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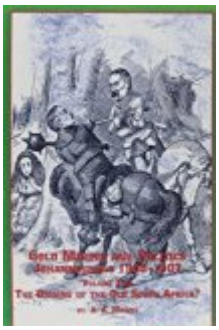

A. A. Mawby. *Gold Mining and Politics: Johannesburg, 1900-1907: The Origins of the Old South Africa, vol. 2.* Lewiston and Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000. viii + 517 pp. $139.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7734-7523-6.

Reviewed by Peter Henshaw

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Rediscovering British Settlers in a Colony of British Settlement: British Proconsular Rule and Settler Politics in the Transvaal, 1904-1907

This is the second volume of Arthur Mawby's exhaustive study of white politics in the Transvaal in the period following its conquest by British forces in the South African War, 1899-1902. Volume 2, covering the period 1904 to 1907, examines the complex interactions amongst the local British proconsular administration, mining capitalists, and various competing classes of British settlers and Afrikaners. The principal focus is on Johannesburg, but the analysis considers the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies more generally. These former "Boer Republics" were, in these years, ruled in theory from London, and in practice by British proconsuls (Lords Milner and Selborne) and their imported underlings (the "Kindergarten"), in conjunction with local collaborators (drawn from the long-established white settler community of Southern Africa). This British colonial administration supposedly reorganized the government, economy, and society of the Transvaal to suit the paramount needs of mining capital, thereby launching British Southern Africa on its segregationist and apartheid trajectory. Such, at least, has been the orthodox (and predominantly Marxist) interpretation, one which has held historiographical sway amongst Southern Africanists since the 1970s and which had roots in British radical analysis dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. ***Gold Mining and Politics*** is Mawby's attempt to overthrow this radical-Marxist orthodoxy.

Many of the radical or Marxist interpretations of British policy in Southern Africa in the period 1895 to 1907 rested on grand theories or sweeping assumptions about the relationship between the Transvaal "state" and gold-mining capital, theories and assumptions which have withstood persistent attacks from a variety of directions. One of the great attractions of the radical-Marxist orthodoxy is that it has so often been presented with considerable style and unsurpassed lucidity, not to mention welcome brevity. The orthodoxy was convincing not least because the arguments it deployed were rhetorically coherent, and the sweep of its analysis breathtakingly broad.

Mawby's approach is different in almost all respects. *Gold Mining and Politics* is long, prosaic, and almost entirely empirical. His attack on the radical-Marxist orthodoxy is akin to a battle of attrition: an awesome array of sources and evidence is deployed across a broad front in a sustained effort to grind down the opposition. While the existing literature is ceaselessly challenged on innumerable minor points, Mawby's main purpose is to challenge the contention that the Milner and Selborne administrations acted principally to refashion the state and society of British Southern Africa in the interest of mining capital. This contention, in Mawby's view, reverses the true picture, which was that Milner and Selborne had their own agenda, one which mining capitalists only partially and reluctantly supported when they were not either neutral or actively hostile. Mawby's assessment is convincing, even if battling through its nearly one thousand pages can only be termed exhausting.

Faced with Mawby's "total archival onslaught," some defenders of the old orthodoxy apparently prefer to ignore the battle entirely. One prominent scholar in this field suggested to me that no-one would be much interested in *Gold Mining and Politics* because "the debate had moved on," the questions at issue having supposedly lost much of their significance after the end of apartheid. This astonishing suggestion begs an impertinent question, namely, Was there anything more to the debates in the 1970s and 1980s about the British government's historical responsibility for apartheid than the attempt to mobilize British support for the overthrow of the apartheid or capitalist order in South Africa? While there is no doubt that the end of apartheid has taken the heat and the urgency out of the debate, scholars of Southern African history must surely hope that the debate will continue, precisely because it is less politically and emotionally charged. Prior to 1994, critics of the radical-Marxist orthodoxy were not infrequently dismissed as being on the wrong side of the anti-apartheid struggle. It seems unfair to dismiss such critics now as being irrelevant. *Gold Mining and Politics* must be regarded as the major new contribution to the debate about the roots of the modern South African state, the great empirical edifice against which other studies in this field must now be tested.

One of the chief weaknesses of *Gold Mining and Politics* is that it lacks a strong theoretical or analytical structure. One result is that it is often difficult to make sense of the mass of detailed information being presented. Part of the problem is that the book is a response to the existing literature on the subject. *Gold Mining and Politics* frequently chases several divergent debates at once, while trying to correct earlier misjudgments. Mawby too often challenges orthodox interpretations on ground chosen by other writers when he might have done better to have reconceptualized the political and economic dynamics of the Transvaal in the early twentieth century.

Mawby, as a consequence, underplays a point he makes in passing in his own analysis. This is the centrality of British settlement and British cultural predominance in the eyes of Milner and his closest officials. A fatal weakness of much of the literature on the Transvaal in this period is that it either takes the British settler population for granted, or regards these people as mere factors of production--as furnishing inputs, directly or indirectly, for the gold mining industry: workers supplying labor, farmers providing agricultural goods, etc. As *Gold Mining and Politics* indicates at various points, Milner's regime was not principally concerned to develop the gold mining industry as an end in itself. The revival of gold production happened to be the only possible way to promote the geopolitical-cum-cultural end of ensuring that British settlers predominated in the Transvaal and, in consequence, throughout British Southern Africa. British settlers were not the means to some higher British economic end in Southern Africa. They were the end. The logic of

Milner's policies cannot be seen correctly unless this crucial point is grasped.

This is not to suggest that class and capital are not central to any understanding of British policy in Southern Africa. It is just that radical and Marxist analyses have typically focused too narrowly on Southern Africa, and paid insufficient attention to the pan-imperial perspective. The key to Milner's strategy for Southern Africa, as for the empire as a whole, was the idea that British settlement overseas was essential to the social and economic vitality (and, by extension, class stability) of Britain, and that Britain's position in the world depended on its ability to keep these settlers in territories loyal to the empire. This socially conservative, if not reactionary, imperial vision held rural settlement in especially high regard, since the maintenance of a strong yeoman farmer class was thought to be the chief defense against urban working-class radicalism. This was why Milner's administration put an apparently irrational effort into promoting British settlement and agricultural development in the rural Transvaal and Orange River Colony. It pursued this policy even at the cost of antagonizing not only Afrikaners (who feared being "swamped") but also of mining capitalists and the urban "Rand British" population of Johannesburg who resented being taxed to support this hugely expensive and patently impracticable policy. Many of the problems faced by the Milner administration after 1902--problems which stimulated widespread pressure for an early change to local self-government--can be traced back to this over-riding concern to boost the British population of the Transvaal, particularly in rural areas. Not least of the problems were the controversies over railway finance (which were bedeviled by an over-rapid extension of lines into rural areas), and over the introduction of indentured Chinese labor (which Milner regarded as a stop-gap that would leave the door open to a policy of increased reliance on skilled British mine labor). The centrality of British settlement has generally been neglected in the radical-Marxist orthodoxy, and though Mawby notes its importance, *Gold Mining and Politics* could have gone further in clarifying the hierarchy of Milner's objectives.

While *Gold Mining and Politics* has successfully challenged the radical-Marxist orthodoxy on a number of pivotal issues, the book does not really serve as an adequate substitute for the earlier literature. Indeed, *Gold Mining and Politics* is best read in conjunction with, and as a corrective to, the main existing accounts. It will, therefore, be of interest mainly to scholars anxious to immerse themselves in the details and theoretical debates associated with this important episode of Southern African and British imperial history. Even if a shorter, more readily digestible synthesis of the history of the Transvaal under British proconsular rule eventually appears, *Gold Mining and Politics* will remain an indispensable addition to any library committed to supporting research in this area.

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