

N. Bhebe, Ed. Junior Certificate History of Southern Africa.

Book I. Southern African Societies before the Scramble.

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144 Pp. P5.50*

In laudable fashion, this first of the three volumes pioneers the localisation of the Junior Secondary history curriculum in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. The Junior Certificate Series is the result of cooperation among scholars, teachers and the examination boards in the Boleswa countries and represent a wholesome response to the growing desire among these countries to stimulate pupils' interest in their own history. This Series is being constructed on the sound premise that youngsters are likely to understand the world better if they first know well their national and regional environment. Book I focuses on the peoples of Southern Africa to the late nineteenth century. Book 2, edited by L.D. Ngcongco and already in print, continues the story through the Scramble, colonial rule and the nationalist period. Book 3, being edited by P.M. Pule, will connect the Southern African experience to major currents of world history.

Upon first reading, scholars and teachers will realise that the Boleswa Junior Certificate Series is considerably more than a local or regional response to curriculum imbalance. For one it represents the cutting edge of curriculum changes that originated in African countries to the North and, ever since, have been moving steadily South. Within Africa, where white control has been more tenacious than in other parts of the continent, putting black Africans centre stage in the history classrooms on the borders of the Republic of South Africa represents the last but one advance. Together with students and teachers north of the Limpopo, Boleswa secondary students will now benefit, for the first time, by reading about Africans instead of natives, civilisations and states instead of primitive societies, and persons worthy of admiration and emulation who are not white to a man. And just as importantly, students will discover that they have not only their own history of which to be proud, but their own historians as well. Apart from Neil Parsons, whose valuable contribution to Southern African history is widely acknowledged, Book I is the work of African scholars, teaching either at the University of Botswana and Swaziland or at secondary schools in Boleswa.

Another achievement of this small volume is the extensive African experience contained within. In little more than 140 pages, thirteen short chapters manage to convey considerable historical depth and breath. Parsons' chapters on the Iron Age and pre-nineteenth century political economies summarise major developments in Southern Africa over two millenia and provide an excellent backdrop for the more localised and ethnic subject matter that constitutes the design of the volume: Mphakalasi writes on the San and Khoikhoi; Ngcongco on the Tswana, Xhosa and Griqua; Pule on the Sotho and Zulu; Bhebe on the Swazi and Shangane and, with Moyo, on the Ndebele. These chapters are supplemented by Bhila's on the Portuguese and Manyane's on the Dutch and British. The historical quality of individual chapters ranges from excellent to mediocre; taken as a whole they are very good indeed. As a collection, moreover, they are unique. Usually, books for the junior level are scaled-down versions of senior secondary or university texts, but Book I is as original in content as it is in design. The present generation of lay readers will likely turn to this volume until something comparable at their level is on the market.

Chances are, in fact, that the adult reader is going to enjoy this book much more than the 12 and 13-year olds for whom it is intended. It has been some time since I taught history at secondary schools in Nigeria and the United States, but from my experience and the comments of teachers already using this text, I expect that junior secondary Boleswa scholars who use this book are in for a tough time. The fact is that too few chapters have been written with the young reader in mind. The few that have - and Pule's pieces on the Sotho and Zulu deserve special commendation - have been written not coincidentally by history masters themselves. They relate a modest amount of factual detail with a clearly stated account that has a beginning, middle and end. The professional historians writing in this volume, on the other hand, serve up too much fact with too little thematic development. In moving through Ngcongco's 12-page chapter on the Tswana, for example, the young reader has eight separate Tswana dynastic histories and in excess of two hundred different personal, ethnic and place names with which to grapple. Expecting Tswana, much less Swazi or Sotho, students just out of primary school to keep track of so much detail - or even worse, memorise it - is fair to neither student nor teacher. Young students, who more readily conceptualise history as story, are simply going to get discouraged. And when reading, as in Parsons' chapter, that "many people with one language or religion thought of themselves as one big family which we call a nation, and were willing to be governed by a ruling class in a big state"

(p. 34), they are simply going to get confused. If the Series is to achieve its objective of motivating youngsters to study their own past, then future editions of Book I will have to undergo revision.

Other changes, too, should be considered. The design of chapters along ethnic lines neatly links Book I with the JC syllabus, but the absence of regional and thematic chapters for the period since 1800 leaves large gaps and dislocates the chronology of Southern African history. There are dangers, too, in stressing historical ethnicity in a region still troubled by apartheid and separate development. Although the authors cannot change the JC syllabus, a compromise should be possible. Certainly a chapter on the Mfecane is a must if students are to grasp fully the extent of the impact of Shaka's revolution. Such a chapter could absorb much of the material on the Zulu, Shangane, Ndebele and Griqua and free valuable space to discuss, for example, Afrikaaner-African relations in the Western and Eastern Transvaal. For necessary reasons, chapters on the Swazi and Sotho must remain, but the chapter on the Tswana should include fuller reference to the non-Tswana in present-day Botswana. And, though the editor is to be praised for want to show "African societies developing in the absence of whites", the Afrikaaners and the "Great Trek" deserve more space, and earlier on, than accorded in the present edition. Hopefully, the San and Khoikhoi will be given a bit more history, too, and portrayed as participants in the history of Southern Africa. The structure of chapters needs to be made uniform, and greater attention paid to including in the maps all place names and peoples mentioned in the text.

Weaknesses aside, Book I remains an exceedingly good value for the money. It is also handsomely turned out: well illustrated, clearly printed, and, for a paperback, sturdily bound.

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