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Negotiating the past:  
The making of memory  
in South Africa

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Carli Coetzee

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The Making of Memory in South Africa

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A public forum held on the day after the opening, and another before the closing of the exhibition, affirmed that power relations remain at the centre of critical debates on museum practice, but that museums themselves are public spaces that can be used for contesting and negotiating these relations. There is no single authentic voice – exhibitions, like other artefacts, are open to imagination and interpretation. A character from *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1972), by the late African writer Alex La Guma,<sup>12</sup> recalls waiting for a fellow political activist at the South African Museum. In the zoological gallery, he 'had been alone, a stranger in a lost dead world...' but in the anthropology section he had mused: 'These Bushmen had hunted with bows and tiny arrows behind glass; red-yellow dwarfs with peppercorn hair and beady eyes. Beukes had thought sentimentally that they were the first to fight' (cited in Voss 1990, 66).

The tangibility of objects is particularly salient in relation to memory. Museum collections, like monuments and sites, bridge the past and the present and provide cues to recollection. They embody memories of the past and evoke memory in the present. The /Xam casts made in 1912 are material reminders of ideas that were current at the time but, having been exhibited for over eighty years, they have accrued other meanings over time. Similarly, over a far longer period, Robben Island has accumulated many layers of memory. The significance attached to particular events in the past changes in relation to the politics of the present. But there remains a surplus of meaning waiting to be made and remade. Museums hold and shape memories but they cannot contain them.

## II

HARRIET DEACON

### Remembering tragedy, constructing modernity: Robben Island as a national monument

#### Introduction

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES the role of Robben Island in the process of reformulating public (indeed, national) memory during a time of social and political transition in the 1990s. Seldom has one small piece of land been so heavily imbued with a symbolism which remains, like understandings of its past and hopes for its future, so deeply contested. It is impossible to embrace the complete range of meanings surrounding the island and its history in one chapter, using a small range of sources. We can nevertheless identify the outlines of a public memory of the island by examining a few eddies of interest and debate in public discourse which have emerged and re-emerged within the vast silent pool of possibilities. These eddies of debate are now part of a broader contest over the structure and meaning of the new South Africa and how to interpret its past. Always in the process of formation, the debates draw their strength from exchanges between various personal and public memories of the island, memories which are often unequal in scope and power, expressed in different media and through different channels of authority.<sup>1</sup>

For the last three-and-a-half-centuries Robben Island has been the 'hell-hole' of Table Bay, South Africa's Alcatraz, an impregnable

place of banishment for those who have opposed the status quo. During the last few decades, debates about the future of the island, as nature reserve, holiday resort, and museum, have represented competing attempts by various political groupings to reformulate the meaning of the island and its role as a national symbol. The now dominant representation of the island as a place symbolizing triumph over apartheid is linked to a reformulation of national identity based on a particular view of modernity represented by the discourse of 'human rights'. This will be compared to a similar (although ultimately unsuccessful) reformulation of the island's role during the mid-nineteenth century, when the 'humanitarian' reform of the island's mental asylum was linked to claims for modernity made by a new settler government which had just been granted some legislative power by Britain.

Robben Island has been used for many different purposes and held various contrasting meanings for South Africans during the course of its history. During the early years of European sea travel to the East (from 1488) and settlement at the Cape (from 1652), sailors used it as a stopping place, the island's seals and penguins kept the early settlers alive, and Dutch East India Company stock were fattened there. For them, the island was thus associated with safety and security. The indigenous inhabitants of the Cape Peninsula did not try and reach it by sea until they were offered a passage by Europeans in the 1640s and they left the island soon afterwards, when its meagre resources had been exhausted. During the eighteenth century the island became a place of detention for those defined as the worst criminals and most dangerous political opponents of the Dutch East India Company. In the latter half of the nineteenth century it was primarily used as a hospital for the insane, lepers, and the sick poor. The image of the island as a healthy place, suitable for curing the sick and the mad, struggled against the weight of its image as a place to which the incurable and dangerous (both patients and prisoners) could be banished. When the last medical patients were removed in 1931

there was much discussion about the potential recreational uses of the island, but by 1939 it was commandeered (as *SAS Robbeneiland*) to protect the country against foreign invasion during the Second World War. In 1961 it became a maximum-security prison.

Although the island's Alcatraz image became something of an international embarrassment to the National Party government in the 1970s the island prison continued to be touted as a symbol of its authority and strength. For the political prisoners and their families, the island was a place of sorrow, suffering, and, in some cases, also a 'university' for the struggle. The Robben Island prisoners were unusual in that they were able, despite internal differences, to create a subversive culture within the prison, developing a common identity (as Robben Islanders), and pressurizing the prison authorities (by appealing to human rights conventions) to give them greater privileges after about 1976. Some of the Robben Islanders have been important cultural brokers in the process of redefining public images of the island through the publication of prisoner memoirs and interviews in the press.

Throughout South African history Robben Island has thus performed a vital symbolic role. Oliver Tambo commented in 1980: 'The tragedy of Africa, in racial and political terms [has been] concentrated in the southern tip of the continent – in South Africa, Namibia, and, in a special sense, Robben Island'.<sup>2</sup> Yet within the public memory of the new South Africa, it has now also become an important symbol of the triumph of human rights over the horrors of the atavistic system of apartheid, a symbol of national transformation. For many South Africans, Robben Island symbolizes 'the indestructibility of the spirit of resistance against colonialism, injustice and oppression' (Lubbe 1987, 49; see also Jacobs 1992, 74). At the outermost edge of the country and yet so deeply part of its history, the island's position, which formerly made it a perfect place for exiling opponents, now makes it a suitable place to situate a critique of the past

within a 'new' country, remade under the 'rainbow' of cultural harmony. Partly because of its long historical association with political imprisonment, although the only prison buildings that now remain are those built after 1960, the island was proclaimed a national monument in January 1996. A project is under way to construct a museum on the island which will symbolize the 'triumph of freedom and human dignity over repression and humiliation' (Argus, 7 June 1993). Like the death camps of the Holocaust (Young 1994, 23), the island prison, a site of repression built by its inmates, is to be the first monument to the death of apartheid. Yet it is not constructed primarily as a place to commemorate martyrs, those who sacrificed their life and liberty for the struggle against apartheid; instead it is to be a place to celebrate victory, where South Africans mark the attainment of mass democratic rule and the demise of apartheid. It has become a symbol of the future of the new South Africa rather than its past. South Africans' understanding of the island as symbol is thus of vital importance in mediating an understanding of South Africa's past and hopes for its future. The significance of the island today lies not so much in what actually happened there as in how its history has been interpreted and represented. The island figures in the national memory partly through its more distant past as prison and hospital (specifically for lepers), but largely through its history as a prison for anti-apartheid leaders (especially Nelson Mandela) who have played such an important national role subsequent to their release. There were other prisons housing anti-apartheid activists, some with even harsher regimes than that of Robben Island. Many other activists continued to fight against apartheid within the country and in exile. But the Robben Island prison and its inmates stood out as particularly significant. The National Party government chose Robben Island for a prison precisely because of its historical use as a place of banishment – it was the most horrific site imaginable. Only those anti-apartheid activists who were considered the most

threatening and dispensable (thus, no women and no white prisoners) were sent there. Although the Robben Island prisoners were, by some accounts, treated better than some other political prisoners during the apartheid era, their imprisonment has come to represent the crimes of apartheid, their release the victory over apartheid. Their personal experiences of imprisonment on the island have helped to reconstruct its political significance. In giving meaning to their imprisonment through autobiography some political prisoners have intertwined historical and personal memories, and explicitly identified themselves with black leaders from the Eastern Cape who were imprisoned there in the nineteenth century. These accounts, supplemented by a rash of histories of the island, have been particularly significant in reconstructing public memory because most South Africans have never been able to visit the island, and many have no knowledge of its broader past.

### Contesting the future of the island

During the 1970s, as political tension rose surrounding the use of the island as a prison for anti-apartheid activists, a public debate about an alternative role for it was generated. There was a political contest between broadly right-wing proposals to make Robben Island into a leisure resort or nature reserve and broadly anti-apartheid suggestions to build an educative museum or a peace centre there within an ecologically and historically sensitive development. This debate was part of a contest over the public memory of the island which because of its symbolic importance had important consequences for national identity. For the resort planners, seeking to deflect criticism of the National Party government, publicly remembering the island's 'natural' environment allowed a public forgetting of its political role. For the museum planners, seeking a site on which to concentrate criticism of apartheid,

publicly remembering the horrors of the prison was part of a project of reconstruction and celebration more than a simple commemoration of heroic activists.

During the 1970s and 1980s plans to turn the island into a holiday resort and nature reserve were invoked to naturalize (and neutralize) the violence of its history and, by extension, the violence of apartheid. By this time tourism had become an important source of income for South Africa, which was struggling with a poor international image. Robben Island, where most of the anti-apartheid leaders were incarcerated, represented the harshness of apartheid rule; scandals about the treatment of prisoners there sparked debate in Parliament about its closure. The conversion of Robben Island into a resort would scupper its image as 'apartheid's Alcatraz' and allow it to signify the 'true' side of the country: 'braaivleis [barbecue], rugby, sunny skies, and Chevrolet' as an advertisement of the time put it. The *Argus* (10 April 1975) explained that Robben Island would be 'far pleasanter to point out to guests of the Cape' if it were a nature reserve or holiday resort rather than a prison. In 1981 it reiterated (21 August):

If (or when) all this [i.e. the resort plan] comes about, Robben Island would be free at last of the stigma that has hung over it for hundreds of years – that of a penal settlement, leper colony and outpost for the insane.

Where once it had been the antithesis of what was socially acceptable, the island was now represented as 'a God-given opportunity to create something special right in the maw of Table Bay' (*Argus*, 12 May 1973), an 'integral part of the Cape' (*Argus*, 18 July 1985). It had become a potential symbol of the 'natural' Africa – without any pesky 'natives' – embodying the 'silence and the smell of unspoilt land' (*Cape Times*, 6 June 1985).

Proposals to make the island 'a great place to escape to'

(*Weekend Argus*, 10 November 1990) for leisure and pleasure have a long history: the island was associated with health even before the establishment of a hospital there in 1846. As early as 1820 Thomas Suter, a cabinet maker from Pepper Street in Cape Town, asked to stay with Mr Murray on Robben Island for his health and a change of air after a long illness (Memorials, CO 3918, 6 May 1820). The fresh sea breezes and the open atmosphere on the island were considered very healthy at a time when miasma theories of disease saw foul air as a major causal factor. Climate was so important in medical considerations that records of rainfall, wind, and temperature were religiously kept on the island between 1888 and 1891 (Superintendent's diary, Robben Island 1888, RI 139). In 1886, the *Robben Island Times*, a news-sheet for staff at the island hospitals, noted 'what a splendid health resort could be made on the Island if an Hotel were allowed to be started at Murray's Bay' (*Robben Island Times*, 1886, 4). But besides unofficial hunting trips to the island (for rabbit and quail) little was made of its leisure potential until the closure of the lunatic asylum in 1921 and the leper hospital in 1931.

The Cape Geographical Society suggested in 1934 that a health resort, with hotel, golf course, and tennis courts, and possibly also a sanatorium, could be built on the island (*Cape Times*, 7 November 1934). The resort idea was floated again in 1945 (*Argus*, 29 November) and in 1959 (23 May), when the *Cape Times* noted with regret that the island's 'tragic history' would reach full circle with the establishment of a maximum-security prison, again missing the opportunity to turn it into a holiday resort, nature reserve, or tourist attraction. But as in all the proposals before the 1970s, official control and the isolation or stigma of the island deterred investors from making any serious offers to exploit its leisure potential. On the cessation of war, a newspaper reporter commented (*Argus*, 6 September 1945):

Once again Robben Island has become a problem. A fine settlement has been built but who would wish to live there? ... I should like to think of Robben Island as a treasure island but really it seems to have no value at all between the wars.

Proposals to put a fishmeal factory there and to maintain the rights of fishermen and yachtsmen to land on the island seem to have had more commercial viability than tourism in the late 1950s (*Argus*, 23 June 1959, 27 July 1960). On the eve of the island being turned into a maximum-security prison the mayor of Cape Town commented: 'I do not think Cape Town cares very much about Robben Island. After all, it was a leper colony for nearly a hundred years until 1931. Since then very few people have visited the island' (*Argus*, 23 May 1959).

Proposals were put before Parliament in 1973 with the support of several MPs including Piet 'Weskus' Marais, who had an anthropology degree from the University of Stellenbosch and a yen to make the west coast into a tourist haven. The prison buildings would serve as unusual accommodation for tourists enjoying the 'beautiful nature reserve', casino, five-star hotel, airport, and yachting marina on the island (*Argus*, 12 May 1973). Influential commercial interests backed the resort proposals while others, such as the minister of prisons, suggested withdrawing it from the public eye completely by turning it into a wildlife sanctuary (*Cape Times* 25 April 1975; *Argus*, 14 February 1976). Debate intensified in 1978 when it was announced that the prison would be closed in five years' time (*Cape Times*, 14 March 1978). Financial considerations supposedly caused a delay in the transfer of prisoners to mainland prisons, but to reduce the political value of the island to the anti-apartheid movement many of the anti-apartheid leaders were relocated in 1982 (*Cape Times*, 23 June). The public debate about the future of the island resumed three years later with the appointment of a government committee on the subject and the resumption of commercial offers to turn it into a tourist resort. A

decision was made to retain the island as a prison, but to defuse any political capital being made out of this the Prisons Service declared its intention to permit more public visits (*Cape Times*, 6 July 1986). Although the remaining political prisoners were removed in 1991 it was another two years before the government finally announced its intention to close the prison in 1996 (*Weekend Argus*, 6-7 March 1993).

As part of its plan to change the image of Robben Island the Prisons Department had already begun in the early 1980s to stock the island (rather inappropriately) with eland, ostriches, and springbok, and to re-establish the penguin colony there. A coastal reserve was established, although the prison staff still enjoyed the fish and crayfish from it (*Argus*, 7 June 1993). The nature reserve idea meant that although the island was dry and largely devoid of its original plant and animal life (*Die Burger*, 8 June 1985) it could now be hailed as a 'forgotten paradise of teeming bird and marine life' (*Weekend Argus*, 14 May 1983), its ecological importance used as a barrier by the department against any unwelcome development plans. When the department opened the island up to visitors in 1986 the focus was not to be the prison, which was still operative, but the nineteenth-century buildings, the Second World War installations and the natural environment (*Cape Times*, 6 July 1986). Private entrepreneurs were poised to take over once the prison was closed: then the prison history could add gothic appeal, like the leper graveyard, rather than making a political point. The island's real historical asset was its quaint Victorian village (or what remained of it after the Prisons Department 'renovations'). As Nick Malherbe of the Future of Robben Island Committee put it, Robben Island would become 'a tasteful tourist destination in tune with the Victoria and Alfred dock development' (*Argus*, 27 October 1990): a 'larger Matjiesfontein [a small Victorian-style tourist resort in the Cape]' (*Weekend Argus*, 11 May 1991).

There was some opposition both to the initial hotel resort proposals and to later plans for a Victorian-style holiday spot. The

commercial resort proposals – particularly the hotel and casino plans, first floated in the 1970s and backed by Sol Kerzner in 1985 (*Cape Times*, 8 June 1985) – were rapidly scaled down to a ‘low key recreational facility for all’ during the 1980s (*Cape Times*, 29 June 1985). By 1991 a survey in the *Argus* newspaper (which has a largely white and Coloured middle-class readership) demonstrated more support (65 per cent) for the ‘nature reserve and restored Victorian resort’ than for a casino (25 per cent) – about a third approved of turning the prison into a hotel. Most respondents decried any developments that would create a ‘rich man’s paradise’ (*Weekend Argus*, 18 May 1991).<sup>3</sup> The National Monuments Council and the Cape Town city council and tourist board also supported the more low-key proposals. If the island was to be a leisure venue for the ‘man in the street’, however, there was still great unease, particularly in ANC circles, about the way in which the recent history of the island was being downplayed. It was soon apparent that the island was too politically sensitive a site for an easy and wholesale reconstruction of its symbolism in the public memory, an erasure of its past.

The contest over the island’s future thus became a contest about what elements of its past were important and how they should be commemorated. Fuelling the debate was the issue of who had the political power and the moral right to determine what happened to the island. The reassurance from Nick Malherbe that Mandela’s cell would be retained as a museum within the Victorian resort drew a furious response from the ANC (*Cape Times*, 17 November 1990). Nelson Mandela protested that the island would be turned into a ‘circus’ (*Cape Times*, 2 December 1991). Ahmed Kathrada, a former prisoner on the island and now a government minister, later argued against the ‘vulgar commercialism’ of plans to put casinos and nightclubs on the island and proposals that exploited the popularity of Mandela (*Argus*, 7 June 1993). Dr André Odendaal, in charge of the ‘applebox archive’ of Robben Islanders’ possessions at the University of the Western Cape, said: ‘It is not

for white businesspeople or the Minister of Justice of the regime responsible for creating this monstrous prison ... to decide on the future of Robben Island’ (*Cape Times*, 16 May 1991).

How, then, was the future of the island – and its meaning as a national symbol – to be decided? Odendaal envisioned a museum like the Holocaust Museum in Israel for the island, teaching visitors about apartheid, as part of a broad educative experience including the ecological and earlier history of the island and South Africa as a whole. In 1993, an exhibition about Robben Island, entitled ‘*Esiqithini*’, emphasized the continuities between the past and the more recent history of the island, and the ways in which imprisoned political leaders were able to transcend their oppression. As the ‘green scene’ reporter John Yeld said after the exhibition: ‘The real environmental significance of the island lies [not in its flora and fauna, but] in its incredibly rich cultural history and in the lessons which this history holds for all South Africans’ (*Argus*, 7 June 1993).

Ex-Robben Island prisoners have been crucial players in defining an educative role for the island. It has long been dubbed the ‘university of the struggle’ because many of the anti-apartheid leaders educated themselves and others in practical politics and academic matters while on the island.<sup>4</sup> The more prominent prisoners have told us what they learned from the island. These lessons are not just their memories, but a model of what South Africa should learn from its past and a sign towards the path to true liberation. Many of them, for example, have stressed the way in which they have put their bitterness at imprisonment aside (*Argus*, 25 July 1994). At the opening of the ‘*Esiqithini*’ exhibition Ahmed Kathrada said the island should ‘not ... be a monument to [former prisoners] ... hardship and suffering [but] ... a monument reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil, a triumph of freedom and human dignity over repression and humiliation’ (*Argus*, 7 June 1993).

The idea of Robben Island as a university has spawned many



new proposals among which are a peace centre and a new home for the Centre for Intergroup Studies of the University of Cape Town. These ideas have been taken up by those who wish to see Cape Town 'retain its status as the country's legislative and diplomatic capital' at a time when it is threatened by proposals to move Parliament to Pretoria. Cape Town would supposedly become the 'Geneva of sub-Saharan Africa' (*Argus*, 30 January 1993). A number of non-governmental organizations (including the Centre for Intergroup Studies, Idasa, and church groups) have formed a pressure group called Peace Visions, which wants to establish a training centre for conflict resolution on the island. This seems to be partly inspired by the institution on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal, promoting democracy and understanding in Africa, which the Dakar conference delegates visited in 1987 and which has close ties with Idasa (*Argus*, 14 May 1994).

In January 1996 the island became a national monument and came under the jurisdiction of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology. The departure of the prison staff families from the island in 1996 and 1997 was an emotional moment, not just for those who had lived there for so many years or for those destined to take their places, but for the country as a whole. Because of a much slower and less marked change in mainland-based civil service staff over the period of transition, the island changeover was one of the most concrete and public signs of a movement away from the old regime in staffing patterns. The Robben Island Museum, established under the temporary leadership of Professor Odendaal in January 1997, is now a reality, entrusted with the task of presenting both positive and negative memories of the island to a still divided and uncertain South African public which has been part of the creation of those memories and continues to be deeply invested in their representation. One of the challenges facing the museum is to present a positive side of the island's history without effacing its role in the tragedies of South African history and the difficulties facing the country's future.

## The island as a symbol of moral maturity

There have only been two major moments in the history of the island in which it has been able to symbolize what is positive rather than negative about South Africa. These moments of redefinition both occurred at a time when a new government sought to emphasize its moral modernity, specifically to an international audience, and to construct a new source of national pride. The first moment was during the mid-nineteenth century when a rising Cape Town middle class wished to earn self-rule from Britain. The second was during the recent transition to democracy. The story of the first reform of the island's image, usually subsumed within the dominant memory of its dark past, can provide an interesting commentary on current attempts at national reconstruction, and a deeper understanding of the ambiguous and recalcitrant nature of public memory.

In the 1850s an emergent white middle class in Cape Town wanted to transform the Robben Island lunatic asylum from a backward-looking place of punishment into a modern curative institution, as a symbol of the humanitarianism, modernity, and maturity of the colony which had earned the responsibility of self-rule from Britain. The attempt to transform the island's image only succeeded briefly – after the granting of responsible government in 1872 and the death of the reformist doctor in charge of the asylum in the same year, the white middle class gradually stopped supporting the institution with paying patients and a good press. Over a century later South Africa has undergone a new political transition to a wider local democracy, again under the critical eye of the western world. In opposition to attempts to naturalize the island's past, a group of ex-Robben Island prisoners have brokered a reinterpretation of the island's meaning, as the university of the struggle and the crucible of change in South Africa. Through the recorded memories of Mandela and others, the prisoners' liberation within the prison and from the island has

become a symbol of national liberation, moral modernity, and ethical maturity. This interpretation has also been important in underlining for an international western audience the fitness of the new power brokers – the urban black middle class – to take the reins of the ‘rainbow nation’ in the context of the failure of other African states to maintain democracy after independence.

The positive reformulation of the island’s symbolic meaning in the public memory during the 1990s can be compared with a similar reformulation in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1846 the colonial secretary, John Montagu, had established a general infirmary on Robben Island for lepers, ‘lunatics’, and the chronically ill. The infirmary was designed as a place where the incurable and offensive among the sick poor could be kept away from society in a cheaper and more centralized institution; it was not envisaged initially as a place of cure. A series of public scandals about the island institution broke in 1852, however, as Montagu’s political opponents (members of the commercial middle class in Cape Town) criticized the management of the lunatic asylum in particular and proposed sweeping reforms. The ascendant colonial middle class in Cape Town used the old-fashioned custodial practices of the island asylum as a symbol of the backwardness of the old autocratic order represented by Montagu and his followers. Once the newly constituted colonial parliament sat in 1854, Birtwhistle, the first surgeon-superintendent on the island, was dismissed and a commitment was made to the humanitarian cure of the insane under a new psychological approach called ‘moral management’.

The reforms of the island asylum were based on British asylum reforms designed to eliminate punishment-oriented treatment of the insane which had been gaining momentum since the beginning of the century as part of a broader humanitarian movement (see Scull 1993). In Britain these reforms were part of a new attitude towards labour among a new dominant class who attempted to reorganize industrial activity upon a free market in labour

power (Russell 1983, 16). The humanitarian asylum is thought to have had a larger political role in disciplining the potentially useful worker and removing the ‘useless’ worker from the ‘free’ market in labour, distinguishing the employable from the unemployable. But the conditions surrounding reform were rather different at the Cape: the final emancipation of slave-apprentices in 1838 did not usher in a free labour system as black workers already within the colonial labour system were almost immediately subject to a harsh master-and-servant law. Montagu established the infirmary partly to remove disabled prisoners and patients from gaols which were to be turned into labour pools for public works. He thus made his major distinction between two groups of unfree labourers: the useful convict labourer (who could be used and reformed as a worker) and the incurable already-institutionalized pauper (who should be sent even further away from society – to Robben Island).

In the Cape the demand for asylum reform was less a response to the reorganization of ‘industrial activity’ (industrialization happened much later) than a symbolic gesture to the outside world, especially Britain, from a ‘new class of persons’ seeking greater local autonomy within the empire. Greene (1987, 214) has suggested that colonial elites of the nineteenth century found it necessary to employ a ‘language of improvement’ and an insistence on the standards of the mother country in order to bolster their poor status in the metropole. The Cape, with a lower status than other colonies such as India, was especially vulnerable — the Cape Town middle class in particular would have experienced a heightened insecurity *vis-à-vis* the standards of the metropole and the threat of the urban underclasses with the hope of representative government in the air (Bank 1991, 4–5; McKenzie 1991, 133–4). Reforming the island asylum along humanitarian lines became a demonstration of the colony’s modernity and readiness for self-rule. It is not coincidental therefore that the main impetus for reform of the island asylum occurred between the granting to the

Cape of representative government from Britain in 1853 and responsible government in 1872.

The much older image of the island as a place of banishment did not fit well with its new role as a place of humanitarian cure. It was too isolated from society<sup>5</sup> and not sufficiently fertile to provide the leafy country-style atmosphere considered so essential for mental relaxation. After initial plans to remove the asylum failed, considerable resources were spent on changing the physical environment of the institution during the 1860s. Surgeon-superintendent William Edmunds, appointed in 1862, personified the scientific humanitarianism of the new reforms. Edmunds felt that the treatment of lunatics should be everywhere the same, i.e. the same as in Britain. By the early 1870s, when Edmunds died, the asylum had implemented moral management and non-restraint methods common in British asylums. It paid its staff three times the going wage for domestic servants in Cape Town and attracted sufficient applicants to staff the asylum with a ratio of one attendant to twelve patients (in contrast to a ratio of one in twenty-five which had existed in the 1850s). As a measure of his success, the number of middle-class female patients increased substantially.

By the late 1870s however the island's middle-class patients began to favour the new asylum in Grahamstown. More white patients were now considered by doctors to be amenable to psychological treatment and to be more curable (Biccard 1880, 9). Mainland asylums were felt to be more likely to provide the proper conditions for their treatment: green fields and controlled contact with good society. The Robben Island asylum was thought most suitable for the black insane because it provided opportunities for unsupervised freedom without the danger of escape, as the under colonial secretary, Captain Mills, explained (*ibid.*, 3):

With regard to the Kafir, the closer you can assimilate his condition to that of his normal state the better. I think it

would be a mistake to confine Kafirs to a house and tie them to one spot. For that reason I think the asylum on Robben Island is particularly suited for natives.

The Robben Island asylum was now conceived as part of a system where black and white lunatics required different treatment in separate asylums. The island, most suitable for the supposedly less curable black patients, was once again a place of banishment rather than cure.

Robben Island's tenacious associations with imprisonment and the racial segregation of asylum populations thus scuppered attempts in the mid-nineteenth century to recast it as a symbol of modernity through the reform of the lunatic asylum. The same reversal is unlikely to happen today because its dark history as a prison forms the very basis of its positive symbolic role as 'universality' of the struggle, teacher of the past, and moral beacon for the future. This positive reconstruction may encourage some South Africans to feel that the shift from prison to museum on Robben Island cleanses us all of the horrors of apartheid. By making the island prison the focus of our memory of apartheid, we also run the risk, as with all memorials, of ossifying and simplifying the meaning of the past. It is indeed a gateway to the new democratic South Africa which symbolizes the moral strength of the anti-apartheid movement in the face of harsh repression, but it is not only that. A museum of apartheid may allow the erasure of personal memories as it tries to construct a public memory. As the island comes to stand for South Africa's transformation to modernity after apartheid – for its new focus on eco-tourism<sup>6</sup> from the 1970s or its new reputation as a shining example of human rights observance<sup>7</sup> in the 1990s – it should not absolve us of the duty to make this transformation happen.

## Conclusion

There has been a fundamental shift in the symbolism of the island over the recent period of transition to democracy. Robben Island is no longer simply a repository of all that was considered negative in society ('communism and terrorism' on one hand or 'apartheid oppression' on the other). It is no longer a place for outcasts but houses what is at the heart of the new South Africa. It has been re-presented as a focus for remembering apartheid and a spearhead for national renewal. Its symbolic meaning has once again made the transition from negative to positive, its symbolic position from outside to inside. This shift, and the physical transition from high-security prison to a public and positive national monument, has only become possible after the release of political prisoners from the island and South Africa's transition to a democratic government. Through the public memories of high-profile island prisoners the history of Robben Island has become a marker of the broader transformation of South Africa as a whole. Like the Robben Islanders, the 'imprisoned society'<sup>8</sup> has been liberated from apartheid. The Robben Island story has thus become an important element in the construction of a new national identity around the observance of 'human rights'.

Although the Robben Island Museum project will clearly play a vital part in the construction of a national identity after apartheid, we should keep in mind, as the museum staff do, that any history or commemoration that it provides will necessarily be selective in its remembering and forgetting – precisely because of the island's vital role in national reconstruction. There is always a danger that the celebration of victory might exclude the individual memories of those who fell by the wayside during the anti-apartheid struggle as well as those who were always on the other side. Concentrating on the national symbolic role of the island may also unwittingly distract us from remembering individual activists, both on and off the island. The employment of

ex-prisoners as tour guides around the island may help to ground visitors' experiences on the island in the personal suffering and heroism of individual prisoners.<sup>9</sup> Situated outside the country, in a place untouched by most South Africans until now, the island's story has to be related very concretely to South Africa's history, to ensure that visitors are encouraged to think deeply enough about their own parts in the dissonant symphony of apartheid and their role in the country's future. The island's story should also permit diversity: if it is to be a living monument for the new South Africa its great opportunity lies, as Huyssen (1994, 16) says of the Holocaust monument, in its opening outwards to other accounts of our past and our future. Ultimately, it will form just one (albeit important) part of a wider memorial culture instead of being a single, over-determined reference to one sorrow and one victory.