

liographic details of the source. The review should begin with a heading that includes all the bibliographic data. The elements of the heading should be arranged in the order presented in the following example:

*The early mission in South Africa/Die vroeë sending in Suid-Afrika, 1799-1819.* Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2005, 272 pp., map, chronology, bibl., index. ISBN: 1-9198525-42-8. By Karel Schoeman.

Do not indent the first line of the first paragraph, but indent the first line of all successive paragraphs. Use double spacing for the entire review. Add your name and institutional affiliation at the end of the review. Accuracy of content, grammar, spelling, and citations rests with the reviewer, and we encourage you to check these before submission. Reviews may be transmitted electronically as a Word file attachment to an email to the review editor. If you have additional questions, please contact the Book Review Editors.

*Portraits of Colonial Natal*

**(Reach Publishers, Westville, 2017, 278pp.  
ISBN: 9780620755153)**

**Duncan Du Bois**

Athambile Masola

*University of Pretoria*

Athambile.masola@up.ac.za

*Portraits of Colonial Natal* is a troubling book. The author states his position in the introduction that this book is a response to the decolonial project because he believes that “colonisation was good in parts, but the decolonisers shy away from conceding that. In any event, history without context degenerates into propaganda” (p. 13). The book reads as an apologetics on behalf of colonialism. This is a dangerous, if not a brazenly white supremacist position to take given the conversations happening in South Africa. Furthermore, it begs the question, who is Du Bois’s audience?

The rest of the book is a collection of “portraits” of the colonial Natal written as overviews of the various key moments and development. It is curious to track the references to Indians and Africans in the narrative Du Bois paints. While black people appear as flat characters – they are simply tribesmen who

“performed a vibrant war dance on the beach” (p. 107) when welcoming the Norwegian settlers – in the seemingly simplistic narrative of conquest, Indians cause “intolerance towards the ‘intrusion’ of Indian settlers. Disdain towards Indians as settlers was a reality since the early 1880s across colonial Natal. Just weeks after Natal entered the Union dispensation in 1910, a petition was launched in Umkomaas against the issuing of further trading licences to Indians...Unfortunately such sentiments prevailed far into the union and beyond” (p. 91). This extract illustrates Du Bois’s tone-deafness when writing about racism in colonial Natal. This tone-deafness continues throughout the book which is further illustrated in the manner with which Du Bois employs the word “kaffir” in the chapter “A sketch of Alfred County and Port Shepstone”.

Du Bois has set himself the impossible task of writing these portraits as though they can be neutral or even provide some enlightenment about the positive aspects of colonialism. While other historians have tried to do the same in the past – a tradition Du Bois sees himself as a part of – there has been enough documentation about colonialism that does not shy away from the complexities of conquest. Historical narratives such as Du Bois’ would have us duped into thinking that South Africans should be grateful the settlers came. The challenge with settler mentality like Du Bois is that it lacks an imagination. Implied in his book is an alignment with Helen Zille’s ideas about the development that came along with colonialism (the roads, bridges, transport etc). This belief that these were the good fruits of colonialism misses the point that Africa could have had a different and more prosperous future without the so-called development that came with white supremacist violence. Colonialism hijacked the future from Africans because it was premised on an encounter that believed that the people and places they discovered were backward and primitive.

Chapter 10, *Settler Security, Insecurity and Solidarity* is worth quoting at length:

Although settlers enjoyed political and military control, there were factors that rendered them vulnerable. These included their proximity to the reserves set aside by Shepstone exclusively for African residence and the fear of unrest or even attack emanating from those reserves. As a safeguard, settler volunteer groups or rifle associations were established across the colony. A spirit of community and settler solidarity was the corollary of those associations (p. 188).

The chapter continues to explain the need for the indentured labourers because the cheap labour from the Africans was unpopular. The chapter also

outlines the strategies by the settler administration to address their insecurities and vulnerabilities which ensured more repression of the African community. The chapter includes the resistance and the battles waged by the Africans such as Isandlwana and Bhambhatha. Du Bois paints the schemes of the colonial administration as though their actions were justified. The growth of the rifle associations highlights the role of ordinary people who were involved in upholding the security of white settlers. While the big men of history are given prominence in the narrative, Du Bois attempts to highlight the role of civic organisations which entrenched colonialism. This is an important contribution but Du Bois does not take it to its logical conclusion of elaborating on the role played by ordinary settlers in relation to the usual grand narratives featuring a few prominent names.

While Du Bois tries to discuss the politics of discrimination and white supremacy in colonial Natal in the chapter “The Coolie Curse” — which analyses “The Indian question” — it rings hollow as someone who would have readers believe that Shepstone was simply a man of his time. One such glaring example the extent to which the names of the settler administrators appear throughout the text. With exception of a handful of names of the Indian and African population, no other names appear. The book would have us believe that barring a few prominent characters, the Africans were passive recipients of colonialism. Names are important when writing about history as they tell us who matters in this saga. Except for one chapter, women are also erased from this narrative. They form part of the usual “women and children discourse” which is a patriarchal outlook on the presence of women in the colonial project.

Du Bois sets himself the challenging task of writing history to respond to the decolonisers’ clarion call. His collection begs the old question: what is the purpose of history in understanding the present and the future? Furthermore, historical narratives are constantly being contested and Du Bois book of simply collecting his writings without an acknowledgement of the feminist perspective leaves the book wanting. The saving grace of this text is that it maps out the extent of the repression in colonial Natal. While there is a level of amnesia about the extent of colonialism, this text is helpful in understanding that English colonialism was the kind of foundation needed in order for apartheid to become the next logical step in 1948. Historians who are experts in this area will do well in reading the book and responding to the contribution it makes to the scholarship of settler colonialism. It would be interesting

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*

(Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2018, 193 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-77614-187-6)

**Jacklyn Cock**

Christo Engelbrecht

*Microhistory Network*

christoengelbrecht01@gmail.com

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.