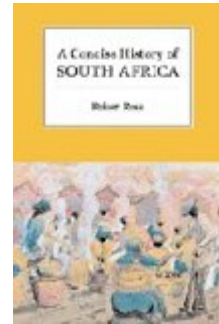


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Ross. *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge Concise Histories. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xv + 219 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-57578-2.

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E Pluribus Unum

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The theme of Robert Ross' excellent new textbook on South African history reminds one of the United Democratic Front (UDF) slogan of the 1980s, "UDF unites, apartheid divides." Here, instead, Ross argues that the underlying current of South African history even under apartheid has been the unification of the region and its many peoples into one country. The series, as its title would suggest, aims to provide readers with brief introductions to the histories of contemporary nation-states. Most readers will be students in survey courses, but the books are also useful for the traveler hoping to better understand the setting of his or her journey, as I discovered on a trip last year to Australia.¹ Ross' book, like the one on Australia, is a synthesis of recent research on the country's history in the light of its contemporary social and political trends.

The book takes us, in seven chapters plus a short introduction and epilogue, through a chronological narrative of South African history from the origins of human settlement to the present. The main emphasis, however, is on the country's modern history, since about 1850. As such, it makes an excellent textbook to use alongside other readings on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while providing a sound introduction to the social and political structures of pre-colonial Southern Africa and to the period of colonization and conquest from the mid-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. The organization of the text makes it easy for students to follow. Ross frequently tells the reader that two or three main

points, which he then enumerates and explains, characterize an aspect of South Africa's history. This becomes a bit tedious when one reads the text in a single sitting, but is very useful to a reader using the text in a series of steps, and probably going back to it as a reference. The maps are clear (though a bit dull) and convey the necessary information. One of the best features of the book is the way the illustrations are presented. Instead of a center-spread of photos with mere captions, photos and drawings are placed in chronological context and are supplied with substantive sidebar-like explanations, like the one on tsotsis (pp. 153), providing some of the richest material in the book.

Ross does not give us a new narrative of South African history; rather, he effectively incorporates the newer research in social and cultural history into the more or less established narrative. That narrative consists, roughly, of establishing pre-colonial social and economic contours in the context of Southern African environments: colonization by Dutch and British forces; the violent knitting together of the country through the mineral revolution and conquests of kingdoms and republics; the white settler state and black resistance under segregation and apartheid, and emerging post-apartheid trends. It differs from earlier textbooks (especially Thompson's popular volume) in that it achieves brevity not at the cost of depth of interpretation, but by clearing away unnecessary detail pertaining to "white" politics. Ross' text contains neither "just the facts" nor all the chronological detail available, but it does provide the sort of overview that helps students understand some of the main issues

of South African history.² Ross sticks with the racial terminology that is established in South Africa in a way that makes the categories easy to understand but may tend to reinforce a reader's sense of the reality of race (especially with regard to the separateness of San identity). On the other hand, he argues effectively that South African ethnic identities are historical and in general recent in origin. The text frequently reminds the reader to analyze events in terms of gender, noting for instance that "traditionalism" consisted of several factors, including "reiteration of male supremacy within the household, [and] a reformulation of ideas of masculinity with the dangers of migrant labour replacing those of warfare (pp. 93-94)." Ross accepts Bradford's argument that the destruction of grain (primarily the product of women's labor) was as important as the slaughter of cattle in the "so-called Cattle Killing (pp. 53)."³ The book also makes effective use of recent research on the link between gender and generation, noting the ways in which such hierarchies affect the dynamics of rural social life and urban politics.

Like any short textbook, the book sweeps through considerable amounts of history in a short number of pages (Chapter Two effectively covers two hundred years). This can sometimes leave students a bit breathless and confused, but it is easy to find effective complementary readings, including primary sources.⁴ There are no notes or bibliography, but the "suggestions for further reading," broken down thematically and chronologically gives a useful guide to older and newer books, though not articles.

In sum, though it is not radical or daring in its ap-

proach, *A Concise History of South Africa* delivers what the title promises, giving students and other interested readers a sound introduction to South Africa's colonial and postcolonial histories. It does this while reinforcing a sense that cultural and social history is central rather than peripheral to understanding and analysis. This book will provide its readers with a good platform from which to begin to expand their understanding of Southern Africa.

Notes

[1]. Stuart Macintyre. *A Concise History of Australia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2]. Leonard M. Thompson. *A History of South Africa*. 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). *The most comprehensive textbook on South African history is T.R.H. Davenport's and Christopher C. Saunders' South Africa: a Modern History*. 5th ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[3]. Helen Bradford. "Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c. 1806-70" in *Journal of African History*; 37 (1997): 351-370.

[4]. See e.g., John Williams, ed. *From the South African Past: Narratives, Documents, and Debates*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

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