

Bill Nasson. *History Matters: Selected Writings, 1970-2016*. Cape Town and Johannesburg: Penguin Random House South Africa, 2016. 204 pp. \$20.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-77609-027-3.

Reviewed by Richard N. Price (University of Maryland)

Published on H-Empire (February, 2017)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Unless one already knows about Bill Nasson, it is not immediately obvious from this book that he is one of the leading historians of South Africa. *History Matters* is a delightful collection of his various writings. But it does not reveal the true scope of Nasson's academic standing. He is the author of five scholarly books and numerous articles; he has been an editor of the *Journal of African History* and one of the co-editors of volume 2 of the Cambridge History of South Africa; he has held fellowships in Australia, Britain, the United States, and Ireland; and for many years he chaired the Department of History at the University of Cape Town; he is now a Distinguished Professor at Stellenbosch University. He is also one of those rare animals who believes that history matters to more than just historians.

And this is where *History Matters* comes in. These are pieces that were written for different audiences; the subjects they address vary widely. The book includes scholarly articles, newspaper columns, book reviews, some autobiography, a tribute to his friend and fellow South African historian Stanley Trapido, and even a poem or two. His scholarly reviews are not confined to history books, nor even to South African history, but include books on international monetary diplomacy, evolutionary biology, Henry Ford's ill-fated

scheme to create a rubber plantation in the Amazon, maps in history, the history of letter writing, and a caustic review of the radical pretensions of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992). A selection of some stringent observations on academic politics that he wrote under the pseudonym "Maki Saki" in the exciting decade of the 1990s is included. The ambiguity of the title of this book is indicative of Nasson's wryly ironic perspective on the business of doing history, but also it reflects his belief that History is not just for the historians but for many others, too.

Of course, this is a position that must come naturally to Nasson. History has mattered very much in the times he has lived through in South Africa. He was born into a Cape Coloured family in Cape Town at the highest stage of white supremacy. In this book he recounts how education served as a protective sphere for the small Coloured middle class of that era, where in spite of racial division and discrimination, the importance and value of a deeply humanistic education were revered and practiced. Nasson's high school provided an education that was to be prized in spite of its disadvantaged place in the wider system. It was surely here that Nasson acquired his love of words and intellectual curiosity, both of which ripple through this book. And here, too, he picked up (from mentors whom he honors with a

clear-eyed appreciation) a suspicion of parading ethnic identity however it was colored.

The themes of race and class run through this book, as one would expect. But the interesting thing is that they never obtrude; they never drive the analysis. A clue to why this may be may be found, perhaps, in an essay on one of his teachers, R. O. Dudley, a leading Cape Coloured activist. The story is told of how Nelson Mandela attempted to woo Dudley into serving as minister of education in his new cabinet. The object was not just to honor an outstanding educationalist; it was also aimed at strengthening the ANC electoral position in the Cape. Dudley was entertained at tea in the presidential mansion where these two principled men had a respectful exchange of views. But Dudley remained resistant to the great man's appeal precisely because he rejected the idea that his vote should be sought on the basis of the color of his skin. Nonracialism doesn't get much more scrupulous or stiff-necked than that. And from teachers such as this the virtue of an ecumenical and independent approach to the matters of the mind, and probably of life, too, was difficult to miss.

Bill Nasson eludes easy classification as a historian. He has focused his historical energies on the relationship between military and society, particularly in South Africa. And he has written on the South African experience in the First World War as well as the standard work on the Boer War 1899-1902. But he has also written a good introduction to the history of the British Empire. And some of the most enjoyable essays in this book demonstrate that he is a first-rate social historian in the tradition of the History Workshop movement. This is particularly the case when he is writing about the mixed race politics of Cape Town. Thus, a small piece for a newspaper on the short-lived Luxerama theater in Wynberg, a glossy, elaborate, picture palace which for a short while in the 1960s defiantly catered to all races. And there is an essay on popular culture and leisure in District Six from the 1920s to the 1950s which was a racially

mixed, lower-class neighborhood in Cape Town before the Group Areas Act bulldozed it empty and scattered its residents to the bleak and windy Cape Flats. This essay evocatively conveys the rowdy, messy, and transgressive personality of this neighborhood in the period before it was erased by the apartheid government. This essay draws on an oral history project that Nasson was involved with, and it illustrates the ease with which he crosses over to public history, where history matters perhaps most of all.

But then, Nasson has never bothered to toil in fields of history where it is unlikely to matter very much. He would certainly prefer to write a label for a new Cape wine brand than sup the delights of postmodern theory. His interest in war and society was established early on and surely came with a desire to highlight the hidden history of the non-white races in South Africa's history. Thus, his first scholarly work, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (2003) was a pioneering look at the South African War as more than just a struggle between two white races. Nasson told the story of black and Coloured involvement in the Boer War through the life of Abraham Esau, a Coloured man from Calvinia in the Northern Cape, a blacksmith and a churchgoer who worked as a spy for the British and was executed by the Boers. This was a work of history that mattered because it recovered a history of black African participation in the Boer War.

The story of Abraham Esau mattered, however, also because it fed into the politics of contemporary history. Nasson had uncovered not only a story of Coloured resistance to white Boer domination. He had shown how in choosing empire loyalism in 1899, the political consciousness of people like Abraham Esau was part of the frail plant of nineteenth-century, nonracial Cape liberalism. White South Africa was eager to suppress evidence of independent black and Coloured political consciousness in the Northern Cape, and so in

Calvania itself, local and national agents of the white regime took care to erase the physical evidence of that tradition. They bulldozed the church where Esau was memorialized and sold off the land upon which it stood. Expunging the public memory of Abraham Esau failed to remove him from Coloured history, however, where he was a remembered local hero. And when majority rule came in 1994 a movement sprouted out of this little dorp to restore Esau to his place in public history.

It was at this point that Nasson got involved. The new Anglican chaplain who was bent on recuperating the public memory of Abraham Esau had read Nasson's book, and called him in as a consultant. In *The Priest, the Chapel and the Repentant Landowner: Abraham Esau Revisited* (1994), Nasson shows how history matters may also contribute usefully to political matters. Esau's rehabilitation was also a story of how he became a symbol of racial reconciliation at this most hopeful moment in the nation's history. When Esau's church was demolished in the 1970s the land was put up to public auction. Quite by chance (a notion, one suspects, Nasson relishes), the land was purchased by a young, rural Afrikaner who was making a hobby out of buying up cheap plots of land, with no particular purpose in mind. By the 1990s this now wealthy man learned the history of what had happened in Calvania and was moved to restore the land to its old owners as part of the rehabilitation of Esau. So the story of the abused and murdered Coloured blacksmith and spy was turned into a symbol of reconciliation in the new South Africa.

But history matters for Nasson in less lofty ways, too. He is not afraid to step out of the world of worthy projects and put his history expertise to the service of popular culture. The most uncommon of such experiences is found in his wry account of getting mixed up in a Hollywood film that was on location in Cape Town. The plot of the movie was not worth much and almost defies de-

scription. Indeed, it is less interesting than the plot of Nasson's own growing involvement, which almost warrants a little movie in its own right. Having originally been brought on as a historical consultant to verify the accuracy of scenes depicting the nineteenth-century House of Commons, Nasson ended up with a speaking role in the movie. As a bewigged--and somewhat whitened--Speaker of the House in the movie, Nasson may be seen in a long shot banging his gavel and shouting "Order, Order" to an unruly group of extras imitating nineteenth-century members of Parliament. In the meantime, Nasson had spent much effort trying to educate the director and the actors on the finer points of nineteenth-century English clothing and parliamentary procedure while at the same time taking note of the peculiar culture and hierarchies of the movie set.

Although this is a story that it would be easy to play for laughs, and Nasson is not above that, it is also a story of how Nasson is more than ready to take History wherever it leads him. He is well equipped to do this. Beneath the often wry, ironic, and witty writing style, his essays in this book are peppered with learned allusions and evidence of wide reading. One has the sense of someone who is endlessly curious. He wears his learning lightly, but these smaller contributions in particular give him away. The book is a delight to read not only for what one learns from and about Bill Nasson, it is evidence that more historians would serve both themselves and their profession well if they were able to step more often outside its confining conventionalities.

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

Citation: Richard N. Price. Review of Nasson, Bill, *History Matters: Selected Writings, 1970-2016*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. February, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48693>



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