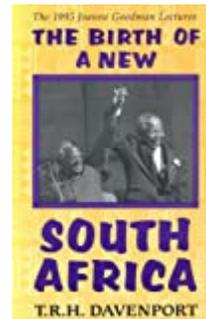


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**T. R. H. Davenport.** *The Birth of a New South Africa.* Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1998. xx + 142 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-8054-7.



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Since their inception in 1976 the Joanne Goodman [Memorial] Lectures have been given at the University of Western Ontario by eminent scholars on subjects linked to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. Exceptions to the geographical limits have involved equally eminent scholars looking at particularly relevant issues. On both these counts it was appropriate for an invitation to go to Professor Rodney Davenport to give him an opportunity to speak on post-apartheid South Africa.

In introducing the published version of the lectures, Professor Davenport points to the difficulties faced by a historian dealing with events which have not, “been allowed to settle down over time”. He overcomes any such difficulties very well and in the first chapter gives us an overview of events leading up to Nelson Mandela’s release from prison and ultimately his inauguration as President of South Africa. This is no mere chronology but gives insight into some of the personalities involved.

The Second lecture/chapter takes us through the delicate peacemaking process during which so many different interest groups tried to ensure that they secured the best deal they could for themselves. The Inkatha Freedom Party appears particularly reluctant to move forward at any speed. Davenport has chosen an excellent cartoon taken from the Mail and Guardian of 26 September 1995

to make the point. The cartoon (between pages 46 and 47) shows the three leaders of the IFP dipping their toes into the water of the Constitutional Assembly swimming bath. The bath attendant comments: “Funny Bunch\_ The always test the water, but they never actually get in.” So complex were the conflicts that Davenport devoted a further, more detailed lecture to analysing the peacemaking process.

In doing this he helps us understand the separate but essential processes, procedures and structures that had to be created and made to work together in order to bring about a reasonably orderly transition. The interaction of COSATU, those pressing for a separate Afrikaner state, and myriad other demands are explained, despite their great complexity with clarity and insight.

To his three lectures Davenport has added a further chapter examining events after 1995. He points to the many problems facing the new government and society in building a new framework for the many different people that make up South Africa to put the past behind them and move forward. This is clearly not a simple task. Truth and reconciliation are ideals; their achievement in reality is extremely difficult.

Throughout the four chapters of this book it is clear that Davenport (like so many of us) has been impressed

by the changes that have taken place without worse violence and disruption than has occurred. Given the bitter history and great diversity of people within South Africa much has been achieved, though much remains to be done. The future is not easy and some measure of disappointment is inevitable.

Although the published version of lectures must lack the vitality of the presentation, one advantage to their appearing in written form is that it has been possible for Davenport to add further comments, in text and footnotes. He has also indicated the sources he used in preparing the lectures, thereby making this a more useful introductory tool than it would otherwise have been for anyone wanting to get to grips with this complex process of reform and development. Perhaps most impor-

tantly, despite the reservations indicated in his preface, he has certainly made good use of a historical perspective in seeking to explain the present. At the same time, it is inevitable that as more time elapses it will become possible to see the events discussed here in better perspective.

Just as my students are all expected to make good use of Davenport's monumental history of South Africa, so too will I be urging them to use this book as a starting point - but only that - in their efforts to gain an understanding of that country since the demise of apartheid.

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