

BOOK REVIEWS

Every step of the way: The journey to freedom in South Africa

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Michael Morris

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Michael Morris' book *Every step of the way: The journey to freedom in South Africa* is an impressively compiled survey of South African history from the earliest times to the present-day. With a foreword by the then South African Minister of Education Kader Asmal, this book is unabashedly identified as "...part of a larger effort by the Ministry of Education to revitalise the study of history" in the country. The book can therefore be considered as more than just a narrative of the South African story, but also a nation-building project meant to illustrate how South Africa came to be the nation it is today.

With a prologue and an endpiece, the book is largely written in a chronological fashion, although the author also infuses cases from either the past or the future in order to help the reader make connections between the past, present and future. The prologue sets the scene for the entire book with the author remarkably using the metaphor of fire as the thread that runs through the entire history of the country. The endpiece, titled "Remembering the future," concludes the book on an expected largely positive note considering the purpose of the book identified in the foreword. Morris emphasises how the past will continue to affect the future such that it is naïve to try and sweep it under the carpet because it was characterised by regrettable conflict. Instead, the role of history in the development of a usable historical consciousness for the nation is well explained.

The book consists of fifteen main chapters with each having a revealing title. The first chapter explains the origins of humankind, with prominence given to the link between human origins and South Africa. This means that the East African origins are ignored with the book focusing on showing South Africa's role. The place of the Khoisan in South African history is well

highlighted. However, as is the case with most narratives, the Khoisan are largely anonymous for the rest of the book. The second chapter – “Strangers on the shore” – moves on to deal with the interaction between the indigenous people and traders from both the east and the west, which is a significant time in South African history. However, it seems like the author largely evaded the two issues of the “Bantu migration” and the “Empty land myth” which are some of the most contentious topics in South African history.

The rest of the chapters follow the unfolding of history through colonialism, apartheid, the first democratic elections and the Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki tenures in office. This is clearly a long period to try and cover, but the author does it justice by giving as much detail as possible in the relevant issues. The student of history who reads the book is helped to deal with both first order and second order concepts. The already identified cases of colonialism and apartheid are some of the first order concepts. In terms of the second order concepts, the book deals with cause and consequence by showing how each preceding event contributed to causing the subsequent. For example, Morris argues that conciliation between Whites in 1910 led to more suppression of Africans. Significance is another concept that is covered through the identification of major historical characters and events in South African history. Another second order concept is change and continuity. For example, Chapter 14 demonstrates how positive change resulted from the end of apartheid, yet a lot of problems also continued, including poverty.

The language that the author uses is accessible even to readers who are not historians. Therefore the book can be read for leisure, but it can also be used in schools and universities, particularly for learners to gain knowledge about the country. This is because the book is rich in terms of sources, both visual and verbal and these include maps, drawings, pictures, timelines, posters, newspaper cuttings, songs, poems, and speeches. All the sources are used appropriately as they are contemporary to the time under focus in each topic. This makes the book engaging, and also paints a more vivid and memorable picture of South African history. In addition, the content is trustworthy considering that the author makes reference to different types of sources including archaeology, applied science (DNA, genetics), oral history and written sources. Understandably, for a book that covers such a broad time-frame, some of the sources are bound to be debatable. For example, the drawing of King Shaka in Chapter 5 has largely been discredited as a fair representation of the Zulu monarch.

Although the book should be commended as a good representation of South African history, there are other issues that it can also be criticised for. To start with, the history in the book is largely political. This is not surprising considering the bad nature of South Africa's political history. As a result, when musicians such as Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela and Abdulla Ibrahim and sportspeople like Vincent Tshabaala (who won the French Open of golf in the 1970s) are mentioned, it is in relation to the politics of the day.

Race is a major issue in South Africa and, by extension, in the nation's history. It is therefore crucial to consider historiography when reading this book. Evidently the author wrote from a neo-liberal revisionist historiography with an emphasis on building a nation that is characterised by democracy, freedom and rights. This book can be criticised in terms of the way it represents Africans. Indeed most of the Africans' activities in the book with the exception of the first and last two chapters are invariably in response to the activities of the White. This reduces the agency of Africans in the sense that they do not become history makers but victims of history. It is important for writers of African history to make sure that they do not seem to be perpetuating Hugh Trevor Roper's claim that the only history in Africa is the history of Europeans in Africa. Similarly the use of words like "pagan" as is the case in Chapter 4 in reference to Africans can also be argued to be promoting a Eurocentric view of religion at the detriment of African belief systems.

Overall, Morris' book is a commendable comprehensive survey of South African history which can be used for different purposes while still exposing the reader to a lot of knowledge about the country. If it does not persuade you to appreciate the history of South Africa, it can still be taken as a challenge for historians to contribute to the rewriting of the country's history.