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BOOK REVIEWS

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History Making and Present Day Politics

Edited by Hans Erik Stolten

Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2007. 376 pp.

ISBN 978-91-7106-581-0.

This book derives from a Nordic Africa Institute conference and draws together some 18 top historians, either South Africans or scholars with a very long engagement in South African historiography, heritage, related social issues such as land restitution, urban space, and a range of other topics. The authors include Saul Dubow, Colin Bundy, Elaine Unterhalter, Martin Legassick, Thiven Reddy, Christopher Saunders, Gary Baines, Albert Grundlingh, Martin Murray, Merle Lipton and Allison Drew.

It is a paradox that many history departments in South Africa confront falling student numbers and that some, at the time of writing, have had to reconfigure themselves or face a real threat to their continued existence. At the same time, there has been a massive growth in public history and heritage studies, although much of the heritage activity is occurring outside the realm of academia. It is found in both newly-created and old historical sites, and there are many other efforts to affirm various heritages under construction, especially those of the majority who suffered under apartheid. There is hardly a month that goes by without a call for tendering to construct some or other site to commemorate a particular historical event, community trauma or victory.

Mpumalanga Province commissioned Peter Delius to provide a team to develop a study of the province's heritage. This study will soon be launched in book form. A national heritage council has also been set up and a range of other bodies (including a commission supporting democracy) have been created in terms of the constitution. These bodies are concerned with religious, linguistic and cultural rights and are clearly very preoccupied with heritage.

History Making and Present Day Politics revisits old debates around South African history and the role of particular actors in this history. Essays consider discourses that have an impact on understanding contemporary South Africa in the light of its past, including questioning the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on gender. With regard to heritage, much of the discussion relates to how public history is informed by power relations and what it means in terms of constructing a new nation. Others relate to relocating our understanding of previously hegemonic heritages which have now become repugnant in the context of a democratic and non-racial order.

Essentially, the book consists of a series of forays into important topics. There is not a great deal that is very new, which was probably not the objective of the conference.

Instead, the aim seems to have been to take stock of where history and heritage stand at the moment and what choices confront scholars. Many authors return to old questions from a new vantage point – that of a South Africa that has changed and where the uses of history and heritage are quite different from what they were before 1994. Despite the crisis of history in universities, the public arena perhaps offers the discipline a better place to influence various issues than in the past. The book should certainly be consulted as part of any history or heritage course.

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