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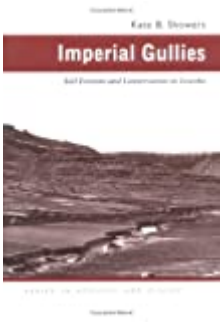

Kate B. Showers. *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. xxix + 346 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1614-3; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1613-6.

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Who Scarred Lesotho?

Imperial Gullies aims to reconstruct the history of soil erosion in what is commonly described as one of the most damaged landscapes in the world. Kate Showers sets out this ambition with evocative language:

"Landscapes are libraries whose information is ignored by most academics â¦ The story of soil erosion and soil conservation in Lesotho is a tale of environmental change and environmental destruction, of a conversation among cultures that never happened, of the persistence of ideas about landscape problems and their technological solutions in the face of obvious failure and, finally, of a misunderstood resistance" (p. 1).

Showers' first objective is to understand what made the soils of Lesotho so vulnerable both to widespread sheet erosion and, more dramatically, the deep gullies known locally as *dongas*. *Dongas* were described from even before the colonial period but Showers wants to know when, exactly, they became so characteristic of the Lesotho countryside and so pervasively destructive to agriculture. She also asks which human activities contributed most to creating these terrible scars and who is primarily responsible for the mess.

The title surely gives Showers' principal conclusion away: the British. Her main arguments are that (1) the Basotho managed the environment well when they were few in number and produced for subsistence and ritual purposes in the lowland valleys; (2) the borders of Lesotho were artificially created to confine a growing population to mostly mountainous territory with very fragile soils and flora; (3) the Basotho responded avidly to market incentives in the 1870s by increasing the production of grain, importing livestock, ploughing under virgin soils, and exporting produce in heavy wagons down steep slopes on bad roads and paths; (4) these "modern" activities rather than supposedly primitive or ignorant farming practices gave rise to early erosion problems; (5) missionaries and government officials panicked and overgeneralized about erosion leading to a misguided attempt to apply a technological fix which, (6) only made matters worse. Indeed, the hasty and ill-researched yet massive soil conservation program starting in the late 1930s had the effect of concentrating otherwise dispersed flows of water behind ill-constructed and ill-maintained contour ridges. When the ridges breached, or simply overflowed around their ends, they caused virtual wa-

terfalls that cut like knives into farmers' fields. Basotho responded by neglecting or deliberately destroying the contours as a form of resistance that may have made things even worse still.

A key element in this history is the lack of respect by government and the scientists in its employ for the farmers whose fields and livelihoods were most at risk. The Basotho were generally blamed for bad farming practices, not consulted for their perspectives on the problems, and coerced into something that they suspected both did not work and served other peoples' interests. The worst of it is that evidently harmful technocratic "solutions" continued to be imposed on the Basotho by undemocratic regimes and self-interested donors long after they had gained independence.

This is a powerful and timely cautionary tale against scientific and political hubris that, in Showers' analysis, go closely hand in hand. Scientists might learn from such histories how ideological they can be in certain situations. This might help move us from dogmatic faith in technology to a more modest, realistic, and hence more honestly scientific approach to highly complex (social, cultural, political and so on) development problems such as soil erosion or global climate change.

Showers makes another important contribution to environmental history by bridging some of the disciplinary divides that commonly weaken analysis. She first walks us through the science of soil composition and erosion, and then carefully reviews the history of climate in order to differentiate specific periods and places of soil stress. She draws on anthropological studies and historical documents to reconstruct attitudes of different players in the drama, primarily small-scale Basotho peasant farmers and colonial officials. She also, together with her co-author in a key chapter (Gwendolyn Malahleha) presents findings from oral interviews of Basotho men and women in a specific village with memories of specific fields, contours, and *dongas*. Their recollections of the 1930s to the 1950s provide an especially rich component in the emerging picture.

Unfortunately, there are problems with the book that undermine its power to convince sceptics. This is such an important new field in African history (as well as a continuing critical gap in Lesotho's historiography and development literature) that these weaknesses need to be spelled out and hopefully addressed in future research. For example, Showers is primarily dependent upon published, official sources in English. This introduces a bias from the beginning that the oral interviews in Sesotho do not offset. On the contrary, the interviews actually highlight two pieces of the puzzle that Showers' documentary sources overlook. The Roman Catholic mission began soil conservation work more than a decade before government got involved and wrote extensively (mostly in French, often sharply critical of government). The principal chiefs, whose views were recorded in the Basutoland National Council and many other unpublished documents, also held strong views, often implicating each other. Failure to consult these sources unduly concentrates attention and blame on just one of the many actors in the story.

Erosion control was also never just about building contour ridges. Donkeys, for example, on account of their destructive grazing habits were the focus of a major, punitive campaign by the government in the 1920s and 30s. The chiefs at least rhetorically aligned themselves with Basotho women (who used donkeys the most) against the government on this issue. And what about population control? A key variable between the pre-*donga* past and the *donga*-plagued present is that the number of humans crammed into Lesotho has increased probably twentyfold.

Of course it is tempting to want to blame the British, who were without question often paternalistic and duplicitous in their governance of colonial Lesotho. We need, however, to be fair in our criticism and to consider the context in which they were operating. Aside from the juggernaut of population growth and seemingly relentless environmental collapse, the Basutoland administration was under intense pressure from South Africa and from the Basotho themselves. A series of very high profile "medicine murders" in the 1940s threatened to bring the whole chieftaincy down in disgrace. From the early 1950s, there were also Basotho politicians who explicitly described those who cooperated with the British and chiefs on erosion control as "stooges" and pro-apartheid traitors.

There is no need to exonerate the British entirely, but knowing the fuller political context we can at least appreciate why they turned to wishful thinking about technology.

Finally, there is the question of contradictory evidence. This is most apparent between the chapter on oral history and the conclusion ("the Basotho are *not* responsible for the massive erosion gullies that scar their landscape â¦ The Basotho were victims of an untested experimental technology," pp. 256-257). Yet the Basotho informants do not present themselves as victims. Rather, they

tend to blame themselves and to express regret at not following the scientific advice they were given by men they often admired ("I wish we really went on doing them, but we were lazy," "people are like animals, they need a foreman," "They [we] were blind, and did not know anything about soil erosion," and so on; see pp. 215-229 especially). The informants are also highly inconsistent in identifying the contour ridges as erosion-forming. Most blame changing weather for the erosion (more frequent droughts, more violent downpours). Some describe great benefits from contour ridges. Even the harshest critics are inconsistent at times to the point of unintelligibility (see especially pp. 221-222).

This self-contradiction, and occasional leading questions by the interviewers, make us suspect that something else was going on in the interviews than the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Showers alludes to that when she refers to the recent (indeed, at the time still ongoing) history of political violence in the country. It might be that she has underestimated the effects of that violence on the interview process. Given that development projects were particularly politicized, readers will have to be very prudent in trusting this source.

None of this is to say that Showers is wrong. On the contrary, she makes a convincing case that science and technology were offered as a panacea when the real work that needed to be done was to address the underlying causes of Lesotho's poverty: its borders, notably. Oblivious to those underlying causes, the technology was bound to fail. This is an insight that resonates strongly today as faith in scientific and technological breakthroughs is brought uncritically to bear on essentially political problems (like failure to address comprehensively the factors driving global climate change).

Lesotho's soil history thus stands as an object lesson of how clever ideas may fail if the science behind them is blind to the underlying human factor. Showers is to be congratulated for mustering such a rich empirical study of that blindness in action.

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