

*A cameo from the past: The prehistory and early history of the
Kruger National Park*

**(Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2012, 757 pp., map, table, bibl., index.
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South African National Parks (SANParks) is the leading conservation authority in Africa. With 3 751 113 hectares of land under its control, the 21 national parks play host to one of Southern Africa's most valuable living heritage features – the unique fauna and flora of the region. It is a heritage that is not merely that of the people of South Africa, but indeed that of mankind, and protecting this heritage is everybody's business, or at least, it should be.

The history of game parks are, as this book clearly demonstrates, not merely the history of animals and their conservation. The overriding emphasis is on the relation between human activity and the natural environment. It is a subject on which the general historian is, one would suspect, not too well informed. It is true that environmental history has not received the attention it deserves in curricula. It is good that this is changing, but for those overwhelmed at where to start, *A cameo from the past* may just be what you are looking for.

What is most important in this study is the way in which various disciplines are consulted to narrate the prehistory and early history of the Kruger National Park. In some ways, this makes the text challenging to read. Yet the result is that one feels enriched, and left with a sense of wonder about the magnitude of this heritage that is South Africa's natural beauty and diversity.

This sense of being overwhelmed is enhanced by the sheer amount of factual information. If there is perhaps one strong point of criticism, it is that the text has some of the qualities of an encyclopaedia. While one is provided with ample facts, the old accusation that history is "just one thing after the other" might surface here for some. But despite the possibility that the volume of information might overwhelm the reader, there is adequate interpretation of

these facts. The fact that the authors went to great lengths to unearth the insights of various disciplines also minimizes this challenge, as their contextual insights assist with interpretation.

Aiding the reader further is the large number of images accompanying this work. Although it would certainly have been far less costly without them, they are of paramount importance to interpret the text. It is often the case with history books that one is left wondering if photographs of well-known politicians are indeed necessary. But in the case of *A cameo from the past*, the pictorial information more often than not enhances the reading experience. Added to these are the important maps included in the back. These are not merely of historical importance, but will assist a modern visitor to the area.

In terms of content, the bulk of the book is concerned with the settlers' activities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Amongst these, the stories of colourful personalities often tell a different tale than what we are so often led to believe about South Africa's past. While there were times of bloodshed and conflict, there are also stories of bravery and brotherhood that seem so distant from what South Africa would become in the late 20th century, especially in the eyes of the international community. Some of the content is so moving that it could serve as inspiration for historical novels. What forms a central theme, however, is the way in which the politics of the area shaped the development of the Kruger National Park, and for those interested in the Anglo-Boer war, there is an entire chapter on this topic and how it relates to the development of the Park.

As the title suggests, however, an ample part of the text is dedicated to the prehistory of the Kruger National Park, and tells a tale of the magnitude of early human settlement – a subject about which many South Africans know too little. Trade and mining were common to the early settlers of the area, and as discoveries are made, our knowledge of these 'first' South Africans is becoming more detailed.

All of this forms a prelude to what can be described as the climax of *A cameo from the past*, which is the formation of the Kruger National Park. Again, this is narrated in great detail. The authors do not shy away from grim realities and lessons learned the hard way, and give us insights into how South Africa developed into one of the leaders in conservation.

Despite its overwhelming detail, *A cameo from the past* can be considered as a work that succeeds in its stated aims. It is an important contribution, and is recommended to anyone interested in wildlife, the Kruger National Park, and the politics of South Africa. Because it is very well-illustrated, it can even serve as a wonderful “coffee table” book, hopefully cultivating an awareness and love for nature, as well as history.

Armblanques

(Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2012, x + 200 pp. ISBN 978-0-624-05643-0)

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Die onderwerp “armblankes” is natuurlik nie nuut in die Suid-Afrikaanse historiografie nie en in hierdie opsig sluit Bottomley se werk aan by ‘n aantal gewigtige publikasies wat alreeds hierdie tema of aspekte daarvan histories ondersoek het, byvoorbeeld dié van Groskopf, Van Onselen, Beinart *et al*, Keegan, Morrel, Lange en Teppo, asook vele ander.¹ Bottomley se boek is ‘n verwerking van sy MA-graad aan die Universiteit van Cambridge oor die geografiese geskiedenis van armbblankes in Suid-Afrika. Dis in Afrikaans in boekvorm deur Erika de Beer vertaal.

Die boek bestaan uit vyf hoofstukke, te wete “Die ontdekking van die armes”, “Die arm stad”, “Die arm volk”, “Die goeie blankes” en “Die moderne armes”. Veral die teoretiese vertrekpunte van hoofstuk een, waar die skrywer aspekte soos klassifikasie, koloniale stedelike beplanning en rasse-orde, witheidstudies,

¹ Sien bv. JFW Groskopf, *Rural impoverishment and rural exodus: Report of the Carnegie Commission*, Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932; C van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914, Vol. I: New Babylon* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1982); W Beinart, et al (eds.), *Putting a plough to the ground. Accumulation and dispossession in rural South Africa, 1850-1930* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986); T Keegan, *Rural transformations in industrializing South Africa. The Southern Highveld to 1914* (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1987); R Morrel (ed.), *White but poor: Essays on the history of the poor whites in Southern Africa, 1880-1940* (Unisa, Pretoria, 1992); L Lange, *White, poor and angry: White working class families in Johannesburg* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2003); A Teppo, *The making of a good white: A historical ethnography of the rehabilitation or poor whites in a suburb of Cape Town* (University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2004).