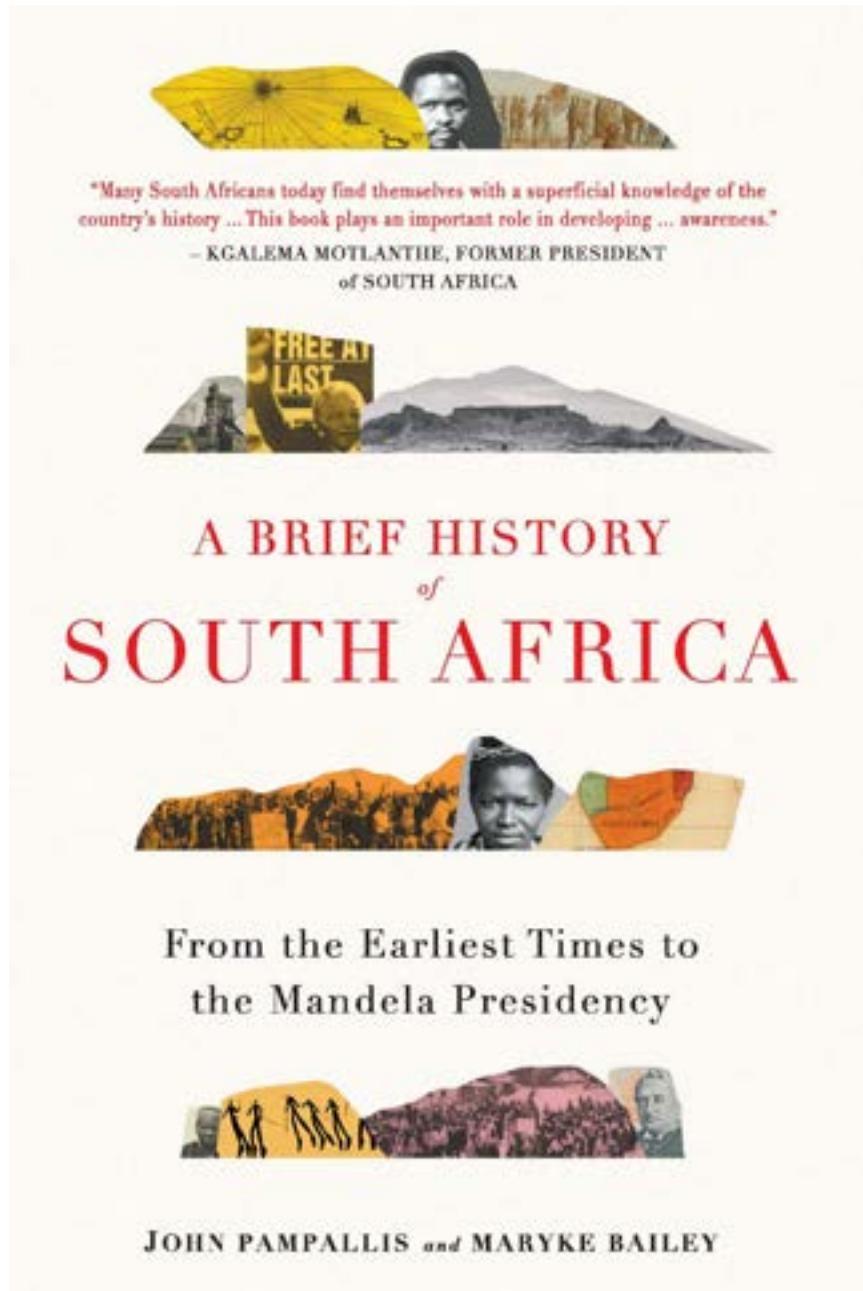


BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Mandla J. Radebe



The writing of South African history has been contentious, mainly due to the exclusion of the majority African people whose past achievements have often been ignored or treated contemptuously. Various tendencies in the writing of this history sought to dispute Africans' claim to South Africa. The Afrikaner tendency, for example, portrayed Africans as not being indigenous to this country (Theal, 1897). On the other hand, the liberal tradition considered South Africa as constituting a single nation with white people making up the core while black people in general, and Africans in particular, had to be integrated on the basis of meeting particular standards (Nxumalo, 1992).

This latter point is precisely what makes *A Brief History of South Africa* an important intervention. In this book, Pampallis and Bailey introduce the reader to a broad sweep of South African history, from the earliest times until the Mandela Presidency. While the book employs both a narrative chronology and thematic chapters, what is useful about this book is that it encourages critical thinking about key events that shaped the history of the country. This is done by, *inter alia*, portraying the agency of the oppressed majority in resisting colonialism and apartheid. This explains the emergence of political, social and trade union movements and their role in the liberation struggle.

Early Societies

Pampallis and Bailey introduce us to the part of our history which has seldom been told owing to our history of colonisation. In a fascinating fashion, they stretch our minds and knowledge to the seventeenth-century societies of southern Africa and reflect on the San as the first inhabitants of the region. Without being presumptuous in their argument that 'early modern humans were present in southern Africa over 100 000 years ago', they concede that 'owing to a lack of evidence, we know very little about these early residents' (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 18). The arrival of the Bantu-language speakers who were farmers is another dimension that is often misrepresented.

The expansion of the early Bantu-language speakers southwards from eastern Africa (the Great Lakes region) and western Africa (probably around Angola) debunks the revisionist notion presented

by colonialist historians such as Theal (1897), which later became the basis of the ideology of the likes of Hendrik Verwoerd. Theal's writings had become part of the foundation of the Afrikaner ideology which racist politicians like Verwoerd relied upon to advance a baseless notion that 'Africans had no right to claim the whole of South African territory as belonging to them' (Nxumalo, 1992: 15). *A Brief History of South Africa* dispels this notion by pointing out that 'The earliest farmers settled around the Kruger National Park, eSwatini and Mozambique in about AD 250. Settlements spread south along the coast of KwaZulu-Natal over the next 500 years. By AD 700 some farmers had settled as far south as modern-day East London' (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 20).

Linked to this is the period between 1700 and 1800 which witnessed political changes among the Sotho-Tswana and Nguni groups. This is yet another epoch that has been misconstrued deliberately. Pampallis and Bailey describe this 'state formation in southern Africa' and the accompanying social, political and economic instability. How we understand and interpret this period of upheaval, known as the *mfecane* or the *difaqane*, is critical for understanding our present which is transmitted from the past. The book navigates various contentious issues such as the emergence of larger states such as the Zulu, Sotho and Ndebele kingdoms and their existence in the context of various kingdoms such as the Gaza, Swazi and Pedi kingdoms.

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How exactly these kingdoms co-existed and the sources of various conflicts are some of the crucial elements that this book unpacks. The political economy of this epoch included competition for the control of trade routes such as the one that 'ran from the Portuguese colonial trading ports in the north-west (Angola) and on the east coast (Mozambique) to the upper Marico district' – parts of our history that are seldom spoken about (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 33). For many, our history began with the arrival of the European settlers in 1652. By the time the colonists and raiders expanded from the Cape Colony by moving towards the north in the early 1800s, the African kingdoms had been in existence for centuries in this country.

The Resistance Struggles Before and After the Gold Rush

This colonial expansion and the brave African wars of resistance are discussed within a proper context of the history of South Africa. Fundamentally, the Africans, despite being technologically disadvantaged due to their reliance on primitive weaponry, were no walk over. Various books about the heroism of the Africans during this period have emerged in recent times, albeit insufficiently. *A Brief History of South Africa* is also useful in this regard. The Khoen and San responded to the Cape colonial expansion and hence the first Khoen–Dutch war is reported to have taken place in '1659 and lasted about a year' (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 38). Again, the war between the trekboers and the Xhosa people is located in the context of the co-existence that the Xhosas had sought to foster, similar to their absorption of the San, Khoen, Thembu and Bhaca people. However, it was the economic rivalry that led to the fights.

The colonial expansion and the resistance beyond the Cape Colony is presented in an easy-to-understand style and language that portrays the agency and innovation of Africans. Nevertheless, there are numerous nuances in the South African story. The book does not miss this crucial aspect. Many African communities regarded the Boers as just another group in competition for land and cattle, and in some instances 'African leaders sometimes allied with the Boers, or the British, in order to defeat a common enemy.' The fights of Chief Moroka II of the Rolong with Mzilikazi is one case in point. Nevertheless, even

in such alliances, the perceived racial supremacy of the Voortrekkers, who 'saw themselves as racially superior', is palpable (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 41).

The heroics of the African kingdoms and their different responses to colonial expansion, such as the Basotho under King Moshoeshoe in the land across the Orange River and the Zulu kingdom under various Zulu kings across Natal, are presented. This is done in the context of various developments such as the indentured labour of Indians in Natal. The defeat of Mzilikazi, together with treaties and agreements with the more powerful kingdoms to the north and east, such as those of the Swazi and Pedi, lay the basis for our understanding for future developments in South Africa. In fact, the liberation struggle cannot be fully understood outside of this background.

South Africa's history would be incomplete without unpacking the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley and the gold rush in Johannesburg 20 years later. It was on the back of these mining activities that South Africa became the largest industrialised economy on the African continent (Venter et al., 2012). The gold mines in particular not only brought about development, employment and wealth, but also, as Durand (2012) argues, 'the most devastating war in the history of South Africa, civil unrest, economical inequality, social uprooting, pollution, negative health impacts and ecological destruction.' The presentation of aspects such as the control of the mining industry and the wealth it created, the role of mine workers and racial dimensions, and fundamentally the impact of the mineral revolution in South Africa are therefore all critical.

Indeed, history does not proceed along a straight line but has twists and turns as witnessed in numerous events of our past such as the Anglo-Boer relations which led to the war and the Union of South Africa. Inevitably, these developments led to new forms of resistance including the formation of early black political organisations. The emergence of these modern political organisations in the late nineteenth century such as *Imbumba yama Afrika*, the Native Electoral Association and the Native Educational Association in what is now the Eastern Cape, provides us with insights to nascent modern resistance in South Africa (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 67). It was in this environment that the South

African Native National Congress, the forerunner of the African National Congress, was formed. Of course, developments such as the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the World Wars, make for complex and fascinating reading.

In the context of the spikes of the recent protest action in the country and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the discussion of the post-war years, which ventures into issues such as the Spanish flu and strikes, connects our past with the present. Similarities between the Spanish flu and Covid-19 are striking in that both are transmitted through respiratory droplets, are highly contagious, and have no definitive cure (Lyngdoh, 2020). These linkages between the past and present are useful in our context as we seek to resolve the national question by building a non-racist, non-sexist, democratic country.

A Brief History of South Africa is replete with information such as the economic crisis of the 1930s, the emergence of the National Party (NP), its rise to power in 1948 and the establishment of apartheid. The initial resistance to apartheid and the revival of the mass movement after the liberation movement had been weakened during the economic boom period of the early 1960s is an important part of our recent history and is useful to understand. The revival of the mass movement in particular, as characterised *inter alia* by the rise of the student movement and Black Consciousness in the universities, the re-

emergence of worker resistance as witnessed in the 1973 Durban strikes, the independence of the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola in 1975 and the broader political development in Southern Africa, Bantu Education and the uprising of 16 June 1976, and the Bantustans are some of the important aspects of understanding our history.

Freedom and Democracy

When the apartheid regime came under severe internal and external pressures, a negotiated settlement emerged as a solution. The processes leading towards negotiations – including the secret talks, overtures to release Mandela, the emergence of F.W. de Klerk as the new NP leader, and the ultimate release of political prisoners and unbanning of political organisations – are crucial elements in comprehending our negotiated settlement. Therefore, how South Africa's democratic breakthrough came about can only be understood by reading this part of our history.

The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) process, which paved the way for the 1994 elections and the eventual rise of Mandela to power, constitutes the last part of the narrative section of *A Brief History*. With the first democratic government in power, a new constitution was drafted and eventually adopted in 1996.

In discussing Mandela's legacy, the question of the constitution often crops up. Of course, other areas like the building of new institutions of democracy, the expansion and transformation of the social infrastructure, the promotion of reconciliation through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the economy remain pertinent. However, it is in dealing with the economy in relation to Mandela's legacy that the book could have done more. Although, it is mentioned that post-1994 the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was jettisoned for the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme, the impact of this ideological shift cannot be discussed in one short paragraph.

Of course, the authors do not proffer to be experts on policy analysis; nevertheless, the historical process leading to GEAR could have been better articulated.

“ The second part of *A Brief History of South Africa* presents themes in South African history, and I found this most valuable. Among the themes presented is ‘The South African Economy’, which traces the various economic sectors in South Africa at different times and their influence in bringing about changes in South Africa’s politics and society.

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Moreover, the folly of the 1996 class project is being exposed daily through our intractable socio-economic problems. Particularly, the SACP and *Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)* were vocal on the policy and issued numerous documents. For example, the Macro-Economic Research Group (MERG) released a document in December 1993 whose ideological orientation differed to that of GEAR. Among the salient features of this document was its focus on the importance of RDP. This history is crucial if future generations are to learn from some of the mistakes from the past.

Themes in South African History

The second part of *A Brief History of South Africa* presents themes in South African history, and I found this most valuable. Among the themes presented is 'The South African Economy', which traces the various economic sectors in South Africa at different times and their influence in bringing about changes in South Africa's politics and society. These sectors include subsistence agriculture which, for centuries, was the backbone of the South African economy; mining and commercial farming, which became the two dominant sectors after the discovery of diamonds in the late 1860s and gold in the mid-1880s; and manufacturing linked to the mining boom. The economic shifts of the 1970s linked to the rise of the financial and services sectors is another important aspect of our economic history.

A retelling of South Africa's history would be incomplete without a discussion of the Bantustans. The book presents a detailed logic behind this sham self-determination project of the National Party. It correctly posits that the 'bantustans helped the apartheid government to extend its control over the movement and labour of the African population' (Pampallis and Bailey, 2021: 202). This is certainly not how apartheid presented this initiative. Having presented a detailed and compelling history of the system, including the decline of the Bantustans due to, *inter alia*, protests against them, it would have been useful for the book to connect the current provincial system to Bantustans. There is no doubt that there are continuities of the Bantustan logic in the democratic period which have perpetuated backward tendencies like tribalism.

The theme on 'The History of Schooling in South Africa' is laden with inequalities as the result of our past. When discussing this theme, it is palpable that the authors are at their strength. It is not surprising, taking into account their backgrounds. The themes on 'Poverty and Inequality', 'Life under Apartheid: Urban and Rural Experiences', 'Women's Struggles', 'The Trade Union Movement', 'South Africa's Constitutions' and 'International Solidarity against Apartheid' are also important, and are more understandable after the scene of our history has been set in the first part of the book. In reality, these are not accidents of history but constructed realities that the African working class in particular must contend with as part of their daily lived experiences. It is credit to the authors for including such aspects as part of our history, for poverty and inequality, for example, form part of the South African landscape.

Concluding Thoughts

While the book does not pretend to present a comprehensive history of South Africa, a more nuanced and detailed discussion in relation to personal and organisational ideologies could have been presented more sharply. More importantly, not just in relation to the Mandela legacy but various aspects of the book, one would have expected to encounter something new given the praxis of the authors. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the book's attempt to present an accurate version of our historical past. Such books are imperative in shaping our damaged collective historical consciousness that has been affected by centuries of distortions of the history, particularly of the black majority. The authors must be commended for their efforts in successfully condensing an extensive historical period in a narrative of just over 300 pages.

A Brief History of South Africa is a useful guide for everyone interested in understanding our past. As to be expected of a book written by seasoned educators, it is a text that will come in handy for both formal and non-formal adult education purposes. However, its strength also lies in its usefulness as complementary material for history teaching in schools (including an appendix of Text Engagement Activities for learners) and, fundamentally, in political education circles. Educators and trainers will find the book a useful tool that is likely to expand their

own knowledge, particularly because each chapter points readers to a range of further readings with a variety of historical interpretations; it also provides questions for group discussion.

**Mandla J. Radebe is an author and associate professor in the University of Johannesburg's Department of Strategic Communication.*

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