

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Scott Rosenberg Frisbie-Fulton, Richard Weisfelder, Michelle. *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004. xliii + 452 pp. \$88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-4871-9.

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The second edition of *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho* is bigger and better than the first, although it does not entirely replace Gordon Haliburton's encyclopedic 1977 book.[1] Rather, because the second edition has significantly reduced the total number of entries, the first edition remains helpful for tracking down many of the lesser-known to middling figures in the history of Lesotho. I should add that both books are very useful for understanding important aspects of South African and regional history. Despite its small size and burden of poverty, Lesotho and the Basotho people have played a major role in the cultural, political, and industrial development of the region.

Where the present edition excels is by offering expanded entries on key figures (Moshoeshoe, Mofolo, Casalis, the Fraser family, etc.), institutions (like the Roman Catholic church, and the chieftaincy), aspects of society and social change (women, clothing, and law), and broad historical events (migrant labor, colonial and constitutional reforms, *liretlo* murders, South African interventions, etc.). Entries include both the tumultuous events of the past three decades and the rich new scholarship on Lesotho that has emerged since the first edition. All but the shortest entries give the reader a sense of the historiographic debate.

The authors deserve special credit for their scrupulous fairness in describing and assessing the many competing, and often polemical, interpretations of Basotho history available. To give but one example, they acknowledge that the 1998 African Growth and Opportunity Act of the United States has created sixty thousand new, desperately needed jobs in the textile industry. But they also detail the low wages, toxic wastes, low tax rev-

enues, and human rights violations by the companies.

Another sign of fairness is in the introduction. After offering a succinct overview of the history and the many problems that have afflicted Lesotho up to today, the authors concede a tendency towards negative and fatalistic images in the scholarly literature about the country. They make the important point that things are indeed bad, but not as bad as often portrayed, and are perhaps even looking up in some ways. A new and improved relationship with a democratic South Africa, and a new constitution that promises respite from the debilitating sectarian strife from the 1950s to 1990s, are unquestionably positive.

One criticism I have is with the bibliography. Several important works are missing, for example, doctoral dissertations by Judith Gay and Maria Ntabeni, Chris Dutton's analysis of *Blanket-Boy's Moon*, Judy Kimble's published version of her Ph.D., novels by Robert Keable and Mpapa Mokhoane, C. J. Driver's biography of Patrick Duncan, and so on. But more irksome is the way that the bibliography is divided up into seemingly arbitrary sections that not only make it cumbersome to find specific works but also potentially ghettoizes many. All of my work, for example, is listed under "Women" when it could just as easily be listed under "colonial," "politics," or "development." Elizabeth Eldredge's book covers up to 1910, yet it is listed under "precolonial." Keith Breckenridge's article on Xhosa gangs in early-mid-twentieth-century South Africa appears under "postindependence." James Ferguson's *Anti-Politics Machine* is found under "politics" rather than "development."

Another arbitrary decision is that the wealth of fasci-

nating documentary film has been entirely excluded for no given reason.

That said, this remains an extremely handy book for teachers and researchers of southern African history. The many agencies that do development work in Lesotho should also possess it. Written in straightforward, non-jargonistic prose, it offers an insightful, de-

tailed overview of the main characters and issues that have shaped—and often frustrated—Lesotho’s development to date.

Note

[1]. Gordon Haliburton, *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1977).

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