

Luli Callinicos, *Gold and Workers* 1886-1924

A People's History of South Africa. Volume One. Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1980.

by Ruth Edgecombe

Usually in South Africa historiography, there is a huge time lag between what historians think and what the public reads, and particularly between modern research findings and what appears in school history text books. New perspectives opened up by life and scholarship tend to be confined to specialist publications. *Gold and Workers*, a simply written and lavishly illustrated book, which has possibilities both as a general reader and a school textbook, is a unique and refreshing exception to this trend.

Gold and Workers reflects conclusions stemming from work and research done at the Institute of African Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, and ideas exchanged at reading groups in Johannesburg and Cape Town. In these contexts academic historians began asking questions about 'the people' – who they were, where they came from and how they shaped their lives. More specifically the book grew out of the first Social History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1978 and is largely based on papers presented there. It is offered as 'one contribution' to work that is still to be done.

The main theme of the book is the rise of the gold mining industry from 1886 to 1924, a theme chosen in the belief that gold imposed the 'pattern of a special form of capitalism' on South Africa – a pattern that developed and is continuing to develop in the present. Traditionally the story of the gold mining industry has been depicted as one of progress, usually related to the stirring feats of the randlords who gained great wealth and shaped the future of the country. This book has a different perspective: it stresses the high price of progress and describes 'the struggle for survival of those whose hands made the wealth, the workers who came to eGoli' – how gold gradually drew them into a capitalist system which developed and ultimately affected every part of their lives.

Major aspects analysed are: the impact of gold and the changes it wrought; the creation and control of workers; the ways in which they were forced off the land to become wage earners – the migrant labour system, the compound system, the contract and methods for keeping wages low. The final theme is the emergence of workers' resistance – desertions, strikes, boycotts, wage campaigns and embryonic political action. The story is primarily that of black workers because the mineowners succeeded in separating out white workers who became a small, well-paid elite as opposed to the mass of ill-paid black workers.

The book shows how the first generation of black workers on the Rand, who considered themselves as farmers belonging to a chiefdom, gradually evolved a worker consciousness in their resistance to the mine-owners. Although resistance in the first generation failed to change the basic system of labour control or raise low wages, subsequent years would see the emergence of more organised resistance, both politically and at work. The story of this is promised in a subsequent volume.



The striking feature of the book is the wealth of illustrations – photographs (although regrettably the sources of all but a few are not identified) sketches, cartoons and diagrams. The photographs depict vividly the nature of life and work on the mines, and have been chosen with skill and care. Cartoons and diagrams by Andy Mason are used to illustrate in simple terms such complex issues as capital, the mining of gold and the cycle of poverty in the reserves. One particularly striking cartoon is that of a minehead atop a huge mouth with jagged teeth, rearing out of the earth to swallow up an endless stream of workers. Several chapters are enlivened with extracts from books, poems, and songs drawn from all over Southern Africa. For instance, a Zulu song captures this experience of the Pass Office:

'Take off your hat.
 What is your name?
 Who is your father?
 Who is your chief?
 Where do you pay your tax?
 What river do you drink?
 We mourn for our country.'

The purpose and point of view from which the book is written are clearly stated:—

'In the compound, in the townships, in the labour bureaus, in the reserves, the pattern created by South Africa's early industrialisation is still with us — the present is our history. Understanding the past is a first step towards changing the pattern of the present.'

The book is dedicated to those who have 'the capacity to make **this** knowledge powerful'. There is always the danger that **acutely** felt needs of the present can be a severely distorting medium through which to approach the past — whether it is a passionate desire to preserve the status quo (cf article two of the principles of Christian National Education which puts history second only to the mother tongue as a means of inculcating a particular world view) or an equally passionate desire to change present evils. In such circumstances history is in danger of degenerating into mere propaganda — a situation in which, as Hobsbawm once put it,

'Nobody . . . can be allowed to do without history, mostly of a legendary kind, and every educational system of the globe bears witness to this fact. It is what old nations use to confirm their permanence, new ones to compensate for their novelty. Remote golden ages or the sufferings of a more recent past encourage revolutionaries, and if they are victorious, the heroic achievements of a still more recent past form the staple of classroom teaching and political oration'. (1)

FOOTNOTES TO DURBAN'S HOUSING CRISIS

1. Hemson, C — 'Durban's Housing in Crisis' in REALITY VOL. No. 3, May, 1981.
2. Durban Housing Action Committee — "1981: Housing Struggles intensify", mimeo 1981.
3. Ibid, P 4A
4. Potgieter, J. F. — The Household Subsistence Level in the major Urban Centres of the Republic of South Africa, October, 1980. Institute of Planning Research, University of Port Elizabeth.
5. Haarhoff, E. J. "Indian Squatters at New Farm and Isipingo Farm: A Physical Survey." "Low cost Housing Research Project, School of Architecture and Economic Research Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 1971.
6. Cato Manor Residents Association : "Cato Manor", mimeo, 1981 p. 3.
7. The Natal Mercury, 24th July, 1981.
8. Durban Housing Action Committee, 1981, p. 1.
9. Hemson, C. 1981 p. 16
10. This table is based on that in Durban Housing Action Committee, 1981, p. 4B.
11. This table is based on that in a "Memorandum from the Durban Housing Action Committee for consideration at the Joint Meeting of the Management and Health and Housing Committee on the 16th April, 1981", p. 6.
12. Ibid, p. 6 — 7.

All historical writing is biased in varying degrees because of such inescapable factors as the ideological preconceptions of the historian, the incomplete nature of the sources he has to work with, the fact that the bulk of his sources are in themselves the products of the minds of men, the fact that any historical writing depends on selection, and so on. School textbooks and general readers are particularly prone to bias because of the high degree of selection involved and the tendency to use them as tools for political ends. **Gold and Workers** demonstrates this. Mineowners, for instance, because they are depicted as 'products of a **system** in which they occupied a particular class position', have only one view in mind — 'maximum profits at the least possible expense'. Their motives are shown as no more complex than this. This is particularly evident in the account of Cecil Rhodes — 'The King of the Randlords' on page 19. Was he interested only in wealth as such, or was it a means to other ends such as the pursuit of power and his imperialist visions? Another example of distortion through over-simplification is the depiction of black subsistence society in the pre-industrial era as a kind of pastoral idyll to give point to the undoubted sufferings and evils caused by the advent of gold mining.

Yet **Gold and Workers** should be introduced into the classroom, where there is all too little critical awareness of the motives and points of view of authors of textbooks which shape their accounts of past events. The author of **Gold and Workers** makes her standpoint clear and explicit. It can serve as an example for examining textbooks in current use which are less explicit in this regard. In turn this can give point to the need for pupils and teachers alike to examine their own preconceptions which influence their perceptions of the past. This is an essential first step in limiting the abuse of history. Moreover, **Gold and Workers**, as a lucid and moving account of black workers in the early phase of industrialisation, highlights a hitherto neglected aspect of our history. In conjunction with other sources it can serve as a means of understanding, insofar as it can be done, the past as a **whole**, and not merely from the perspective of any particular group. Understanding is the prime function of the study of history. While "presentism" can never be entirely eliminated, the study of the past, should, in the first instance, be approached for its own sake. Understanding the past is the key to understanding the present. And when the present is understood thought can be given to future action.

1. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Growth of an audience', **Times Literary Supplement**, 7 April 1966.

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