



Labyrinth of East London Lore. Keith Tankard,

Reviewed by Ann Tothill

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Established as a British military supply port in 1847, East London is a harbour town in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. The *Labyrinth of East London Lore* covers primarily the period from the establishment of the harbour up to 1914, when East London was accorded city status. During this time, East London served among other things as port, holiday resort, home to a Boer War concentration camp and refuge to some of the thousands of "Uitlanders" fleeing the Transvaal Republic. South African history textbooks generally skim over the history of the town in a sentence or two, if they cover it at all. Keith Tankard's *Labyrinth of East London Lore* site offers a more extensive resource for local teachers and researchers, while giving a wider audience access to a little-known cross-section of South African history. Dr. Tankard--a lecturer in History at Rhodes University's East London campus--indicates that the site was developed in order to make the history of East London more accessible to the community, especially to schools in the region. The main focus is on the nineteenth century, the author's particular research area. South African academics in the humanities and social sciences have generally been slow to realize the potential of the World Wide Web as educational tool and channel for the dissemination of research. As the only web-based resource of this scope and nature in South Africa, the site breaks important new ground. Although only a tiny minority of South African schools are

connected to the Internet (about 1.5% in the Eastern Cape Province), there are a variety of projects aimed at developing multi-purpose community telecentres and connecting teachers' centres and schools. In addition, almost all of South Africa's tertiary institutions are fully connected, and many are involved in schools outreach programmes. These initiatives bring with them the need to develop innovative web-based teaching resources. *Labyrinth of East London Lore* combines Dr Tankard's own essays and articles with archival material, photographs, and maps. The site looks at the social and economic development of the town during the period in question, covering topics ranging from the port's early financial difficulties to bathing habits in Victorian East London. For users looking for a linear progression or information on specific topics, an index and table of contents are given along with a list of the photographs and pictures featured on the site. For those of a more hypertextual bent, the site is indeed a labyrinth offering happy hours of browsing. Short "fact files" on many of the topics are provided, with links to more extensive information. Similarly, clicking on the slightly-larger-than-thumbnail versions of the maps and images incorporated into essays generally leads to larger versions with full captions and additional text. Another starting point for exploration can be found in the "cybertrails" which look at particular events or areas. At this point only the "Port Rex Trail" is up and running, but "Boer War," "Har-

bour," and "West Bank Location" trails are also planned. <p> A key aspect of the site's usefulness to educators will lie with the cybertrails. Comprising a mixture of narrative, analysis, primary sources, and questions about the evidence presented, the cybertrails will eventually provide teachers with a solid set of resources for introducing primary sources and "working with evidence." Currently, primary sources such as journal entries are provided in HTML format; scanned samples of these sources would be a welcome additional resource. An even more important addition will be worksheets and guidelines for teachers on using the materials. <p> "The Port Rex Trail" takes us back to the abortive 1835/36 British attempt to establish a harbour at the mouth of the Buffalo River. In 1835 Sir Benjamin D'Urban, looking for a harbour for his "Province of Queen Adelaide," dispatched a team to explore the possibilities. Under the leadership of Colonel Harry Smith, the lagoon and river mouth were surveyed and found suitable: "ere long it is to be hoped the paddles of a steamboat may arouse the torpid Hippopotamus." However, after stories of the barbarous British military treatment of the Xhosa population reached the Colonial Office in London, the order was given to abandon the Province and with it any ideas of building a harbour. The Port Rex cybertrail gives an overview of these events, interspersing the author's narrative and analysis with primary sources, such as entries from the journal of D'Urban's aide de camp, reports from the <cite>Graham's Town Journal</cite> and correspondence from Lord Glenelg, the British Secretary of State. <p> The cybertrail poses a puzzle, too: was the town now called East London formally given the name "Port Rex" in 1836, or was the naming ceremony actually a party joke subsequently used to further the agendas of two of the participants? The Port Rex naming episode is used to highlight some of the issues surrounding the construction of history and working with evidence, and "cyber-hikers" are asked to consider the evidence for themselves. <p> A more linear

approach by way of the table of contents would take users firstly to brief histories of South African and East London. These short overviews are probably the weakest areas of the site. Intended only to locate the Labyrinth within a broad historical context, these sections are understandably brief. This contextualization would be more satisfactory, however, if it deviated more substantially from a Eurocentric narrative and chronology. The snapshot of social and urban development in a colonial nineteenth century town provided by the site as a whole is a legitimate and welcome resource for teachers and students of South African history. It could, however, be located within a broader historical perspective and offer greater acknowledgement of the contested nature of South African history. <p> Both overviews are in danger of conveying a misleading impression not only of South African and East London history, but of the web site itself. The narrow Eurocentric approach implied by the two brief overviews is not borne out by the site as a whole, which covers all sections of East London's community, but users might still interpret these pieces as "setting the tone" for the site. This could be addressed through additional content, as well as by more comprehensive links to relevant sections of the site. For those not familiar with East London, it would also be useful if the overview of the town's history stretched (however briefly) up to the present day. <p> Technical requirements for accessing the <cite>Labyrinth of East London Lore</cite> are basic. The site currently does not make use of Java, plugins, or even frames. Text-only access is feasible: interesting as the maps and photographs are, they are essential to neither navigation nor comprehension of the site. Rather puzzling, however, is the use of a different background on each of the second or third level pages which seems to do little other than create work for the site's maintainer. <p> The <cite>Labyrinth of East London Lore</cite> is currently the work of an individual, focusing strongly on the author's particular research areas. Dr. Tankard hopes, however, that

"knowledgeable townspeople will also come forward with their contributions, and so open new vistas of information for all interested people: scholars, students or merely inquisitive adults." If such contributions can be attracted, the site has the potential to become a substantial repository of East London community history.

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

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