

DISCUSSION: THE NATURE OF POWER

EDITORIAL NOTE

A review article by Dr. Lance van Sittert, ‘The nature of power: Cape environmental history, the history of ideas and neoliberal historiography’, was published in this *Journal* (45 [2004], 305–13). The Editors have received a comment from Professor William Beinart and a reply from Dr. van Sittert. We take this opportunity to remind readers that the *Journal* does not normally consider comments on ordinary reviews for publication. In this case, however, the comment is on a review article. As such it falls within the procedure for publishing responses to articles appearing in the *Journal*, which was set out in the editorial in *Journal of African History*, 17 (1976), i.

ACADEMIC AMNESIA AND THE POVERTY OF POLEMICS

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VAN Sittert's review article, which included coverage of my *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment, 1770–1950* (Oxford, 2003), contained so many inaccuracies and misrepresentations that it is difficult to let it pass. These undermine many of the points he purports to make, on both small and substantive issues. The *Journal of African History* is one of our few journals of record and I would like to set the record straight. I have only limited space for this rejoinder, and it will be impossible to take up all relevant questions.

The Rise of Conservation focuses primarily on debates about environmental degradation and regulation, and about conservationist ideas and measures in South Africa over a long period. It deals largely with the commercial livestock economy of the Cape, before and after Union (1910), and addresses the ideas and actions of Cape and South African officials, some trained as scientists, as well as self-consciously progressive settler landowners. It also argues that the commercial livestock economy, especially wool production, has been underestimated when viewed over the long term and that this lends greater significance to the issues in question.

Amongst other criticisms, van Sittert dismisses the book as a metropolitan view of insignificant, isolated, dead, white men, often short-term officials, with little understanding of the society or environment in which they operated and with little social impact.

A good place for historians to start is sources. Van Sittert purports to see a major difference between ‘metropolitan historians’ and others who are not clearly specified. He alleges that the former view ‘the Cape past largely through the holdings in the PRO and Rhodes House’ (van Sittert 311, n. 18).

This is incorrect in the case of *The Rise of Conservation*. The PRO was not used at all for this book. Rhodes House does contain a major collection of books and government papers, including statistical registers and censuses, which were indispensable for this study and would be for anyone addressing this topic. Most of the published materials were generated in South Africa and are the same as those held in South African libraries. It surely does not matter where they are consulted. Extended sections of *The Rise of Conservation* are based on state and private archives in South Africa, including collections in Pretoria, Cape Town, Umtata, Grahamstown and Graaff-Reinet. The book is also informed by interviewing in different districts of South Africa, which gave me some familiarity with – amongst other issues – geography, transport routes, plants, livestock, farm layout, the impact of betterment, family histories and local environmental ideas. I explain (p. 393) why oral information was not used systematically in the text.

A supposed piece of evidence for this apparent metropolitan bias is that Peter MacOwan, former Huddersfield (Britain) and Somerset East (South Africa) science teacher, government botanist from 1881 to 1905, has ‘attracted absolutely no attention in the metropole’ because he did not write published reports. This is untrue. *The Rise of Conservation* has sections devoted to him (pp. 117–18 and 123–6), has more index references to him than to any other botanist and refers to his history of ‘Botanical Collectors’ (pp. 65–6). It is noted that ‘for much of the late nineteenth century he was probably the best-informed person on Cape plants, particularly those with agricultural or pastoral significance’ (p. 118). Either van Sittert has not read much of *The Rise of Conservation* or he is suffering from academic amnesia. In fact MacOwan published widely and a good many of his publications are available in Britain; he also corresponded with British botanists. *The Rise of Conservation* covers a long period and deals with many different individuals and ideas. Much potentially relevant source material is not covered; the sources are sufficiently rich to sustain book length studies on a number of the themes explored; some of these studies have been, or are being, written. The book does not aim to be encyclopaedic but to explore one set of inter-linked ideas and actors.

We should then consider the knowledge and experience of the authors of sources used. In suggesting that officials had little impact, van Sittert asserts that I neglect to comment on their ‘often strikingly brief Cape careers’. Again this is incorrect. While the early Cape specialist bureaucracy was fragile, much of the book deals with the period after 1880. I cannot list all officials and their periods of office. A few of those mentioned such as Harvey (treasurer, 1835–8), Brown (second colonial botanist, 1862–6) and Branford (first veterinary surgeon, 1877–80) were officials for only three to four years, although the two former maintained a strong interest in South Africa and Brown also worked as a missionary for four years. But the great majority of officials on whom the book focuses had long careers – serving for over 25 years: Hutcheon, the key Cape vet; Kanthack, Cape and Union director of irrigation, later consultant around the region; H. S. du Toit, agricultural official and chair of the Drought Commission; Lounsbury and Pettey, the American entomologists; Thornton, principal of Grootfontein agricultural college in the Karoo, agricultural officer and later adviser in the High Commission territories.

This applies also to many other figures who appear more briefly in the book, even when born overseas, such as de Waal, colonial secretary and administrator of the Cape; the Swiss vet Theiler; the English botanist Pole-Evans and the farmer-politicians Smartt and Frost. Aside from the early travellers and a few early officials, the great majority of people who generated the sources used in *The Rise of Conservation*, including officials and farmers, spent the bulk of their adult lives in South Africa. Many devoted a great deal of time to farming, agricultural politics, natural resource management and conservation; collectively they had a deep knowledge of these issues.

Van Sittert makes a great deal of the fact that the book deals largely with white men; warming to his theme he succumbs to cliché and dismisses their writings as the ‘scribblings of dead white males’. Here we should consider briefly not so much his polemics but his practice. In a recent article, for example, he discusses ‘The bourgeois eye aloft: Table Mountain in the Anglo urban middle class imagination, c. 1891–1952’.¹ It focuses very largely on the aesthetic ideas of dead white men using published sources. From the article, it would be fair to surmise that there were no Africans in Cape Town at this time; there is little on coloured people, or women (except for brief reference to the indispensable Lady Anne Barnard), little economic context, and we are given no sense of the size of the Cape Town ‘middle class’. It seems that van Sittert is claiming that he can write about the ideas of dead white men, but that no one else can. Or is he suffering from academic amnesia in respect of his own work as well? In view of this breathtaking forgetfulness, it is difficult to take the review article seriously.

The review article is littered with emotive language. To write critically about white men is to ‘venerate’ them, or ‘laud’ them; we hear about ‘canonization’, ‘hagiography’ and creating ‘cults’. This seems to misunderstand fundamentally the nature of historical writing: to research and write about people does not imply agreement with their positions, actions or ideas. Is van Sittert lauding Rhodes by describing him as an ‘innovator’ as well as imitator in his views of Table Mountain?² Is he contributing to the cult of Lady Anne Barnard, and canonizing Smuts? It is an absurd set of judgements to make.

Van Sittert argues that *The Rise of Conservation* fails to mention the ‘unrepresentative’ nature of Wellwood farm, used as a reference point through the book, implying that the focus on officials and progressive farmers is somehow disguised. Yet this is made explicit from the outset (pp. xvi–xviii), as well as in references that discuss the size of the farm, the merino sheep stud (pp. 57, 164), the above average wool yields (p. 57), avoidance of transhumance (p. 58), the relative wealth of the owners and degree of investment, the scale of dam building (pp. 93, 163), the Rubidge family’s political influence and in the chapter on the farm itself (p. 305). Charles Rubidge is quoted specifically distinguishing himself from others: ‘if the whole Colony had been as much improved as my farm, we should have been ten times as rich as we are now’ (p. 163). I am not agreeing with

¹ Lance van Sittert, ‘The bourgeois eye aloft: Table Mountain in the Anglo urban middle class imagination, c. 1891–1952’, *Kronos*, 29 (2003), 161–90.

² *Ibid.* 180.

Rubidge's statement, merely indicating that the 'unrepresentative' nature of the farm is made clear.

It is then suggested that officials and progressive landowners were isolated, weak and ineffectual because they were relatively small in number. Perhaps van Sittert is suffering another bout of academic amnesia in forgetting that less than 10 per cent of adult South Africans (initially, and depending on who are later counted as supporters) were able to impose the coercive, far-reaching, deeply divisive and authoritarian system of apartheid. To take another analogy, British landowners, relatively few in number, had great power in the countryside and beyond over a long period of time. Power cannot be reduced to numbers, especially in a colonial context, or in a pre-democratic world. The claims made for this group, including officials, landowners and farmer-politicians (not only English-speakers) are not vast: they concern their role in shaping their own farms, the agrarian world more generally and aspects of state intervention – and the state – that have been neglected till recently in historical literature.

The Rise of Conservation explores a number of areas in which they were influential, such as veterinary regulations, compulsory scab legislation, controls of overland transhumance, private and state water provision, forestry, eradication of predators, the campaigns against prickly pear, replacement of kraaling, fodder provision and rotational grazing in fenced camps. It highlights the concerns articulated by some of them over environmental change and conservation, which in their eyes implied primarily efficient use of natural resources so that commercial pastoral farming could be viable over the long term. The limits to their capacity, uncertainty of outcomes, divisions over specific measures and complexity of politics are touched on throughout the book. Over the long term, the pattern of pastoral farming that they espoused – though this was not static – became widespread. It also influenced the approach to 'betterment' in the African homelands, a set of interventions which deeply affected land use and rural politics. Some of the specific linkages – for example through the agency of officials such as Thornton – are illustrated.

Another example of one-eyed reading concerns the circulation of the government's *Agricultural Journal*. I am sorry if I noted the figure of 6,000 rather than 5,000 for the late nineteenth century. However, van Sittert is wrong to say that this is the only figure available. A thesis that he supervised gives two figures – 4,000 for 1889, and 5,000 for 1899.³ My book also covers the period after 1910. The national *Journal* had a print run rising from 30,000 in 1913 (p. 249) to a peak of about 48,000 in August 1914 – the last edition before wartime stringencies stopped publication in this form.⁴ A regular circulation gauge was published at this time. Probably more than 50,000 copies of shortened versions of the Drought Commission report were

³ Dawn Nell, "'You cannot make the people scientific by act of parliament': farmers, the state, and livestock enumeration in the north-western Cape, c. 1850–1900" (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1998), 44.

⁴ *Agricultural Journal of the Union of South Africa*, 8, 2 (Aug. 1914), 282; *ibid.* 1, 1 (Jan. 1915), 6, mentions 42,000 – apparently incorrectly – and estimates that over a quarter of a million copies were circulated from the start of the Cape journal in 1889 to this time; it was revived after the war with a lower circulation (*Rise of Conservation*, 254).

published in various forms by the government (pp. 254–6). My point is that even in the late nineteenth century the figures rivalled some of the larger circulation newspapers in the Colony. It is unlikely that there were other substantial government publications with such circulation in the early twentieth century.

I do not offer these figures as a measure of the number of progressive farmers. On this basis, about 15 per cent of Cape farmowners would be so judged in the late nineteenth century (the book does not suggest that only English-speakers were progressive farmers), and by 1914 the national percentage would be nearly half. There is no space here to debate the issue of calculating progressive numbers, which is not central to the argument. The question is when, and by what measures? Nor is there space to argue, contra van Sittert, that the Department of Agriculture, and most governments from about 1890 to 1948, adopted an essentially modernizing approach to agriculture. This was not dependent upon English-speaking progressives holding direct government power.

Van Sittert is highly exercised about the half chapter of *The Rise of Conservation* devoted partly to the writings of Brown, colonial botanist and subsequently author of (probably the first) overview books on environmental issues at the Cape in the 1870s. He asserts that *The Rise of Conservation* is hagiographic about Brown, that Brown was an ‘unimportant colonial botanist’, that too much has been written about him. The contention that there is a hagiography of Brown can be dismissed. I refer to Brown as ‘verbose’ (twice), his writing as ‘florid’; I note his ‘insensitivity to his audience’, that he ‘provoked opposition’, and ‘to a degree precipitated his own dismissal’ (pp. 100, 114–15). *The Rise of Conservation* explicitly states that Brown was not a field botanist or collector, although in his short sojourn he did attempt to rearrange a local herbarium and compiled one of the fullest lists of tree species so far made.

Brown is interesting partly because, as in the case of a few other travellers and shorter-term officials, he synthesized a number of different sources and ideas current at the Cape and tried to make sense of them in the light of his general botanical and geological knowledge. Moreover, his strong views on fire, selective grazing and conservation – and the opposing views that he quoted at length – provide a prism through which to look at these issues, at this specific time, when some of those with botanical interests were trying to understand the causes, character and consequences of vegetation change. His views are used in conjunction with other sources, including evidence from farmers. Brown’s work and concerns were frequently quoted; they had a surprisingly long afterlife amongst those South Africans interested in these issues. To mention just a few sources (all in *The Rise of Conservation*): in the 1877 Stock Diseases Commission, a key report arguing for the improvement and conservation of pasturages; in the work of T. R. Sim, author of probably the first major book on Cape forests (1907), who acknowledged Brown’s influence and vehemently defended his position on fire; and in that by J. D. Schonken, who wrote what is to my knowledge the first book-length study of *Dorre [Dry] Suid-Afrika* (1921) in Afrikaans, and quoted Brown extensively.⁵ Many others could be cited. Has

⁵ J. D. Schonken, *Dorre Suid-Afrika* (Bloemfontein, 1921?), 41–55.

too much been written about him? We should surely welcome critical discussion of any of these figures. It is also worth noting that classificatory botanists have attracted considerable attention in popular histories of the discipline in South Africa and are well covered in the *Dictionary of South African Biography*.

Much more could have been written on MacOwan, and on important twentieth-century plant specialists: Pole-Evans and the Botany section of the Union Department of Agriculture; Bews, Philips and the emergence of ecology and pasture science; Henrici and others on indigenous species; Acocks, Tidmarsh and interwar debates on rotation systems, grass types and desertification (*The Rise of Conservation*, ch. 11). But, as explained in the introduction, it was not possible to write about all of the different sciences throughout all the periods covered by the book. Botanists are a major focus for the period *c.* 1830s to 1870s when they provided one framework for understanding changes in the Cape environment. For subsequent periods, other spheres of science and knowledge are pursued. It would have been possible to write many additional chapters on many other relevant people and themes.

Van Sittert's misinterpretation of the argument about environmental change in *The Rise of Conservation* should briefly be addressed. He mentions only the discussion, in the post-script, of the environmental conditions on livestock farms in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century – and the possibility of 'stabilization'. This allows him to suggest that the argument is only about environmental improvement. *The Rise of Conservation* is hesitant (p. xv) concerning judgements about environmental degradation, but the book is replete with such historical references and explicitly notes that degradation on livestock farms was intensifying in the first few decades of the twentieth century, when environmental conditions probably reached a nadir (pp. 25, 234, 367–8, 373). The possibility of stabilization (a term used by scientists and not, as van Sittert suggests, the same as equilibrium) is discussed with respect to evidence from the last couple of decades, compared with this low point in the first half of the twentieth century. Evidence is offered for this argument in a fifteen-page discussion (pp. 373–88) of the issues; as part of a postscript, this only scratches the surface and the issue is now the subject of a large scientific literature. A recent national survey of *Land Degradation in South Africa* (1999) categorized the veld in some of the key districts considered as 'slowly improving'. Van Sittert is also incorrect to assert that 'elite ideas' are used to explain the possible stabilization of environmental conditions. Points made in this respect include the falling number of livestock, falling wool prices, larger average landholdings, rotational grazing, the switch to wildlife farming, the expansion of conservation areas and government regulation, including stock reduction schemes.

In a bizarre assertion, van Sittert definitively states that I have 'abandoned the idea' about conservationist concerns and interventions amongst officials in southern and central Africa more generally, explored initially in an article entitled 'Soil erosion, conservationism and ideas about development' (1984). I have not abandoned the idea and there is now a large literature, on a number of different African countries, which draws on some of the arguments made in that article, as also on publications at that time by

McCracken, Anderson, Grove, Richards and others. The article did not assert that conservationist ideas explained everything, but attempted to analyse their nature, how they intersected with other elements of state policy and how they provoked rural resistance. Twenty years on I have my problems with this article – some touched on in *The Rise of Conservation* – but neither it, nor my other work, has been abandoned; it may yet form the basis for further regional writing.

Finally, in making a number of general claims about *The Rise of Conservation*, van Sittert rails against a focus on texts. The book does not simply focus on texts, but I would suggest that historians, before they do anything else, should get their texts straight and represent them accurately. We can then have space to debate historiographical issues in an informed and constructive manner. I can understand that my concern with officials and elite farmers, and with a specific strand of ideas and practices, might disturb some readers, and bore others, immersed in African history or sub-altern views. The approach, as outlined, has been to try to amalgamate a historiography of environmental ideas and sciences with that on agrarian history. Certainly compared to some explorations of conservationist ideas, this discussion is embedded in the specifics of a production system. Similarly, the analysis of conservation links it firmly to efficiency in the use of natural resources, as well as to the preservation of nature. But yes, I am arguing that whites in South Africa need to be considered not only as agents of oppression but also as the bearers of complex and disputed ideas that had a significant impact and should be taken seriously. And yes, as previously argued, I think that Africanist or subaltern approaches to environmental studies, to which I have tried to contribute, have become paradigmatic in much literature, and sometimes obscure important issues for debate and research, not least the salience and significance of scientific approaches.⁶ *The Rise of Conservation* has its own trajectory but in part tries to open up these questions. A post-apartheid historiography should be sufficiently secure to include such debates.

As to my 'project', it aims eventually at a broad-ranging approach to history, including consideration of comparative, national and more global levels as well as the history of ideas, political economy and localized studies of resistance or, for example, plant use. Van Sittert has recently co-edited a collection with one of the latter pieces.⁷ But like most historians, I find it difficult to do all of these things at the same time, so that individual books and articles highlight particular issues. Lastly, I disagree with van Sittert that environmental history, or histories concerned with the environment, should be collapsed into political economy. It depends on what questions are being asked. Consideration of environmental factors and causation might help to explain why South Africa was different both from African colonies and from most other settler states. There should certainly be space for detailed analyses of changing environments, in which scientific literature and

⁶ W. Beinart, 'African history and environmental history', *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 269–302.

⁷ W. Beinart and L. Wotshela, 'Prickly pear in the Eastern Cape since the 1950s – perspectives from interviews', *Kronos*, 29 (2003), 191–209.

research techniques are deployed, and for histories of ideas, including dis-embedded discussions of aesthetic views of Table Mountain.

Journal editors are hard-pressed members of the academic community; they deserve our admiration and seldom get sufficient credit. They cannot know of the inaccuracies in reviews (I counted 11 compressed into three pages, not all rehearsed here). But should the *Journal of African History* be publishing reviews with such overblown language? Do they add anything to scholarship or rather facilitate misrepresentation? What if we all adopt the hatchet or the sneer as our prime mode of explication? Having published one such piece is there a basis for denying this route to others? If I was part of an editorial team responsible for publishing a review with so many mistakes or misrepresentations, I would apologize.