

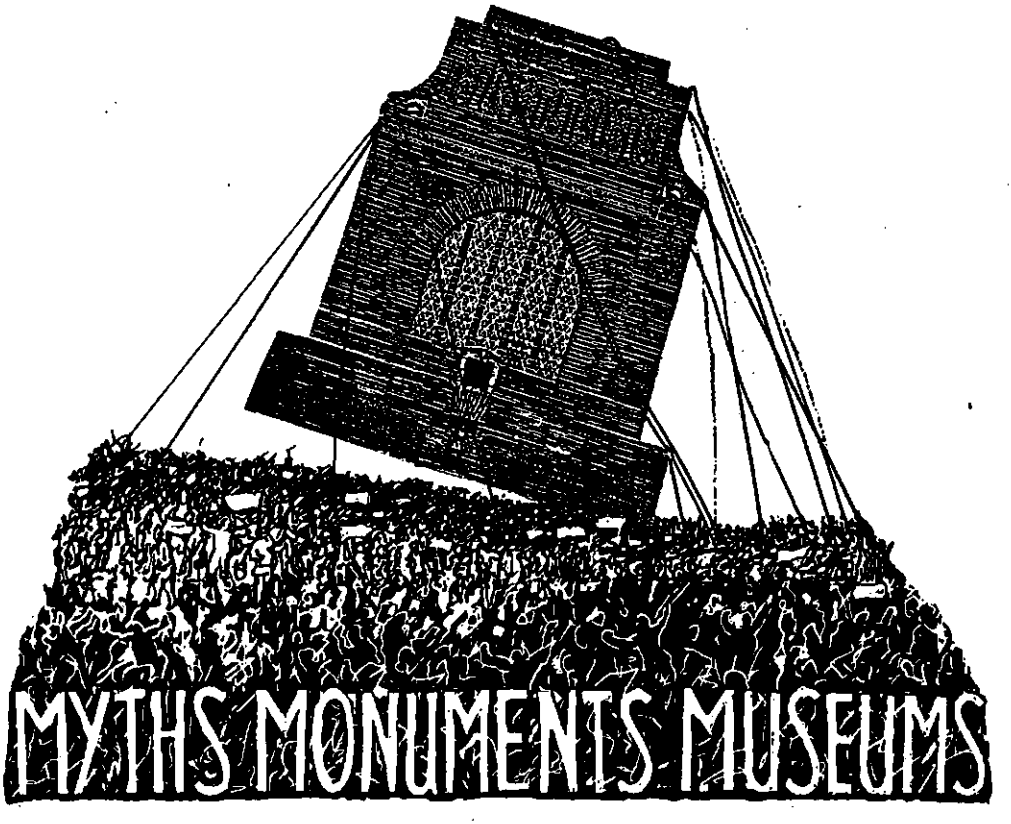
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Changing the subtext: coping with bias in museums and the historical record in South Africa today

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
HISTORY WORKSHOP

CHANGING THE SUBTEXT: COPING WITH BIAS IN MUSEUMS AND THE HISTORICAL RECORD IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY



D Y SAKS

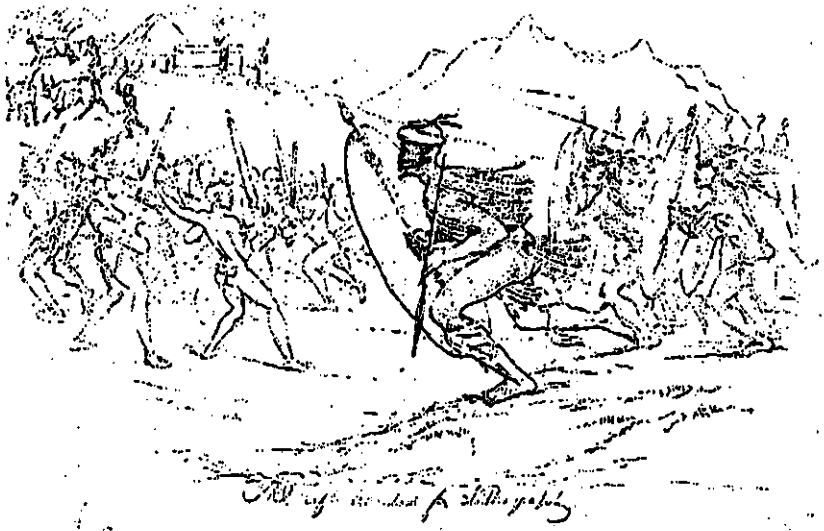
AFRICANA MUSEUM
JOHANNESBURG.

AFRICANA

Changing the Subtext: Coping with Bias in Museums and the Historical Record in South Africa Today

Because time is limited, the following observations will merely sketch in outline various areas of bias in traditional South African historiography and some of the ways in which museums can counter it. In essence, bias in the South African context has been a case of a dominant white minority presenting a view of South African history which has served to obscure the realities of the colonization of blacks by whites by subtly, and all too often not so subtly, shifting the onus of guilt onto the shoulders of blacks themselves. Museums and national monument councils have played an important role in this self-exculpatory and fundamentally false version of the past. I have chosen, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, five areas in which the imposition of white rule has been elaborately justified by such means as the building or proclaiming of carefully selected national monuments, the choice of public holidays and commemorative festivals and the ideologically-bound choice and presentation of the historical evidence in museum displays.

The first of these five examples, which has obvious relevance to South Africans today, is the issue of black-on-black violence. By dwelling at length on the alleged tyranny of black leaders and the fratricidal nature of black civil wars, it is easy to advance the conclusion that the imposition of white rule rescued black people from their own self-destructive natures. An obvious example is the *mfecane* in which the apparently genocidal effects of inter-black strife during the 1820s are said to have cleared the way for white settlement in the interior. The following drawing, by Charles Bell, shows Matabele warriors attacking a Bechuana kraal in 1835. A similarly bloodthirsty depiction of Matabele warriors on the charge is on display in the Fort Schanskop Museum of Military History in Pretoria. Significantly, this emotive picture has been mounted immediately before a section dealing with the Voortrekker conquest of Mzilikazi's kingdom, a clear example of a biased subtext which implicitly justifies a white invasion.



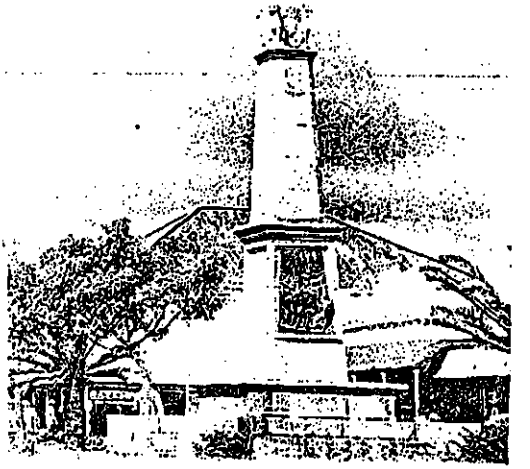
No 179. Matabili attack on a Bechuana kraal. 1835.

Example number two is the strong emphasis place on black-white negotiations. This emphasis serves to imply that land passed from black hands to white by civilized agreement rather than by force, and that subsequent wars between the two were caused by blacks failing to observe the terms of the agreements arrived at. Such negotiations are always initiated by whites and it is assumed that black parties to the treaties had complete knowledge of their terms and complete authority to make them.

One of the most often represented negotiations episode is that between the Zulu king Dingane and the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief in February 1838. The following is a photograph of one of the panels of the historical frieze in the Voortrekker Monument depicting this event. There is much that can be said about it, but it will suffice to point out that the fact that Retief's followers are standing proud and erect whereas Dingane's subjects are all squatting makes an obvious contrast between Zulu tyranny and trekker democracy.



Also used to represent the struggle between the forces of covilization and of barbarism is the theme of warfare between black and white in which blacks are usually shown in an unfavourable light, even in clearout cases of white aggression. There are many examples of how incidents in these wars have become enshrined in the folklore of the white supremist ideology and which have become further entrenched by the erection of national monuments or the naming of towns or streets after whites killed, the latter frequently accorded the status of martyred heroes (examples include the towns of Wepener in the Free State and Roossenekal in the Transvaal). This marble pillar in High Street, Grahamstown, commemorates the probably apocraphyl incident during the 1819 Battle of Grahamstown in which a soldier's wife, Elizabeth Salt, reputedly smuggled gunpowder through to the beleagered soldiers



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intrepidly fighting off hordes of black attackers. Because one's sympathies naturally tend to be with the defending side, little emphasis has been placed on instances in which whites attacke blacks. This well-known painting of the Isandhlwana battle, with its dominant theme of British courage in adversity, is a typical example.



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It goes without saying that the merciless attrition which was employed to bring recalcitrant black tribes to their knees is seldom if ever allowed to form part of the popular picture. This matter-of-fact engraving, which shows Colonel MacKinnon's columns burning kraals during the 8th Frontier War, has thus not tended to be the type of material to be highlighted in South African museums up until now.



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A more subtle variation of the white supremist ideology, in which European expansion is shown as a positive, civilizing force, is the strong emphasis that has tended to be placed on missionary activity. Thereby the facts of conquest and dispossession are obscured by images of patriarchal white missionaries bringing the light of Christianity to the benighted heathen as in the following watercolour by Charles Bell. The subtext of this emphasis is that the said heathen should be grateful to their white conquerors.



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involved in the conquest of blacks have been elevated to ludicrously exalted positions within the traditional framework of white supremist historiography. This is true of Robert Godlonton, a rabid exponent of settler race paranoia on the Eastern Frontier, who has been immortalized by a highly flattering marble bust in the Albany Museum. It is especially true of Sir Harry Smith, now generally regarded as a bullying, somewhat unbalanced conquistadore but to whom traditional historiography has been excessively kind. This unwarranted adulation has influenced the historical record to a considerable degree with numerous towns having been named directly or indirectly after him (eg. Aliwal North and Smithfield) and with surviving portraits consistantly showing him in an heroic or aristocratic mould. The following print, showing Smith in later life, creates the image of a grave and dignified elderly warrior which in turn tends to obscure the less savoury facts of the subject's life.



Problems and Strategies

Clearly putting right the great imbalances built into the official historical record will be no easy task. As is well-known, nearly all national monuments are representative of white history. It is important to note that the term "national monument" need not merely denote a granite obelisk stuck in the ground or an old building with a bronze plaque affixed to it. The definition can be broadened to include, inter alia, commemorative medals, romanticized historical paintings, the naming of towns and streets, the national flag and anthem and historically-related public holidays. Supplementing and where necessary replacing these symbols will entail great expense and will in all likelihood generate bitter controversy.

The inevitable legacy of an ideologically slanted museums policy is that museum collections are overwhelmingly pertinent to white history. It is perhaps also fair to add that whites tend to be more concerned with preserving the physical evidence of their past and have made most of the donations to museums. What this means, of course, is that the settlement of 1820 and the Great Trek are heavily represented whereas material relating to, say, Shaka's kingdom, has been lost.

Certain changes are easy to make, and at the very least museum labels and introductory texts need to be carefully redrafted to provide a broader and more balanced summary of the relevant historical context. It is also possible to lessen the Eurocentric nature of many themes by subsuming them within newer, more neutral frameworks. An example of this is the First British Occupation of 1795-1802, a subject given far too much prominence in school textbooks and indeed in the present Africana Museum display. Plans for a new Africana Museum display have included this topic in a general theme dealing with the evolution of Cape government after 1795 which will be less concerned with the social life of Lady Anne Barnard than with the growth of representative institutions and colour policies. Moreover, and if properly employed, the inversion of well-known events involving blacks and whites can be a valuable revisionist strategy. The implications for, say, the Great Trek, would be that

hitherto employed, one could experiment with a Zulucentric "We were over here and then they arrived" paradigm.

Of course, the national-ideological overtones of the trek to Natal, themselves a later invention, are to be avoided. This principle applies to all examples of the historical record which tend to say more about the worldview of the recorders than about the events they are depicting for prosperity. It is therefore vital that romanticized Victorian renditions of Zulu War episodes be shown at least in part as examples of the nationalist-imperialist ethos that prevailed at the time. Allowing the visitor to accept them at face value will perpetuate past distortions rather than educate. And at this crucial stage in our country's history, those museums which neglect to recognise and correct past mistakes risk making themselves redundant in the new South Africa.

D Saks
Africana Museum 13 May '92