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Environment, Power, and Justice:  
Southern African Histories

# Environment, Power, and Justice

Southern African Histories

Edited by

Graeme Wynn, Jane Carruthers,  
and Nancy J. Jacobs

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*To a better world, for generations to come*



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## PREFACE

Aldo Leopold, a Homeric figure of the American environmental movement, reflected in his essay “Good Oak” on the work of cutting down a tree on his property in rural Wisconsin. As the newly filed saw bit through the trunk, wood spilled from the cut and accumulated on the snow in front of each kneeling sawyer. Stroke by stroke the sawdust piles grew. Together they represented “the chronology of a lifetime written in the concentric annual rings” of the sturdy oak.

This evocative description of once-familiar manual labor has often been taken as an allegory for the work of history. The little chips of wood pulled from the tree by the saw are the historian’s facts, forming archives or piles of information about the past. Loggers and historians both draw inferences about larger wholes from the fragments (of wood or evidence) exposed by their efforts, until finally the metaphorical tree falls, and a more complete picture of the past is revealed in the accumulated record of the stump. There the skilled interpreter finds, in the traces of tree rings, burn scars, and other marks, the story of changing circumstances, of drought and temperature, and of human presence across the years, just as the historian composes a revealing account of lives gone by from the links and juxtapositions of information in archives and other sources. But there were other messages in Leopold’s tale. His story was also about the centuries of natural history that sustain human activities on earth and the importance of thinking ethically about the intricate connections between people and places, societies and nature through time.

This seems a good place to begin, because this book, like Leopold’s good oak, has deep roots and a complex history. It is the work of almost a dozen scholars of different ages, from very different backgrounds, educated in a variety of disciplines and settings, and trained in a wide range of disciplines. Yet we find common ground and united purpose in our shared interest in the past and present of southern Africa and in the larger issues of social and environmental justice that continue to beset the world in which we live. Together, we also hope the injustices will become less egregious over time, in some small way through our

collective effort in these pages but more efficaciously through the good sense and gathering wisdom of the generations that follow us.

The immediate origins of this book lie in a conversation between Nancy Jacobs and Graeme Wynn, sparked by the 2017 announcement of the program theme for the annual conference of the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) in 2018: “Environment, Power, and Justice.” Graeme had recently returned from a spell as visiting fellow at Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies, which had driven home for him the radically different discourses around environment, power, and justice in southern Africa and North America. Recognizing the parallels between the new program theme and the title of Nancy’s 2003 book, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History*, he broached with Nancy the prospect of devoting a session of the 2018 conference to showcase southern African work on the theme. With a special session within his purview to organize as ASEH president, this was easily achieved. Graeme and Nancy quickly agreed that Jane Carruthers (a leading figure among environmental historians in South Africa, and recent past president of the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations) should be one of our panelists. Further conversations among the three of us led us to approach Jacob Dlamini, Muchaparara Musemwa, and Sandra Swart as potential participants and happily fill out the panel when they agreed to attend the conference in Riverside, California.

“Environment, Power, and Injustice in Southern African Histories” proved to be a lively, well-attended session, despite its 8:30 a.m. start time on Friday morning. Sandra Swart spoke about “The Animal in the Mirror—Baboons and the Politics of Power”; Jacob Dlamini focused on “Ka-Skukuza: The Kruger National Park in the Political Calculus of the Lowveld”; Muchaparara Musemwa addressed “The Environment-Power-Injustice Nexus through the Lens of Water in Zimbabwe”; and Jane Carruthers offered her thoughts on “Power to the People! Energy, Environment, and Equity in South African History.”

Buoyed by this exchange, we three editors began to envisage a larger, more lasting follow-up project. You hold the result in your hands. In retrospect, the path from Riverside to Ohio University Press was both more tortuous and more gratifying than we envisaged. Four years of hard work lie between the conference and the appearance of the book. We began by recruiting contributors—approaching colleagues whose work on the general themes we had in mind intrigued us—to ask for

suggestions and to extend invitations to join us. Unfortunately, some whom we hoped to include were unable (or unwilling) to commit to the project. Then, inevitably, there were unforeseen bumps along the road, from the personal to the pandemic; some who agreed to contribute withdrew; others who participated initially were unable to continue; restrictions on travel introduced in response to the COVID-19 situation in March 2020 led to the cancelation of much anticipated opportunities to meet and collaborate in person. Perhaps most disappointingly, a writing residency at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, Italy, that would have granted the editors opportunity to collaborate on the introduction and afterword fell victim to the virus. So, too, did a couple of our contributors' scheduled visits to Vancouver to present early versions of their work.

On the other hand, there has been much that is good and remarkable about the road we have traversed together. Contributors came through in spades and on time and were exemplary in engaging with the copious comments of hyperactive editors. Green College, a residential college for graduate students and postdocs from across the University of British Columbia (UBC), and a lively center of intellectual life on the campus, provided funding for a thematic lecture series that enabled several contributors to present early versions of their ideas to engaged audiences between September 2019 and spring 2020. These visits were also supported, financially and otherwise, by the departments of History and Geography and the African Studies Programme at UBC. We extend our thanks to Principal Mark Vessey, the staff at Green College, and the heads of the other departments and programs involved for their important support. Together they helped to impart momentum to the project that sustained it, despite the early withdrawal of one of our scheduled speakers, the failure of another—who presented in Vancouver—to revise or submit his work, and the disappointment of those whose springtime visits to this fair city were stayed by the virus that turned much of the world inward as this book came into shape.

From the editors' perspective this project has carried us on a Homeric odyssey—a remarkable intellectual journey in the virtual company of our contributors and each other. We think it safe and true to say that none of the essays, reflections, and arguments presented in the pages that follow are quite what any of us envisioned when we began—but that they are the better for that. To belabor the Aldo Leopold reference with which we began, we editors might be likened to the kneeling sawyers, but it

is the work of the contributors whose writing appears in these pages that has, without question, raised the good oak of historical reflection on matters of transcending importance to even greater glory than we imagined possible at the outset.

Finally, a few more specific acknowledgments. The beautiful maps in this book are all the work of Eric Leinberger, the remarkably gifted cartographer associated with the Department of Geography at UBC. His skill in translating the uncertain sketches and verbal instructions of those who thought that a map or two might help into valuable, integral parts of the book is remarkable; his patience in dealing with the local editor has been equally impressive. No book sees the light of day without the work and support of many people whose names never appear in the table of contents. We thank Jim Webb, of Colby College, general editor of the series in which this volume appears, and Rick Huard of Ohio University Press, for their support of this project. We extend overall thanks to the press for its expert and courteous handling of the publishing process and to Christopher Merrett for his skillful compilation of the index. The comments of the two anonymous reviewers of the original manuscript, commissioned by the press, were probing, thoughtful, and supportive; they did much to tighten and improve the organization of the book and challenged us to move beyond the place that time had allowed us to reach in our editors' "end papers." The Publication Fund of the History Department of Brown University generously paid fees for the cover illustration, Johnny Miller's "unequal scene" of the segregated landscape of the town of Stellenbosch, the township of Kayamandi, and the mountains behind. Finally, we are very pleased to recognize the University of British Columbia's global commitment, realized here by its donation of a clothbound copy of this book to forty institutions of higher education in Lesotho, South Africa, and Zimbabwe through the Office of the Vice-Provost International.

Ultimately, this has been a team effort, and we as editors are privileged to have had the opportunity to work together, and with our fine, thoughtful, and creative contributors. Would that all academic endeavors encompassed such reassuring, intellectually stimulating, and ultimately rewarding toil.