

Brian Du Toit. *Colonia Boer: An Afrikaner Settlement in Chubut, Argentina.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995. xiii + 468 pp. \$109.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7734-8975-2.

Reviewed by Martina E. Will

Published on H-LatAm (January, 1997)

Brian Du Toit's ambitious study may be the first of the Boer colony of southern Chubut, Argentina, but *Colonia Boer* addresses many of the issues common to the myriad ethnic enclaves that scattered throughout Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Argentina's Boer colony is distinguished from other such immigrant groups by its extremely small size (a few hundred at arrival), its unique ethnic composition, and the extremely high rates of repatriation (approximately 550-600 people between 1937 and 1939). At times assuming some prior knowledge of South African history, Du Toit's study is otherwise accessible.

The first half of the book sets up the background of the Boer migration, including a very brief sketch of Argentina's immigration policies and its Homestead Act of 1884. The real heart of the story is in the second half, which looks more closely at the Colonia Boer, as the Argentine settlement came to be known. It is here that we learn of Boer social organization, the internal conflicts caused by denominationalism, and the challenges the Boers faced in establishing schools for their children. Du Toit is clearly an Afrikaner insider, and it is perhaps because of this that he is eager to include all of the genealogical information that he can possibly find. Combined with the many other details that are not always relevant to the story, these genealogies considerably weigh down Du Toit's work. A critical editorial eye should have

sifted out much of this distracting information, perhaps relegating it to an appendix or to more extensive endnotes.

Although Du Toit has surrendered to the temptation to include every imaginable detail, this in itself would be considerably less troubling were some overarching framework evident. Instead, the absence of any clear methodology leaves to the reader the responsibility of making sense of the history contained herein. Although *Colonia Boer* provides an interesting portrait of the Boers in Argentina, it frequently reads like a laundry list of names and anecdotes, lacking in focus and relying heavily on the reader to sort through pages and pages of information without analysis in order to establish what is germane.

Any study of an ethnic enclave seems to require a thorough contextualization of the group in question, its country of origin, and the political, economic, and social dimensions of the destination country. Du Toit is adept at placing the Boer colony of Chubut into a South African context, noting the strong emotional and cultural ties the Boers maintained despite some notable South African indifference and even hostility. We gain a good understanding of the background of the emigration to Argentina, but the place of the Boers in South African society, the political divisions of the region, and the theological distinctions between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Church are not made clear to readers without a

background in nineteenth-century South African history. The Argentine side of the story is even more vague. With the exception of some geographical information on Patagonia and references to the high rates of foreign immigration to Argentina, Argentina appears frequently as a blank slate. The government is largely only a ghostly participant, seemingly indifferent to the Boer presence and having virtually no contact with the Boer colony outside of tax collection.

Indeed, the Argentine government, in the few appearances it makes, is portrayed as a monolith with no regional, state, or local interests evident. The national government may very well have been monolithic in pursuit of its interests, but those interests are never clearly identified, and it therefore seems more a case of oversight or research limitations that the portrait is not clear. Du Toit's discussion of land tenure offers one possible example of government intervention that he does not pursue. Although he acknowledges that the allocation of land per Boer family was four times that permitted an Argentine family, Du Toit does not follow this thread, noting only that "A group of Argentine farmers submitted a petition to the Ministry of Agriculture in December 1902 specifically asking for 'the same concessions as the Boer immigrants were receiving...'" Du Toit does not indicate how this dispute was resolved, or whether these same farmers entered into direct conflict with the Boers over these same issues. Part of the reason for the absence any discussion of these questions rests in Du Toit's sources, which are largely secondary and almost exclusively English and Dutch-language sources. He cites three Argentine periodicals in his bibliography and a handful of books in Spanish but otherwise appears to have done no archival work or oral history in Argentina.

Unlike many immigrants to Argentina, the Boers did not come for economic reasons. Arriving in the first decade of the twentieth century, the very small (about 300) Boer colony that settled

in the sparsely populated landscape of Patagonia came to Argentina to escape the horrors and devastation of the recent war with Britain. Subject to British rule in the wake of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), a minority of Boers decided to leave in large part for nationalistic and cultural reasons. They ended up in Argentina due to the propaganda efforts of self-appointed immigration agents. Here as elsewhere, Du Toit pays great attention to detail. Among those who promoted immigration to Argentina, Du Toit looks at the colorful Camillo Ricchiardi, an Italian who had fought with the Boers. Though Ricchiardi's motives for promoting emigration to Argentina are never entirely clear, Du Toit devotes several sentences to Ricchiardi's rumored marriage to one woman versus his actual marriage to another. Ricchiardi is a decisive figure in the Boer migration to Argentina, but the myths surrounding his marital life are far from pivotal. The details of his personal life add nothing to the history of the Boers in Argentina, especially as Ricchiardi seems to disappear from the text after the migration period.

Du Toit's study is full of such details, including excerpts from documents that go on for several pages, causing one to backtrack repeatedly in order to remind oneself whether the writer is Du Toit or someone else. Ultimately, rather than pique the reader's interest or dramatize the plight of the individuals under discussion, these details bog down the prose and obscure what might otherwise be a far more compelling study.

The inclusion of so many details would be less distracting were it not for the fact that many important points of analysis seem to have been overlooked in the effort to commit every available fact to paper. For example, although Du Toit touches on issues of race relations and gender dynamics, he provides no substantive analysis of either. He quotes an account of life in Argentina by one H. J. Visser, who in 1903 reported in part: "There are only two classes of people in Argentina--the rich and the poor. The whites are the rich and the poor

are niggers" (p. 103). Yet it is apparent from Du Toit's account that there were many poor Boers in Argentina. How were they perceived by the different segments of the Argentine population? Did the few black Africans who accompanied the Boers relate to the local population much differently than the Boers? How were they received by the locals? Given the equation of the poor to "niggers," how and to what extent did the Boer colonists interact with poor Argentines? Du Toit later states that "There was a strong prejudice against those who were not of the elect, i.e., Afrikaans-speaking, Protestant, or white. Thus they looked down on the Argentineans, particularly those of swarthy complexion" (p. 229).

But what of the Argentine view of the story? The Boers arrived in Argentina just as nationalist sentiment was on the rise, and class and race antagonism, including a strong anti-immigrant movement, came to the fore. Were the Boers so isolated in Patagonia that they did not experience this? What role did economic competition and religious differences play in the Colonia Boer's relationship with neighboring Argentines? There is a fascinating but unwritten history here just in terms of race and ethnicity. Conflicts with border-crossing, sheep-stealing Chileans are also mentioned but not considered as more than anecdotal information. (p. 232) Unfortunately, Du Toit is so busy relating stories and listing genealogies that he does not usually explore what they may reveal.

Similarly, while mentioning the Boer acquisition of 80,000 acres for the establishment of a colony in Chihuahua, Mexico, no comparison of the two colonies is forthcoming, and the Chihuahuan Boers are not mentioned again. It is unfortunate that Du Toit did not take this opportunity to employ a comparative approach, to better understand the situation in Argentina. To what extent were land tenure questions, religious strife, intermarriage, and foreign schooling common to the Boer enclaves in both Argentina and Mexico? Do Boer descendants in Mexico, as their

brethren in Argentina, refer to themselves clearly and proudly as being Argentine (p. 423)?

A comparison of another ethnic enclave either in Argentina or in another Latin American nation would also be a useful tool in understanding the Boer legacy in Argentina. Like the Canadian-born Mennonites who migrated to Mexico in the 1920s, the Boers' hoped that migration would allow them to retain their language, their unique brand of Calvinism, and their ethnic social identity. Was one group more successful than the other in achieving these goals? What were the factors that facilitated success? How did local peoples in each place respond to the presence of the newcomers? What impact did government incentives have on immigration? What impact did government support or indifference have on the return rate of migrants? A comparative approach would have greatly improved the value of Du Toit's study. Du Toit briefly explores the frontier nature of the Boer colony, isolated as it was in Chubut, and approaching the subject as a frontier history may offer greater opportunities for a comparative history.

The Colonia Boer is a fascinating subject, and Du Toit has successfully synthesized the accounts of Boer colonists and foreign travelers, integrating these with reports from periodicals and some Boer correspondence. There are, however, many stones unturned in *Colonia Boer* that hold promise in terms of ethnography, frontier history, family history, religious studies, and group immigration. Because Du Toit's work spans several fields, it may be a useful reference tool for those with a specific interest in these subjects. Largely devoid of analysis, however, *Colonia Boer* may be of limited use to those without such a specialized interest. For those with such a special interest, it should be noted that Du Toit published an earlier work on the Boer migration to the Southwest and Mexico (Texas Western Press, 1995).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit,

educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permissions, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Martina E. Will. Review of Toit, Brian Du. *Colonia Boer: An Afrikaner Settlement in Chubut, Argentina*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=790>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.