

REVIEW OF :

Paul Maylam (1986) - *A History of the African People of South Africa from the Early Iron Age to the 1970s* (Cape Town: David Philip, R18.00 paperback)

Cynthia Kros

Maylam is probably a little modest in the statement of his objectives in this volume. He does not merely proceed to gather the pickings of the more 'original' historians; he gives a succinct account of the events under review and then sifts through the available evidence, concluding with critical comment. He gives careful consideration to the interpretations that have been rendered by the 'revisionist' historians, without being swept off his feet by their revelations. For example, he follows the complex course of the *difaqane* and then steers just as skillfully between the view that it was the devastation wrought by the *difaqane* which set the pattern for the present 'homeland' disposition and the one which seeks to underplay the extent of the demographic disaster. Maylam is at pains to demonstrate that the acquisition of historical knowledge is a process of accumulation and evaluation. His point is that not enough is yet known about the *difaqane* for any scholar to reach a definitive conclusion about its nature or ramifications. Even when he deals with the much more fully charted history of the twentieth century, Maylam shows how interpretations shift - the ICU in an earlier account has been portrayed as *failing* in its main objectives. More recent research has illuminated its *successes*. He always manages to convey the impression that the 'revelations' are ongoing.

Maylam's caution extends to his treatment of ethnic tags and classifications. He begins by justifying his selection of 'African' history. By electing to compile a history of the 'African' people of South Africa, Maylam seeks to redress the balance of a historiography usually tipped heavily in favour of 'white' history. The question to ask is: does Maylam succeed in presenting a more balanced and accurate overall picture, or does his approach merely represent a shift of focus?

It does enable him to make several important points, one of which is that Africans had lived in southern Africa centuries before the arrival of whites. All but the most fanatical conservatives probably accept this nowadays as the 'empty land' concept is no longer as central to the mythology of apartheid legitimation as it once was. Probably more significant in this regard is Maylam's refutation of the complacent assumption that, to borrow the words of a recent reader's letter to *The Star*, Africans dwelled

in 'a virgin and barren' land before the advent of the whites.

But, Maylam's emphasis on 'Africans' also detracts from the other historical actors, who were neither 'white' nor 'African', in the sense he intends. Thus, for example, in the pre-historic period, he neglects hunter-gatherer societies.

The strongest case for concentrating on 'Africans' lies in the era of state formation. Shaka's empire certainly did not owe its origins to second-hand stories of European militarism and imperialism brought back by the wandering Dingiswayo. His and other contemporaneous African states were clearly the result of a process of internal dynamics. But, it was not long before these states and elements of African societies which had been displaced by their formation, did come into contact with 'whites' and the decisions and courses of action they pursued were influenced by that contact.

By the time Maylam reaches the twentieth century, one senses that he himself feels unnaturally constrained by his 'African' category. He finds it necessary to contextualise certain African responses by providing quite a lot of detail on the evolution of the South African state. He is also required to separate 'Africans' from the other victims of segregation/apartheid and to gloss over instances of resistance in which there has been general co-operation, or indeed, the reasons for the failure of a sustained cooperative movement. By singling out 'African' history Maylam is not labouring to perpetuate a segregationist view of South African history, but to undermine it. However, this leads to some of the anomalies suggested above.

Maylam has confronted what he himself calls a 'daunting task'. He has consulted almost every significant work on southern African history and has melted them down into a coherent and critical account. As a handbook for enlightened teachers or for students at a tertiary level, it is invaluable. Undoubtedly it does open the field to those who are not directly engaged in academic research. But, because of its sophistication and style it is not a truly 'popular' history. Perhaps it is unrealistic to think that a slim volume (a mere 224 pages) which covers so many centuries of history and which refuses to take shortcuts by being simplistic or polemical, ever could be.

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