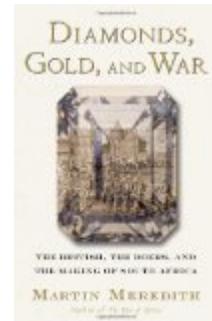


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Martin Meredith.** *Diamonds, Gold, and War: The British, the Boers, and the Making of South Africa.* New York: Public Affairs, 2007. xv + 570 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58648-473-6.

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## Cecil Rhodes and South Africa

Martin Meredith, a journalist and biographer, has been very busy the past decade writing about current events in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In *Diamonds, Gold, and War*, he turns to the late nineteenth century to explore the history that led to the birth of the Union of South Africa. Meredith offers a compelling narrative, which will no doubt satisfy most readers who possess little or no background on the subject. However, scholars and even readers who are somewhat familiar with the subject and want to be challenged by new analyses, bold interpretations, and current sources are advised to look elsewhere.

Meredith's story is told in a traditional way. It focuses on the life of Cecil Rhodes from his arrival in South Africa in 1870 to his political demise following the failed Jameson Raid and then ultimately to his death in 1902. The book is rife with personal exchanges and anecdotes, stories of greed and ambition, and the pursuit of dreams by "great" men. In the narrative, Rhodes tries to outwit Paul Kruger, the president of the Transvaal, "whose only education was the Bible and who believed the Earth was flat" (book jacket); charm the small, shy financier, Alfred Beit; steal the minerals from beneath the feet of Lobengula, the Ndebele king; and convince Joseph Chamberlain, the British colonial secretary, to endorse a putsch in the Transvaal to be carried out by a bunch of wild and woolly foreign miners. Rhodes is certainly the central character in this tale; even the tragic events of the South African War, 1899-1902, are described as they unfolded around him while he was held up in the besieged diamond town of Kimberley. Oddly enough, neither the title

nor book jacket alludes to the biographical nature of the work.

*Diamonds, Gold, and War* is a book about whites: Britons and Boers. Blacks are but a sideshow in Meredith's story. He tells us about the creation of the compound system to harness African labor for the mines, for example, but he offers no discussion of who the laborers were, of what polities or tribes they were a part, how they lived, why they came to work, and why they went home. Meredith is more interested in discussing high society in Kimberley and the competition between financiers for control of the Rand than he is in explaining tribal politics in Bechuanaland, Lobengula's relationship with the Shona, or the role of blacks during the war. Although this book claims to examine the creation of modern South Africa, by relegating black South Africans to a minor role caught amid a larger imperial struggle, Meredith misses the opportunity to discuss key features of colonial society that later became embedded in the racial legislation of the apartheid era.

Scholars need to be forewarned that there are no citations and only one large map of the region. References to sources would have been particularly helpful at times, for example, when Meredith claims that at a meeting between Rhodes and Chamberlain in the aftermath of the Jameson Raid a deal was struck between the two not to make public earlier telegrams, which would have cast guilt on the colonial secretary. "The blackmail was mutual," Meredith assures his readers (p. 365), but historians certainly would like to see solid evidence supporting this

statement.

*Diamonds, Gold, and War* provides a basic overview

of the period's history, and it is quite an enjoyable read. Perhaps its readers will be encouraged to read further on the subject.

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