

to hear from them whether this book advances the conversation about the complexities of the colonial project or whether it is simply a reflection of some of the attitudes that should be left in the past. The decolonisers would do well in reading this book as it will bolster their cause even more. It be more evidence for the need for white South Africans to account for the land question and the dispossession of African people.

Writing the Ancestral River. A biography of the Kowie

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In telling the story of the Kowie River, Professor Jacklyn Cock concentrates on three different moments in the Kowie River's history through the processes of ecological degradation and racialised dispossession: the battle of Grahamstown (1819); the harbor development (1821-1870s), and the development of the upmarket marina on the Kowie River in Port Alfred (1989). Against the backdrop of hydro political analyses, such matrix makes good sense since it carries a normative scope that includes the historian's passions, intentions and motivations. Cock made her's clear.

Ecological considerations are topical in today's global village as Environmental Sciences world-wide grapple with the issues they investigate. *Writing the Ancestral River* gives excellent examples of History making productive contributions to Environmental Humanities. The contributions here, include the high-up-on-the-agenda themes of racial dispossession of the Eastern Cape's indigenous populations by white settlers. Cock refers to Tim Keegan for whom the annexation of the Province of Queen Adelaide "was simply a 'gigantic land grab'" (p. 95). This resembles populist language in the current land expropriation without compensation debate in South Africa.

The most fundamental point in Cock's book is that the Battle of Grahamstown is seen as of decisive importance in the history of the Kowie River. It was a battle "in the claim of the Xhosa to their land" (p. 53). More profoundly, "[i]t is widely acknowledged by historians that this event was a turning point in South African history" (p. 51). Suffice to generalize that historians are fond of identifying turning points in history. According to Cock, a *new mode of accumulation* (p. 55) emerged: settler capitalism. Not only was William Cock (great-great-grandfather to Jacklyn Cock) credited for developing the Kowie harbor, he was also a *pioneer of settler capitalism* (p. 71). But Cock does not write about William Cock's first five years as a farmer, his failed crops, material loss at the hands of the local populations, or floods before he bought his first vessel in 1826. Neither about the severe losses he endured during the Sixth, Seventh and Eight frontier wars of 1834-1853.

As a side comment, there are a number of much earlier examples of settler capitalists before William Cock arrived in South Africa in 1820. It would also do no harm to take the view of Noël Mostert that the Battle of Grahamstown "was the most significant battle of the nineteenth century in South Africa" (p. 54-55), or Stephen Kay's reference "to the unrighteous conduct of colonists ... towards the *defenceless* natives" (p. 63. Emphasis added) on research review. The same holds true for the use of words such as "pathetic" (p. 42), "foolish pride" (p. 56) and "maximum force" (p. 59) even in their respective contexts, or, the hypothesis that "[t]he dominant concern today is the control and management of rivers, ignoring most of the wild species that depend on them" (p. 30).

Professor Cock is well placed for the task at hand. There is, for instance, her personal "connection" with or "closeness" to the Kowie River. For some readers, this might be too "close to home" but her "personal account of what the river presents" (p. 4) to her, "connects a personal and collective memory, the social and the ecological, the sacred and the profane, in both the honouring and the abuse of nature" (p.4). We also read: "[t]he story of the Kowie River has been more than an intellectual engagement. It is both a memoir and paean to place, a love story disguised as a social and environmental history" (p. 5).

Such personal revelations place a high premium on the historical method, because Cock's intellectual, physical and emotional journeys

want to unravel social political economic and macro-ecological problems (p. 9) through asking “big” questions. Together with these “motivations” (pp. 1-13) is a long list of questions that Cock (pp. 9-10) wants to answer, in which lies a not so obvious but important value of this study – the rich potential to conduct future micro-historical studies of all three “moments”.

South African historiography is a dynamic field of study, full with varying interpretations and classifications: *Writing the Ancestral River* makes an important addition. From a semantic and historiographical perspective, “Kaffir wars”, became “frontier wars”, became “Xhosa wars”, became “Hundred Years War” or in Cock’s words “wars of dispossession” (p. 3) with distinctions between “episodic cattle raids and skirmishers rather than dramatic confrontations between armed protagonists’ [...] harassment, rather than warfare [...] fundamentally a sustained guerrilla struggle” (p. 40). Similarly, Makhandia is credited as “an early freedom fighter” and William Cock “a pioneer of settler capitalism” (pp. 69 and 71) or George McCall Theal and George Cory were referred to as colonial historians (pp. 57 and 58). Similarly, Martin Legassick not mentioned as a revisionist historian or Hermann Giliomee as an Afrikaner historian.

In line with Cock’s objectives of this study, her descriptions of the river itself, are packed with relevant and interesting examples. The important thing about this chapter is that it presents an excellent backdrop against which ecological degradation or ecocide and racialised dispossession and genocide were convincingly connected with colonialism (p. 127). In both instances William Cock was found to be deeply involved, driven by “self-interest” (p. 94).

Professor Cock penned William Cock as “certainly a controversial figure” (p. 77): a honourable member of the colonial legislative council, a man with a powerful presence, with a large house that “dominated the little village” (p. 78). As an entrepreneur he belonged to “a settler elite who promotes the violent dispossession of the land and livelihoods of the indigenous population”, father of the marina, with heroic confrontations with forces of nature (p. 11). William Cock received land, supplied the military establishment (p. 71), was a colonial administrator, owned a collection of boats, and traded with the Cape, St. Helena and Mauritius (p. 77). A man of great enterprise and perseverance, “a pioneer in the development of South Africa’s export business” [...], “few could “match

him in ability and energy or match all he accomplished for the development of the country”, was “self-interested or [...] a war profiteer” yet a man of unshakeable character, with great integrity, a deep-rooted sense of justice, deeply religious and who gave to churches (p. 80).

In 1852 the Cape governor approved plans to improve the harbor and the Kowie Harbour Improvement Company was formed. Cock was a director. When the company was dissolved in 1870, the government took over the control of the harbor’s development until 1886. By all accounts the 1870s were the busiest period of the harbor but by 1886 it failed. “The most *plausible* reason is no doubt the sedimentation of the Kowie” wrote Cock (p. 89. Emphasis added), but the “most *convincing* argument for the failure” was a lack of enormous capital required for maintenance (p. 90).

Cock’s treatment of settler capitalism and environmental justice – or according to her, “the false binary between “nature” and “society” (p. 137), deserves concluding observations. She is correct that the Anthropocene does not capture the pain and immediacy of environmental destruction (p. 142). This is in line with modern thinking about *capitalism as world-ecology*. In other words, we do not live in the geological time of the Holocene, not even the Anthropocene, but in the Capitalocene. Thus: settler capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system: it is a way of organizing nature human and non-human nature alike. This makes settler *capital* (economy) and the environment interdependent. And in this sense *settler capitalism as a world-ecology*, joins also William Cock’s accumulation of capital, his pursuit of power and as co-producer (-destructor) of nature, in dialectical unity.

Writing the Ancestral River is a must-read for those wanting to find out about new learning towards a shared future of humanity in nature and nature in humanity. Hopefully one day, we will be able to break with the binary of apartheid/neocolonialism-interpretation of the South African past and answer “big” questions outside that box. Just maybe the gap between environmentally-inclined social scientists and empirical world environmental historians presents an opportunity to better understand the humanity-in-nature and capitalism-in-human dialectic.