

BOOK REVIEW

Marc Epprecht. *Welcome to Greater Edendale: Histories of Environment, Health, and Gender in an African City*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. xii + 342 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. \$110.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-7735-4772-5. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-7735-4772-2.

Welcome to Greater Edendale by Marc Epprecht occupies a complex political position. Its empirical methodological principles are conservative. Yet the author's political, social, and environmental sympathies tend toward the radical in more than one direction: the book aims to decolonize historical understandings, overturn nationalist narratives, and challenge pro-growth economic thinking. This mix of conservative and radical is not so unusual, but in this book Epprecht commends a mid-twentieth century liberal experiment while also criticizing the injustices inherent in post-apartheid policies. Some parts of this tight study of a little-known place can only be appreciated by specialists, but the mix of radical, liberal, and conservative demands close attention and deserves serious discussion.

Epprecht provides a history of black residential sections of the Msunduzi municipality, best known for including Pietermaritzburg. Edendale was originally founded as a mission station; it next grew into a multiracial freehold settlement and then became the main black township in segregated Maritzburg. Rather than covering Edendale or Msunduzi comprehensively, the book is designed as a series of chronologically arranged case studies, although it also reads well as a monograph.

Epprecht deploys an "ecohealth" approach that draws together environment, social inequalities, health, gender (particularly women's experiences), and sexuality. That said, the state is definitely the central actor in this story; Epprecht parses different forms of administration over time to understand their repercussions on women's lives and public health.

The early chapters offer a critical historiography of black townships, which I recommend to social scientists of South Africa as well as to specialists in urban and environmental studies in other areas of Africa. Epprecht makes a case that many interpretive tendencies—colonial nostalgia, conservationism, progress narratives, anti-growth discourse, and crisis narratives—have created blind spots blocking new questions about the eco-health history of black urban areas. In this critique, Epprecht is generous, careful, and self-aware in differentiating this argument from those that went before.

For example, Epprecht returns several times to questions of a “sanitation syndrome,” the health-obsessed segregationist impulse, first identified by Maynard Swanson. Epprecht appreciates Swanson’s analysis and recognizes that South African health science was politicized. Nevertheless, Epprecht holds that in the decades since Swanson’s observations, some histories have gestured toward a “sanitation syndrome” without close examination of local evidence. In the place of the segregation-by-sanitation-syndrome argument, Epprecht argues that Pietermaritzburg city planners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not particularly associate Africans with unhealthy environments. In point of fact, this book argues, Edendale was the site of a “relatively radical experiment in local government and social medicine” in the 1940s and 1950s (129). Here is a strong plea to take the social benefits of liberalism seriously.

The Local Health Commission (LHC) of the 1940s and 1950s is at the crux of Epprecht’s argument. Chapter Five describes the interplay between landholders of different races, national and provincial governments, and members of the African Christian elite that led to this new form of local authority governed by a multiracial advisory board. The politics were local and truly contested; African women mounted successful challenges to the LHC’s social health ambitions. They objected to proposals for intimate surveillance of their reproductive practices and health, regulations on livestock keeping, and prohibition on beer brewing.

Notably, Epprecht deems this local government experiment successful: “Edendale for a short time bucked the national apartheid trend” (171). Epprecht judges that the LHC remained oriented toward a promise of non-racialism until 1953, when it was undone by national developments. Over subsequent years, the segregationist mandate was imposed on Edendale and the multiracial settlement “became black.” Periodization matters to Epprecht; in this account, South African segregation did not rise inexorably from 1910 through 1948 and beyond. The tipping point toward segregation in Edendale was in the early 1950s, when the national government shut down this local experiment.

As previous chapters disturbed the periodization of segregation in South Africa, Chapter 7 questions whether 1994 qualifies as a watershed. Evaluating the quality of the environment, Epprecht stresses continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid governments. Giving the requisite survey of RDP, GEAR, and HIV-AIDS, Epprecht disputes any characterization of post-1994 development as sustainable (although a good part of the problem has been the toxic legacy of earlier decades). The deeper problem is contemporary South Africa’s commitment to the principle of growth.

The final chapter is wide-ranging, moving through the environmental and health repercussions of many issues: proportional representation, black economic empowerment, corruption, and the status of traditional authorities. The current political and health environment have fueled nostalgia and xenophobia. Epprecht ends by advocating the productive

possibilities of degrowth. The concluding suggestion is that the unrecognized achievements of the social medicine experiment can yet be achieved by some other unexpected unorthodox development in local government. Epprecht hopes this history will inspire in current policy debates, but *Welcome to Edendale* makes the case about ill-formed policies and consequent constraints so thoroughly that changing directions toward degrowth and better eco-health brings to mind the metaphor of turning a supertanker.

Nancy J. Jacobs

Brown University

Providence, Rhode Island

nancy_jacobs@brown.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2018.108

For more reading on this subject, see:

Cherry, Janet. 1999. "Declining Democracy? A Case Study of Political Participation in Kwazakele Township, Port Elizabeth." *African Studies Review* 27 (2): 48–52. doi:10.1017/S1548450500006089.

Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2017. "Africa from the Margins." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 37–49. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.47.

Tomlinson, Richard. 1988. "South Africa: Competing Images of the Post-Apartheid State." *African Studies Review* 31 (2): 35–60. doi:10.2307/524418.