

**Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, Robert Ross, eds**

*The Cambridge History of South Africa*  
Volume I. *From Early Times to 1885*

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The first volume of *The Cambridge History of South Africa*<sup>1</sup> is the first complete textbook on South African History from pre-historical times up to 1885 published after the fall of Apartheid. Of course there were other textbooks published after 1994, some of them were new editions of older books (Davenport and Saunders 2000; Thompson 2001), others were newly written on a wave of euphoria just after the fall of apartheid, and the first free elections in 1994 (Ross 1997; Welsh 1998), but these books reflected the scholarship of the period before the fall of apartheid, or, as in the case of Robert Ross, were concise histories. *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, despite the statement introduction – that it is based to a great extent on scholarship that preceded the fall of apartheid (Hamilton et al. 2010: XIV) – also reflects more than fifteen years of post-apartheid historiography.<sup>2</sup>

This book presents a new attitude towards the history of South Africa. Not by artificial means, as in the case of Norman Etherington's *The Great Treks*, which chooses an arbitrary, geographical point of reference (Etherington 2001: 2, 25-27). The editors of this book used a more traditional, but I dare also say better way to do that. They simply enclosed in this volume the history starting from circa 2000 years ago. They did not treat the pre-colonization period as a separate part, just a shorter or longer archeological and anthropological introduction to proper history (Thompson and Wilson 1969: 1-186). In fact they compose the structure and narrative in such a way, that contact with Europeans and the beginning of European colonization are interwoven into the fabric of the regional history. This simple measure stresses the fact that this book is about a history of this region, and not a history of European expansion and colonization of South Africa.

<sup>1</sup> The second was published on 31 July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Even more, if we remember that since the publication of *The Oxford History of South Africa* (Thompson and Wilson 1969-1971) the historiography of South Africa broke free from the apartheid paradigm to a great extent.

The first volume of *The Cambridge History of South Africa* is generally composed along chronological lines, with each chapter written by a different author or group of authors. There are two exceptions to this chronological construction. The first chapter, prepared by the editors, presents a general history of South African historiography. The last chapter deals with the issue of changes in consciousness among South African communities, especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some chapters overlap chronologically, but this is mostly a result of different authorship.

The editors also stress the fact that, although they are interested in the history of the territories now belonging to the Republic of South Africa, during earlier periods, these territories were just a part of southern Africa, therefore they are making some excursions beyond contemporary political borders.

In the first chapter the reader gets a comprehensive presentation of South African primary sources and historiography. This is very helpful to any scholar interested in this region, as she or he gets extensive information about historical traditions, starting from the oral narratives of the Africans, through successive phases of historical and historiographical writings by both Europeans and African intellectuals.

The authors present difficulties and challenges in the examination of South African primary sources, firstly the difficulties of studying non-written records of African communities. They were, to a large extent, mediated by European or westernized narratives or, in the case of material culture, they represent a set of values and attitudes quite different from the European. The other difficulty is that the written sources in their variety represent one, colonial (administrative, missionary or settler) point of view. Contrary to revisionist historians, such as Julian Cobbing or to a lesser extent Dan Wylie, who tend to accuse settler narratives and colonial historiography of intentional misrepresentations (Cobbing 1988: 487-519; Wylie 2006: 5-9, 14, 31), the authors of this chapter show that settler accounts were far from being uniform. They oppose the depreciation of these primary sources, claiming that many of them include detailed records of local communities, and captured in writing, to at least some extent, African ideas about the past.

Similarly, they present a comprehensive and mostly unbiased account of the development of South African historiography. While demonstrating the shortcomings and biases of successive historical schools, they also show their positive input to the development of modern South African historiography. For example, in presenting the apartheid period, they show the preconditions of anthropological or historical studies biased by social and cultural engineering, but at the same time they stress the very thorough analyses of archeological, anthropological and historical traditions and writings made during that time. Such an attitude does not exclude any tradition, but shows the complexity of South African historical writings, traditions and attitudes.

The second chapter, written by Simon Hall and John Parkington, starts a chronological account of South African history. The authors start with the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry to South Africa. They stress the importance of archaeology for the reconstruction of early history as well as later periods. The authors try to reconstruct the history of the region, based on archaeological findings. It is a new development, because in earlier books archaeology was usually treated as separate discipline (Thompson and

Wilson 1969: 1-39). They acknowledge the difficulties of the interpretation of archaeological findings, but still accept them as important material, showing the character and changes in African cultures of this region.

They present the problem of the origins of Khoe-khoe pastoralists, and their relation to San people; whether they were different peoples or just peoples in different phases of an ecological cycle. The authors do not take decisive sides in the discussion, they present the arguments of both sides, and try to keep their opinions to themselves, giving the reader the possibility for further study. The same goes for the problem of the migration of the Khoe-khoe: was this really migration, or rather diffusion?

The main topic, however, is the arrival of the mixed farming population circa 250-580 A.D. in South Africa. They show the dynamics and complexity of African communities, which participated in long distance trade with the East African coast as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century (Hamilton et al. 2010: 88, 90). Finally they deal with the question of the ambivalent relations between Bantu and San during these early times.

The third chapter, written by Simon Hall, deals with later African communities from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He shows their expansion and diversification, which, together with participation in the Indian Ocean trade, led to the development of the first states, like Mapungubwe and later Great Zimbabwe. He also deals with the question of the beginnings of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana groups of Bantu peoples. In this case he presents the newest findings, according to which both these groups have their roots in East Africa, and their process of ethnogenesis started before their arrival in Southern Africa (Hamilton et al. 2010: 128-129). This shows a change in interpretation, which happened since the eighties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a theory of Nguni origins in South Africa was dominant (Maggs 1989: 37-38). At the same time he shows that the process of ethnogenesis of other Bantu groups took place in South Africa, as in the case of the Venda (Hamilton et al. 2010: 133-138).

At the same time, Simon Hall warns of some of the traps waiting for researchers. The value of oral traditions for an early history is limited, and archaeological findings should also be treated carefully, as they may create a false picture. Still, these two help in reconstruction of the history of this region, especially after 1500, when the occurrence of written primary sources of European origin allows for comparison and verification. On the other hand he sees archeology as a means to verify written sources, and points to rock paintings as an interesting primary source (Hamilton et al. 2010: 163).

Simon Hall reconstructs Nguni migrations to the High Veld during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, the reader gains insight into the dynamics of social and political processes, and realizes that the African migrations in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had their precedents. Then the reader may observe the scale and character of socio-political changes among African communities and chiefdoms during the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of overseas trade on these processes (introduction of maize, demand for ivory), or the role of colonial economic and political expansion (Griqua and Kora). It is interesting that he moves the beginning of the mfecane to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hamilton et al. 2010: 149). In this and other respects (the role of Mzilikazi, or the circumstances of the rise of the Zulu state), readers have the chance to acquaint themselves with up to date studies of these topics.

The fourth chapter, written by Robert Ross, chronologically overlaps with the previous one. This is because it deals mostly with the question of emergence of colonial society in South Africa from 1500 up to 1800. It represents a new attitude toward the history of the Cape Colony, the concentration on social and economic issues. Ross presents the role of the Khoisan as one of the crucial factors which shaped the history of the Colony. Firstly, readers are presented with the background of creating a colony in Table Bay, then with the reasons for its transformation into settlement. Then he presents the character of internal relations in colonial society, relations with administration and between burghers themselves (Hamilton et al. 2010: 179, 182-183). Although Ross himself was one of the chief protagonists in the debate concerning the role of market as a stimulus for *trekboer* expansion (Neumark 1957; Van Duin and Ross 1987), he presents this debate objectively, and eventually seems to agree with Susan Newton-King, that what we have in the Cape Colony may be called an economy of poverty (Newton-King 1999: 150-209).

Analyzing social structures, he shows that the lines of division in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Cape Colony were not clear and not racial in the modern understanding of this word. It was still possible for people of colour to be integrated as a part of the burgher class (Hamilton et al. 2010: 196-198). Similarly, he stresses that in the frontier areas there were no racial lines of conflict, and what is even more important, we may see that there was a triangular relation in which the colonial administration and local burghers were not necessarily and not always on the same side. This was especially visible on the northern frontier (Penn 2005: 187-201). Robert Ross suggests that we may observe rapprochement between local elites and the district magistrates (Hamilton et al. 2010: 208). But was it rapprochement, or perhaps rather a takeover of local administration by local elites? This question must be left unanswered right now, but should at least be asked. If there is anything this chapter lacks, it would be a somewhat more thorough presentation of the commando system, which should not be seen as just a military system, but, like *amabutho*, as something more, a tool for mobilizing manpower and building patronage and social and political position on the frontier.

The fifth chapter, written by John Wright, deals with the upheavals and transformations of African societies during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter overlaps chronologically with the third chapter. This is difficult to avoid in a collective work. It has its merits, and shows different perspectives on some topics, but on the other hand, the function in such a monographic work is different. It is one thing to present a diversity of opinions in every chapter, another to present certain segments of history more than once. Still, it is an interesting chapter. It shows the changes in historiography and attitudes towards the *mfecane*; presents new social developments during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the role of the intensification of external and internal trade in these processes; finally the role of the so-called firearm frontier (the northern frontier of the Cape Colony) in these developments. At the same time he is skeptical about the influence of the slave trade from Delagoa Bay as a factor before 1810 (Hamilton et al. 2010: 224). He argues convincingly that the role of Portugal as a factor in South African history during this period should be more thoroughly investigated.

Analyzing the socio-political processes among the Nguni, he shows the role of the *amabutho* system as a crucial element in consolidation processes. He presents its origins and stresses that its functions were not only military, but also social and economic. Presenting this system he demonstrates that it did not supersede an older system, but rather supplemented it. In effect *amabutho* and chiefdoms formed parallel and overlapping structures.

The new concept he is propagating here is what one may call 'Ndwandwe Aftermath' as opposed to 'Zulu Aftermath.'<sup>3</sup> It focuses attention on the role of Ndwandwe in the transformations which took place in Zululand-Natal and spread from there with the migration of Ndwandwe splinter groups (like Mzilikazi or Soshangane) (Hamilton et al. 2010: 236). In effect, although the author redefines the meaning and chronology of the *mfecane*, he shows the viability of the term to label profound transformations taking place among African societies in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The next chapter, written by Martin Legassick and Robert Ross, presents the expansion and transformation of the Cape Colony and colonial society during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This whole chapter is framed by two Khoe-khoe rebellions, in 1799-1803 and in 1851-1853. This may seem strange, as it is a departure from traditional chronology, but these events denote changes in South African society. The first may be considered the beginning of the end of the old colonial system. The second represents the end of the first phase of the new system introduced by the British. These dates correspond to the takeover of the Colony by the United Kingdom, and its transformation into a British type self-governing colony. Finally, the closing event corresponds also to the conventions acknowledging the existence of independent Boer communities in the interior. One may argue that this chapter deals with the process of forced modernization and its effect on local communities. The authors show that lines of division were not clear, and at least some of the Boers in the interior were as much opposed to this process as Khoe-khoe and AmaXhosa (Hamilton et al. 2010: 309, 311). Still they do not elaborate on the reasons why such a significant group of Boers was not interested in colonial expansion, why they abstained from the campaigns on the eastern frontier, and sometimes even supported some of the African groups and chiefdoms (Legassick 1980: 66-67; Keegan 1996: 202-203, 270-272).

They show the changes in the character of the frontier wars after the British takeover of the Colony in 1806. The wars take on an increasingly brutal character, commencing with the forced removal of the Xhosa from the Zuurveldt, through the scorched earth policy during the 1834-1836 war and the Axe War to total war or even a war of extermination in the case of the Mlanjeni War (Hamilton et al. 2010: 266-267, 282, 298, 312, 315).

On the other hand, they turn our attention to social and economic changes of that period: the immigration of British Settlers and their importance to South Africa, the development of British Settler identity, the rise of a new African peasant elite, cultural Anglicization of Afrikaner elites, the development of a new wool economy, and many

<sup>3</sup> Which of course alludes to John D. Omer-Cooper's book *Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa* (1966).

more. Characteristically, the Great Trek is moved to the back of the stage a little. It is not presented as a crucial event, but the authors still acknowledge its importance as a substantial movement of population and extension of the colonial nexus far into the interior. I must say that I prefer Norman Etherington's narrative of the Trek, as a collection of many family and client-group treks (Etherington 2001: 244). Still, whatever my doubts may be, and there are just a few, this is an interesting chapter, presenting a vivid and complex social, economic and political history of colonial society during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The seventh chapter, prepared by Norman Etherington, Patrick Harries and Bernard K. Mbenga, deals with the colonial expansion and changes in the socio-political situation from 1840 to 1880. The narrative starts with the Cape Colony. Reading the first few pages brought a sense of *déjà vu*. Presenting the situation on the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony, the authors were repeating what was already written in an earlier chapter (Hamilton et al. 2010: 296-301, 308-312). Of course, it is from a slightly different point of view and there are some slight differences in interpretation, but I am not sure if in such a monograph there is a place for such recurrence. However this is just a matter of opinion.

The authors argue that it was during the forties, fifties and sixties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Colony was transformed into the modern British-like settlement. Changes occur in infrastructure (roads, railways) and the evolution of the political and constitutional system. We observe at last the emergence of the Afrikaner national movement, and a revival of the Muslim community in Cape Town (Hamilton et al. 2010: 334-335). In fact it should be stressed that throughout the whole book we have several references to the Muslim community in Cape Town and its importance in South African history.

The authors then move towards the South African interior. We are presented a short history of the Great Trek and the politics which emerged as its result. The authors present the complex relations between Boer and African communities. They describe the disunity of the Boers, the sources of those divisions and the role of patriarchal leaders. The authors show the variety of relations with African communities and chiefdoms and the process of Africanisation of the Boers (Hamilton et al. 2010: 343). The reader sees that African chiefdoms shaped the situation north of the Vaal to no lesser extent than the Boer communities. Mutual relations were not only complex but also very dynamic, and up to 1877 this dynamic often worked against Boers and for African communities. The authors show that so called *inboekslinge* (forced labour) and *Oorlams* (acculturated Africans, quite often former *inboekslinge*), played a crucial role as culture brokers between Boers and Africans.

Representing the character of Boer communities, the dynamics of their relations with Africans and the rudimentary character of institutions north of the Vaal river, they do not ask the question, whether we may call the Transvaal a state. They show that the evolution toward statehood took some 15 years, until 1867. But was it really a state in anything but name? I won't argue here that the negative answer is the only one possible, but I would like to see a discussion of such a question. Especially in view of the indifference of the greater part of the Boers to the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877.

The authors then move to Natal to show the character of this territory. They describe the reasons and circumstances of migration of large groups of Africans into Natal, and in effect the creation and character of a Shepstonian system of indirect rule. They show that the British settlers brought a set of Victorian prejudices to Natal, which should be seen as the base of racial segregation. But at the same time, they show that Shepstone's intentions were not vicious, that he wanted to create conditions for cooperation with African elites. Then, as they argue, the Langalibalele affair may be seen as a sign of change in racial relations, and the crisis of the Shepstonian system (Hamilton et al. 2010: 378-379).

The discovery of diamonds as one of the crucial events in South African history is also appreciated in this chapter. The presentation of the importance of this discovery is rather classical: in fact there is very little to argue about. The discovery designates the beginning of the mining revolution in South Africa. It opens up new possibilities for most of the communities living there, but at the same time, it is the beginning of the shaping of social and economic realities which became predominant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The competition between Africans and Whites in this work market led to the division of working-class interests along racial lines, and this in turn led to the increase in racism. At the same time we may observe the development of new Bantu identities influenced by contacts with missionaries, settlers and colonial administration.

Diamond mining also created a single regional economy, or at least started to create it. This, and revenues from a new sector of the economy, revived the idea of a South African Federation sponsored by the British government. With regards to this process, the authors introduce an interesting concept of the "First British War for South African Unification" (1877-1882) (Hamilton et al. 2010: 383), as collective designation of a series of conflicts connected with the British endeavour to dominate the whole region: the Zulu War, the BaPedi War, the Transvaal Rebellion and the BaSotho Rebellion. This is an interesting idea, especially in view of the fact that one may consider these wars and this rebellion as a manifestation of opposition against modernization. In this respect the Transvaal and BaSotho rebellion may be seen as affined phenomena.

This is the last chapter of the chronological narration. The next and final chapter, by Paul S. Landau, deals with the problem of identity. The consciousness transformations of how South Africans perceived themselves are the main topic of this chapter. This is important as one of the most visible manifestations of stereotyping.

The author presents the elements of the traditional structures of Bantu peoples, and discusses changes in identification, especially during the period of upheavals during the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He then analyzes the influence of missionaries and Christian ideals on the character and development of African communities. He stresses the fact that most, if not all communities were mixed in their composition, and therefore at that time identity did not correspond directly to ethnicity. It is evident in the cases of mixed communities (Bastards, Griqua, Coloureds), but it was also true among the Bantu or the Boers.

He deals with the question of so called 'Bastard' and 'Oorlam' identities, which were akin, but not identical. Both played a crucial role in transmitting cultural values, practices and structures between Africans and Europeans, especially Boers. It is important to see

the adaptation of elements of local culture by Boers (Hamilton et al. 2010: 416). Even if he sometimes seems to exaggerate, as when he argues for the similarities of the political systems of the Boers and some of the Bantu, he still points out an important phenomenon – the mutual acculturation of Boers and Africans. Usually more stress is placed on the Boer, settler or European influences among African communities. He points to the fact that this process was mutual and we may observe, at least to some extent, Africanisation of the Boers.

He then shows that the institutions of Anglo-Saxon society, which colonial and later republican Boers gradually assimilated, helped to develop racial attitudes. Over time, social exclusion became racial exclusion. However, before exclusion became a dominant factor, a variety of mutual relations and cultural hybridity developed (Hamilton et al. 2010: 418; Van Onselen 1996: 22, 234). It is an interesting, though sometimes somewhat controversial study of cultural influences across ethnic, geographical, political and cultural borders.

The first volume of *The Cambridge History of South Africa* is an important publication. Perhaps it is saying too much, but it might one day be seen as a symbol of a breakthrough in South African historiography, similar to *The Oxford History of South Africa*. It is new history for new times. Written and edited by a group of eminent historians of South Africa, it summarizes the current state of knowledge and adds some fresh and interesting insights. It reflects contemporary interests, such as gender studies, local and regional studies, or questions of identity, and blends these with more traditional attitudes and interests. The authors managed to write a history which is to a great extent Afrocentric – not by any artificial means, but by presenting the history of specific periods by means of the history of local communities, African, Boer, or of mixed origin. At the same time it shows that there is still much to be done.

It is a very valuable publication, and one or two controversial interpretations and concepts do not affect this value. This book will be very helpful to researchers and scholars interested in South African history and historiography. I read it with great pleasure.

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