

In sy geheel gesien is die werk van Fransjohan Pretorius en sy medewerkers 'n belangrike toevoeging tot die oorsigwerke wat daar oor die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis bestaan. As versamelwerk met hoofstukke deur verskillende skrywers vorm dit nie so 'n goed samehangende eenheid soos die resente oorsigte van Davenport en Saunders, Thompson en Ross nie. Dit is egter, met uitsondering van *The Cambridge History of South Africa* (wat ook 'n versamelwerk is), die omvattendste sintesewerk wat sedert 2000 verskyn het en beslis die omvattendste werk in Afrikaans sedert die laaste uitgawe van Muller se *500 jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis* in 1980. Dit is ook die eerste sintesewerk om 'n oorsig van die geskiedenis tot 2011 te bied. Van die meeste oorsigwerke het daar verskeie hersiene uitgawes verskyn. As die boek gereeld deeglik hersien word en daarby gepoog word om van die ernstigste leemtes uit te skakel, kan dit nog vir baie jare 'n standaardwerk oor die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis wees.

*Written culture in a colonial context: Africa and the Americas, 1500-1900*

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Attitudes to written culture can be contentious, and this book tackles the issues head-on from the foreword through to the detailed analyses by the contributors. The juxtaposition of Africa and the Americas informs the commonalities and highlights the differences very effectively. Tracing the expansion of the written word chronologically, this book addresses many different aspects and the multifaceted nature of the content makes it interesting and informative.

The importance of representation through means other than text was disregarded by the colonisers, to the detriment of many of the existing cultures. The understanding that such representation was significant serves as

the starting point of the book. The first section is insightful and informative and focuses on the issue of the nature of “literacy” and serves to remind the reader that literacy is contextual. Also, the changes in graphic representation by indigenous people in response to the exposure to other methods of creating images is addressed in an insightful manner and serves to describe the cultural changes that occurred as a consequence.

The fact that paper could convey messages from far-off lands reinforces the magical nature of written text. It served to maintain contact between people who were spread out all over the world. The recognition of the power of knowledge permeates the text. That the written word could also be used to control people is significant. This is addressed in various ways throughout the book. An instance of this is the recognition of the importance of record keeping by the VOC. The ships’ captains and fleet managers were expected to keep intricate and detailed records of voyages and navigation charts. These had to be submitted to the VOC authorities and were not allowed to be shared with anyone outside the VOC as they deemed such knowledge to be of extreme importance in terms of their competitive advantage. This throws an interesting light on the philosophy and ethos of the VOC.

In general, the keeping of travel records and the manner in which such records served to contribute to globalisation is a theme that, while not unexpected in the light of the purpose of colonisation, is dealt with in an interesting and insightful way. The status of records kept by travellers has advanced and is now recognised as a literary form. The power of the written word is further spotlighted by the relationship between literacy, colonialism and missionary work. The differences in the use of text by the Catholic and Protestant missionaries as well as the impact of these differences are examined. This serves to reinforce the cultural variations that are found in religious practices that have been adopted in Africa and the Americas. The manner in which text was used for the acculturation of indigenous people is an important theme.

The importance of storing information is addressed as it serves to reinforce and preserve either an existing culture or the “new” culture that is either imposed upon or adopted by indigenous people, and to serve as a record of the changes introduced by the colonists. The in-depth knowledge of each contributor is apparent and one can get caught up in any particular chapter. At times one has to refer back to previous chapters to keep the thread, as the many and varied topics can be confusing.

Nonetheless, this is a book that one can dip into at almost any point and find something interesting or thought-provoking. The fact that the fifteen chapters are grouped thematically does assist the reader in keeping the ideas together and I would suggest that rather than reading the book from cover to cover, each section should be read and digested before proceeding. There are some instances where the reason for the grouping is not entirely clear as some of the chapters could fit equally well into a different group. This being said, it does guide the reader through the text in the way that the editors intended and creates coherence.

The final essay on Ulysses in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies requires a much greater knowledge of Greek mythology than the average reader may have. The linking of the adventures of the Greek heroes to the philosophy and approach of the Spanish colonists is tenuous although it is a very interesting take on the differences in the cultural traditions of the Portuguese and the Spanish. However, it is not obvious that it makes any major contribution to the subject overall. Perhaps this can be ascribed to the lack of classical education in general in Southern Africa, which, while not the fault of the contributor does make one question the relevance for the average reader.

The reader can identify with aspects of the history of both continents but, as a South African, the chapters on South Africa are the easiest to relate to. The ease of reading these chapters contrasts with the challenge of reading others where the subject matter may be less familiar. Nonetheless, it is a challenge that is worthwhile as it is both rewarding and enriching.

As the subject matter of the book reaches far beyond the boundaries of writing and colonial history, I would not hesitate to recommend it to anyone interested in communication and culture in general.