

What have we here?

Martin Legassick, *The Struggle for the Eastern Cape, 1800–1854: Subjugation and the Roots of South African Democracy, Democracy in Africa Series, Vol. 1*

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What have we here? This reviewer found the product very different from what she expected, after reading the publisher's stated intention, with its Democracy in Africa Series, to develop "a series of books to address issues of democracy on the continent. The aim ... is to contribute to the discourse on the consolidation of democracy in Africa." With that in mind, I looked for references to the large body of work on the topic, for example, books or edited volumes by P.J. Hountondji, by P.A. Nyong'o, by Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, and so on. There are none. If the author has good reasons for excluding such "discourse" from his own discussion it would be helpful to readers to understand that choice.

So what does one get? *The Struggle for the Eastern Cape* offers a detailed account of the fraught history of that region between 1800 and 1854, by means of a synthesis of published work. The author's own path breaking histories are peripheral to this discussion but he is thoroughly familiar with the relevant research, both early and recent, as outlined in chapter 1, titled "Historiography". Legassick draws on many secondary sources, amply acknowledged in the endnotes. He relies heavily on three for his concluding chapters: "This book is indebted to the narrative strength of [Noel] Mostert's account, the theoretical insights of [Tim] Keegan, and the more pointillist approach of [Clifton] Crais." Indeed, the wealth of sources for the time and place considered here is impressive. The cover blurb therefore surprises where it asserts that this volume "reconstructs our understanding of a period that has been given little attention in the historical narratives of South African democracy".

Christian missions are central to this narrative: "If this book dwells on the various forms of mission activities and ideas it is because missionaries were the main mediators of colonial politics and culture among the Khoisan and Xhosa." In that connection, Elizabeth Elbourne's argument that "religious ideas" can be used with effect by all parties – the oppressed, as well as the oppressor – is important. From the dispossession of the herding people, and the measures by which the new British masters of the Cape sought to control them, the story turns to the greater challenge posed them by the strong and numerous Xhosa on the colony's eastern frontier. Expulsions and treaties characterised the second decade of the century, until the scene was dramatically altered by the arrival in 1820 of thousands of British settlers.

At this point the story "hots up". Britain's interests were brought to the fore by means of far-reaching changes in the colony's legal system and traditions of governance. "Coloureds" received civil rights and, for some, land hunger was met by access to a large

tract, the Kat River Settlement – on land from which Xhosa had been expelled. Philanthropists, who were in the main London Society missionaries plus a handful of the ruling elite, confronted a quandary: “In reality the contradiction was inside philanthropism, between forcible civilisation and upliftment. The ‘more civilised’ were set against the ‘less civilised’”. There followed “Maqoma’s war” of 1834–36 which British regulars, reinforced by the coloured members of the Cape Mounted Rifles and by colonists, eventually won. The latter were soon afterwards embittered by the British colonial secretary’s dispatch that ordered the surrender of certain conquered land. Legassick cites Mostert who refers to that dispatch as “the pivotal event of the nineteenth century”. To this he adds: “... echoing through the words of Glenelg and, behind him, of Buxton and Philip [of the London Missionary Society], were the voice and the arguments of the absent Maqoma.”

From that point, the influence of missionaries became more complex. Representatives of mission societies which were less attached to the humanitarian ideal gained the ear of government. The messages conveyed to prospective converts among the Xhosa gave rise inevitably to cynicism. Here the author presents a wealth of pithy quotes from an array of sources, many of them steeped in disillusionment. Colonists were unflagging in their zeal to assert control over the labour force. Repeatedly thwarted with respect to a vagrancy law, they secured (in 1842) a Masters and Servants Act. From the 1840s, settler pressure grew in favour of representative government. For a time the movement was blocked by the Colonial Office which suspected the intentions of the colony’s “dominant caste”. The ups and downs of this process are traced in detail and are of considerable interest. Of crucial importance was the setting of criteria for the franchise. Legassick alludes to various analyses (by Keegan, Crais, Ross) of the factors which persuaded policy-makers to support, *en fin*, a low franchise.

The conclusion begins: “Had things been left to the Boers and indigenous people to negotiate and fight it out for themselves, South Africa might have become a different place”. I imagine it would! There was, within the timeframe of this book, a sort of a model taking shape across the Vaal River where the South African Republic was already in being. That polity had also, of course, experienced the influence of “British rule, and of the growing integration of South Africa into the world economy of 19th century capitalism”, which “hardened the hierarchies of race, and strengthened the hegemony of white colonists”. This formulation becomes, in fact, the central message of the book.

The chapter ends with a reflection on the mixed messages of the Christian mission. As Legassick acknowledged earlier in this text, many sources on which the historian must depend were mediated by the missionaries: thus, for example, “are our views of Khoi-Xhosa relations filtered through the eyes of missionaries with different standpoints on colonization”. Here he comments on the phenomenon of Xhosa conversion: “Ironically, having been conquered, the Xhosa took up Christianity in a big way – though on their own syncretic, often semi-millennarian, ‘Zionist’ terms”. The miracle is the resilience of Xhosa culture, despite the many shocks it sustained.

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Curiously (to me, at least) the cover blurb refers to the “non-racial franchise in 1854” as representing “the roots of democracy in this country”. Should not a contribution to “Democracy in Africa Series” take account of the indigenous forms of government which embraced (unless I am misinformed) certain democratic elements? My most heartfelt complaint concerns the fact that “democracy” is nowhere defined. Had it been, it should not have been possible to construe it, as is done here, in terms of race or social class without so much as a passing allusion to gender.

The book includes a number of relevant illustrations. Should it be reprinted, the map’s caption should be altered to read “in the 19th century”. A further correction: the date 1900 (p 109) should be changed, I think, to 1800. An index would be a welcome addition.

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