



Frontiers: the Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People

By Noel Mostert

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A history of South Africa's most sophisticated black nation describes how belief in a strange prophecy caused the Xhosa to destroy all their food and stock, and discusses their history from emigration from Central Africa to frontier wars.
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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This book masterfully reinterprets the founding era of South Africa, especially the 19th century, to emphasize not the Afrikaners but the conflict between British colonials and the indigenous Xhosa people. Drawing on virtually forgotten government records and vivifying little-known people, Mostert (Supership) has done for South Africa what Robert Hughes did for Australia in *The Fatal Shore*. Mostert places South Africa in the framework, both geographical and moral, of world colonial expansion; Britain's Cape Colony, site of an experiment in political liberalism, illustrates the era's tension "between high-minded conscience and self-interest." To reconstruct this "crucible of modern South African society," the author conjures up multiple worlds in passages often intricate and lyrical, though the depth of detail may deter readers. He draws on historiography, geography, linguistics and archeology to portray the European scramble for Africa, the cosmology of the indigenous Bushmen and the lives of the Afrikaners and the Zulus but eventually focuses on the British settlers and the Cape Xhosas, a proud people with traditions of democratic debate, communal land and welcoming of strangers. Their interactions animate a narrative rich in drama: the British began "probably the most callous act of mass settlement in the entire history of empire"; the Cape was the first society to attempt to legislate an interracial state; and when the Xhosas, decimated by the frontier wars and vulnerable to prophecy, killed their cattle and thus many of themselves, it was "probably the greatest self-inflicted immolation of a people in all history." Mostert concludes that the Cape Colony, where the nonracial franchise continued to contract until it vanished under 20th-century apartheid, "represents one of the greatest of lost ideals within human society." Photos not seen by PW. BOMC, History Book Club and QPB alternates.

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From Library Journal

This monumental work deals primarily with conflicts between the Xhosa and white colonizers, culminating in the 1850s when the tribe invited mass starvation by killing their cattle and destroying their food, convinced that this would drive away the British. It also chronicles the moral struggle within the British Empire over the treatment of nonwhite populations. These two dramas shaped white attitudes toward Africa and Africans that lasted well into the 20th century and still affect South African politics. The author, a South African-born journalist now living in Canada, spent several years researching this well-written, absorbing narrative which, while aimed at the general public, belongs in academic as well as public libraries. History Book Club and Quality Paperback Book Club alternates.

- Paul H. Thomas, Hoover Inst. Lib., Stanford, Cal.

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From Kirkus Reviews

At the heart of this megabook from South-African-born Mostert (Supership, 1974) is the moving story of the tragic clash between races--black and white--and cultures--British, Boer, and African--in a place that for a brief, transcendent moment was a model to the world of racial tolerance and democracy. Beginning with the Portuguese search for a route around the Cape to India, Mostert traces the history of what was to become the Cape Province when South Africa united in 1910. When, in 1652, the Dutch East India Company established a small settlement at the Cape to provide fresh water and provisions for passing ships, it had no intention of founding a colony, let alone a country. But the settlers, who were soon to become the only white tribe of Africa, the Afrikaners, began almost immediately to foray into the interior in search of more land for their cattle. By the mid-18th century, they had advanced far enough up the eastern seaboard to meet the Xhosa,

one of the great black tribes of southern Africa. This meeting of two cattle-owning but otherwise immensely different peoples became the crucible for many of the policies and attitudes that shaped the future South Africa. Mostert chronicles in detail the good intentions gone wrong, the ignorance and incompetence, the deeds and misdeeds that followed. Nine wars were fought before peace prevailed in the early 19th century. By that time, all races were entitled to full civil rights and enjoyed a franchise open to all male property-owners, black and white. It was a time of brief hope, extinguished with such tragic consequences in 1910. Despite the daunting length--and weight--and some inevitable repetitiveness, a perceptive and sympathetic portrait of a seminal period in South Africa's history--and one of special interest as Nelson Mandela, a Xhosa prince by birth, begins to take his rightful place in the new South Africa. (Thirty-two pages of photographs; four maps--not seen.) -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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Raul Warren:

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