

# URBAN, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL HISTORY

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The do's and don'ts of regional history have been set out forthrightly in the first issue of *Contree*. As a research field, regional history is regarded as being concerned with regional character, with every facet of local life.<sup>1</sup> "Regional history studies the past from the local angle, is interested in the smaller community and the activities of ordinary people in their own environment."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, "its approach is individual in that it reverses the traditional historical practice of reconstructing the past from 'above', with the actions of central authority, government and national figures as the focal point."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this note is not to quibble with this humane approach, but to warn on preserving a sense of perspective.

## A PARTIAL APPROACH

Within the broad interest field referred to above, Christopher<sup>3</sup> (explicitly) and Ferreira,<sup>4</sup> Ferreira,<sup>5</sup> Immelman<sup>6</sup> and Marais<sup>7</sup> (implicitly) reveal the considerable interest attaching to accounts of things past. However, if regional history is to be more than a catalogue of intriguing descriptions, it will need to search for *explanations* of local events and phenomena. If regional history is to account for the evolution of the man-made landscape, artefact of human settlement, then it will be inextricably linked to attempts at explaining the reasons for settlement in the first instance.

## EXPLAINING SETTLEMENT ORIGINS

One of the more certain aspects of population or settlement geography is that man is not a self-propelled organism who settles and resettles entirely of his own

volition. In consequence, the imprint of man on the landscape must be seen in terms of broad social processes which have operated to dictate or, at least, constrain his location. Regions are manifestly 'open' places which are constantly being buffeted by large-scale social processes. Indeed, regions cannot be studied exclusively from 'below' without risking fascinating stories at the expense of solid explanation. Regional historians must be wary of laying themselves open to the criticism that they are engaged in drawing lines which do not matter around areas which do not and never did exist!

This is not the place to review the several explanatory schemes currently under consideration as approaches best explaining settlement patterns. It is fitting though to draw attention to the debate<sup>8</sup> and to consider briefly an explanatory framework which has yet to leave its mark on local researchers (see Wright<sup>9</sup> for a summary and review of foreign contributions in this framework), but which could give guidance to regional historical research.

The framework reflects an interest in the rôle played by the mode of production as an agent of national and regional development and underdevelopment. All too briefly summarised, regional events are explained on the basis of the region's 'labour history'. The crux of the argument is the symbiotic relation between capitalist development in core regions and the transformation of social, economic and political structures within peripheral regions; this transformation allows for socialisation of the production process and exploitation of labour, the driving force of capitalism.

In the present context it is to be noted, above all, that in its strongly conceptual approach there is room made for the 'openness' of regions. As Wright<sup>10</sup> has argued, "historians must be extremely careful and self-conscious about how they operate" with conceptual schema, but an approach which is anything but parochial should be allowed to assume its rightful place on the various levels of resolution on which South African local history can be explored — urban, regional *and* national.

□

## POTCHEFSTROOM

TABEL II: 1850 TOT 1860

	'50	'51	'52	'53	'54	'55	'56	'57	'58	'59	'60	Totaal
Potscherfstroom	2	3	6	13	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	28
Potscherf	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2
Potschefstroom	51	25	25	89	2	12	—	4	1	1	14	224
Potchefstroom	2	4	4	74	8	39	7	13	14	19	58	242

Aangesien die samestelling van *Potchefstroom* so 'n ongewone verskynsel in dorpsbenaming is, en die idee nie weer in die naam van 'n ander Suid-Afrikaanse dorp herhaal is nie, kan die Boere se benadering en spelwyse begryp word. Hulle moes letterlik aan 'n nuwe begrip gewoond gemaak word. Die vader van die naam is dus blykbaar nie 'n Boer, 'n Fransman of 'n Hollander nie, maar stellig 'n Duitser. Dit sou verklaar kon word as vasgestel kon word dat Bodenstien ten tyde van die naamgewing by Potgieter se laer aan die Mooirivier was. Dit lyk onwaarskynlik dat P. Dietrichsen of C.J. Rabe daardie funksie vervul het, aangesien die Volksraadsnotule van Junie 1842 dui op Johannes Bodenstien. □

1. C.G. HENNING, Some notes on regional history research, *Contree* 1, 1977, pp.21—23.
2. C.M. BAKKES, Editorial, *Contree* 1, 1977, p.3.
3. A.J. CHRISTOPHER, Historical geography and local history, *Contree* 1, 1977, pp.11—15.
4. O.J.O. FERREIRA, Schoemansdal: van Voortrekkervoorpos tot volksfeesterrein, *Contree* 1, 1977, pp.5—10.
5. P. FERREIRA, Doddington Court, Durban, *Contree* 1, 1977, p.28.
6. E. IMMELMAN, Die St. John- Anglikaanse Kerk, Victoria-Wes, *Contree* 1, 1977, pp.29—30.
7. J.J. MARAIS, Carnarvon: oorsig van die geskiedenis van die dorp en distrik, *Contree* 1, 1977, pp.16—20.
8. L. GUELKE, On rethinking historical geography, *Area* 8, 1975, pp.135—138; D. GREGORY, Rethinking historical geography, *Area* 8, 1976, pp.295—299; R.J. JOHNSTON, Population distributions and the essentials of human geography, *South African geographical journal* 58, 1976, pp.93—106.
9. H.M. WRIGHT, *The burden of the present: liberal-radical controversy over Southern African history*. (Cape Town, 1977).
10. *Ibid.*, p.95.