricia W. Romero seeks to address what she perceives as a gap in existing scholarship on the history of African women, namely a lack of personalisation and case studies in accounts of women who have made important interventions in the historical narratives of Africa. While recognising the many high quality works by noted historians, Romero introduces her text by expressing her desire to “produce a different type of book” (p ix). This is something she certainly accomplishes because her text deviates somewhat from most historical scholarship in terms of its style and format. Her focus throughout the work is indeed on the women whose personal stories and contributions she wants to bring into sharper relief in academic conversations. As her title suggests, the view she provides on African women is a panoramic one that encompasses pre-colonial, colonial as well as post-colonial African history. The attempt to combine a panoramic overview with a focus on personal stories is a challenging task that Romero has set herself but, I would argue, she manages to produce a text that adds value to our academic understandings of African women’s roles in history.

Given the subject matter, the author is obliged to pay considerable attention to the myriad forms of epistemic, socio-political and economic oppression that have shaped the narratives of women on the African continent and continue to do so. Without shying away from the reality of gendered oppression, Romero never loses sight of women’s resilience and the creative ways in which they exercise agency, even in contexts of severe structural disempowerment. This commitment to celebrating African women’s strength is reflected in the chapter delineation with Chapter One dealing with “Pre-colonial Queens and Powerful Women” and the final chapter being entitled “The March of the Women”. This last chapter is devoted to African women’s vital contributions in spheres ranging from literature to fashion and sport. By beginning and ending her text with celebratory stories of women’s power and accomplishments, the author cushions the necessary but difficult discussion on topics such as female genital mutilation and gender violence in times of war.

Chapter Two deals with European interactions with the Khoe/San at the Cape of Good Hope and Romero begins with a useful differentiation between the “various Khoisan people we shall be meeting at the Cape” (p 21). This sense of the author and readers being fellow travellers through a narrative that is populated by characters whose stories are highly personalised and whom readers get to meet is evident throughout the text and the writing style aligns well with Romero’s aim of offering “a different type of [history] book” (p ix). This chapter also includes a discussion of imagery and the racialised and gendered female body that resonates with topical contemporary debates about the symbolic and discursive violence that are all too often inherent in evaluations of women’s appearance. Chapter Three is devoted to the subject of women and slavery. This is obviously a weighty topic that has received extensive scholarly attention and in less than twenty pages, Romero does not claim to offer an in-depth analysis. She does, however, provide a helpful overview that distinguishes between the different manifestations of slavery in the specific temporal and spatial location of the Cape of Good Hope under the Dutch, in East Africa and in West and Central Africa. Romero again combines personal stories with a larger overview that considers the enduring legacy of slavery on societies throughout the continent. Chapter Four is titled “Transitioning” and it attempts to cover a range of topics that is so broad that it feels somewhat unwieldy at times. It includes sections on missionaries in South Africa; missionaries and travellers (which includes poetry as well as references to the literary outputs of Chinua Achebe); women as royals and their ceremonial roles; witchcraft; spirit possession and traditional beliefs. Each of these brief sections deals with issues that could easily be, and have frequently been, the sole topics of entire monographs or edited collections.

In Chapter Five, titled “The South African Body: Defiled, Diseased, Devastated, and Destroyed”, Romero turns to another widely analysed subject, namely the story of Sara Baartman. This discussion furthers her earlier consideration of imagery and the female body but it does not really add any new insights to Baartman’s history. In the same chapter, Romero then moves to sections dealing with women and the South African War (including extracts from the reports of Emily Hobhouse on concentration camps); rural African women; patriarchy and hardships; the evolution of women as leaders; the role of Germany in South West Africa (now Namibia) and Herero women. Chapter Six deals with another substantial subject, namely women and colonialism in Africa, while Chapter Seven considers women’s experiences of anti-colonial conflict and health. The important issue of health is discussed further in Chapter eight where Romero’s analysis of women’s concerns in post-colonial Africa includes the vital topics of AIDS and female genital mutilation. As is to be expected, the personal stories that intersperse this chapter are particularly harrowing.

This is a text that will be of use to scholars of African history and politics as well as those whose analytical focus is on gender. Perhaps partly as a result of her interest in the personal narratives of women, Romero’s text is accessible enough for a non-specialist market. In terms of the sheer range of the topics that are addressed, this is an ambitious work and it might be criticised for failing to add new insight into each of those areas of research. However, Romero makes it clear that this was not her

intention. For the reader who approaches the text with a sense of being respectful of what Romero set out to do, there is much to be gained from this personalised panorama.

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Appealing work for those interested in colonial and labour history

Duncan L. Du Bois, *Sugar and Settlers: A History of the Natal South Coast 1850-1910*

Sun Press, Bloemfontein, 2015
415 pp
ISBN 978-1-920382-70-4
R375.00

This recent publication by Duncan L. Du Bois is an interesting and rich account of the history of Natal's South Coast during colonial times. It is based on Du Bois's PhD thesis entitled "Sugar and Settlers: The Colonisation of the Natal South Coast, 1850–1910", which was accepted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2014. Natal's South Coast during colonial times was known for its cultivation of coffee, cotton and sugar. However, it was the cultivation and production of sugar which promoted the arrival of settlers and the extension of Natal's southern frontier to the Mtamvuna River.

In this interesting publication the author provides a rich narrative of the socio-economic, political and geographical factors that shaped and defined the history of the South Coast. Colonisation along this coast was far from benign. It was jettisoned against multiple factors and events. For example, shortage of labour, lack of infrastructure (roads, railways and bridges), political woes, and the impact of the Anglo-Zulu War were all significant issues. There were tireless efforts by settlers in the Alexandra and Alfred counties to redress some of their pertinent grievances. For example, between 1880 and 1885, no less than 18 petitions were submitted to the government: four concerned the need to establish telegraphic links between the South Coast and Durban and Pietermaritzburg; three requested the establishment of a separate magistracy in the Lower Umzimkulu district of Alfred County; three called for improvement to the harbour works and the granting of fiscal status to the river port; while two appealed for the construction of a bridge over the Mkomanzi; and others dealt with general colonial issues.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One provides a comprehensive account of settlements in the area such as Isipingo, Lower Mkomanzi, Alfred County, and Alexandra County. It also documents the role and contributions of pioneer families such as the Reynolds and Crookes and their influence on the economic and political development of the South Coast region.