



The South Africa Reader:

History, Culture, Politics

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*Clifton Crais and Thomas V McClendon (eds.)
Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2014. 598 pp*

This anthology in eight parts is arranged chronologically. It begins with extracts from African writings about the past. The second and third parts give us a range of voices from the seventeenth century through slavery and expansion to the nineteenth-century frontiers. Parts IV and V take us from the discovery of diamonds to the era of apartheid, via the concentration camps of the South African war, the Bulhoek massacre and mineworkers' songs. Then follow three parts on South Africa after 1948: apartheid and the struggle against it; from the Soweto uprising to liberation; and the transition and "reconciliations". This final part is, in the editors' words, "intended to provoke discussion about the 'new' South Africa" (7). There is a good mix of extracts on culture alongside political history. Each section is introduced briefly by the editors and the text is illuminated by a range of photographs, with a special section on everyday life in Soweto through the photographs of Santo Mofokeng (261ff).

Everyone will benefit from dipping into this volume. While some of the extracts and other material may well be familiar, not all will be, and every reader is likely to find relatively unknown gems here. The extracts are often tantalisingly brief, but that is inevitable. As with any such collection, it is easy to find things to criticise. Besides omissions (I would have included, say, some extracts from the Constitutions of 1993 or 1996), there are some self-indulgences, most notably the inclusion of the lead editor's recipes for bobotie and biltong, with ingredients and directions ("Preheat oven to 180 degrees Fahrenheit..."(65)).

As the well-informed editors note, there is an emphasis in the volume as a whole on violence and suffering (cf. 473), and some may think it presents too negative a picture of South Africa. There is no doubt, however, that it illustrates the rich diversity of the country and the complexity of its history, and it does so better than any other single volume I know.



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