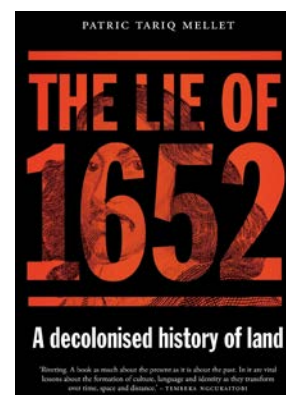


The Lie of 1652: A decolonised history of land

Patric Tariq Mellet

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Review by Desiree Lewis



Desiree Lewis is a professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of the Western Cape. She teaches and writes in the areas of cultural studies, critical race and postcolonial theory, feminism and, more recently, food as material culture.

It is rare to read such a meticulously researched historical study that uses the term “soul”, that so frequently foregrounds the writer’s biography and ancestry, and that so insistently refers to the centrality of corrective history in healing. Patric Mellet’s insistence on the affective functions of historiography reflects his conviction that struggles around land in southern Africa are not simply about resource ownership or control and juridical rights. They also have profound existential, ontological and identity-constituting implications.

Mellet develops a holistic and interdisciplinary approach. Drawing eclectically on linguistics, archaeology, climatology and genetics, the author resolutely sifts through different archives in dislodging the dominant narratives, tropes and icons that continue to limit understandings of South Africa’s past and present. While the book focuses on overturning the myth of Jan van Riebeeck’s “discovery” of a stagnant and sparsely populated Cape in 1652, it expansively debunks colonial archives as sources for South African history.

As a student in the 1980s I was fascinated by historians’ contestations about how to explain the mass migration and social upheaval among

Africans in the late 19th Century. A pivotal voice in this debate was J. D. Omer-Cooper’s Africanist argument that southern Africa, prior to the arrival of Europeans, was characterised by massive social upheaval and the dramatic evolution of African polities.

Mellet’s sustained critique of what he calls the “1652 paradigm” echoes the politics of Omer-Cooper’s intervention into colonial history. It also takes up recent 21st Century decolonial calls. It exposes the hegemony of colonial epistemology, and the extent to which neocolonial fabrications are perpetuated even in recent histories that are presented as revisionist or authentically “African”. Arguing that African-centred processes – independent of the driving force of colonialism – can be traced far back to centuries BCE, Mellet compellingly shows how migration, labour, social organisation, cultural activity, linguistic change, trade and technological innovation were all vibrant processes long before the seemingly defining moments foregrounded in so much historiography.

The book’s dislodging of colonial beginnings and climax is probably the most powerful intervention in his decolonial approach. By refusing to

fixate on storytelling with reference to the arrival of settlers, or to the 19th century, Mellet compiles a history that is highly relevant to our current understanding of social agency, development, justice and progress.

Because the author takes on so many entrenched myths, it is hard to do justice to the scope of his decolonial intervention. In fact, some readers may find the book over-ambitious: it covers a lot of ground (spanning the period from 1000 BCE to the 21st Century) and also homes in on meticulous detail, such as biographical discussions of Krotoa or Autshumao. But what is path-breaking about this book is its disclosure of new ways of beginning, plotting and peopling historical storytelling that consistently centre Africans, and that do not define Africans as adjuncts in other’s biographical narratives.

In line with his resolutely interdisciplinary perspective, Mellet draws on linguistics, archaeology and genetics in describing the peopling of South Africa. Emphatic about “a real postcolonial shift” rather than “putting a spin on history for political expedience and material claims” (p. 60), Mellet emphasises that the San, conventionally stereotyped in terms of phenotype, location and

mode of production, have always been remarkably heterogeneous and dispersed. Related insights are given into the Khoe, with the book stressing early contact between the Khoe and Europeans in the 15th Century and a long tradition of Khoe resistance to colonial domination. In contrast to the environmentally exploitative, masculinist, classist and racist systems that colonialism was to bequeath, the Khoe society that Mellet describes is marked by gender role flexibility, non-exploitative relationships to nature, and tolerance and flexibility in the face of difference.

It is striking how Mellet exposes the intransigence of colonial formulae in histories of the peopling of South Africa. For example, by using accessible evidence in maritime history, he questions the wisdom of authoritative historians such as Elphick: contrary to Elphick's claim that van Riebeeck's arrival was one of the very few contacts between Europeans and Africans at the Cape, the author draws on maritime records to show that numerous ships had stopped over at that time, and that frequent Khoe engagements with Europeans must have preceded his arrival. The omission of the clear evidence provided by maritime history is one example of the way in which historiography has settled into blind spots – irrespective of the abundant evidence of other histories to be told.

A similar unsettling of historiography's clichéd stories is Mellet's account of migrations and community formations that blur the divides among areas now known as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa and Botswana. In this sense, the book presents an empirically grounded corrective to current ethnocentric and nationalist identity politics. The othering of “non-South African Africans” is not only shown to be reactionary, but also proved to be absurd. Equally absurd is the reification of ethnic groups often still

believed to have always had very distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. The common understanding that pre-colonial South Africa had exactly so many distinct ethnic groups breaks down totally under Mellet's scrutiny of centuries of linguistic blurring, physical movement and social reconfiguration. His explanation of slavery at the Cape also explodes the myth of timeless traditions and static societies. In what he calls the “streams of our ancestral and cultural past” (p. 222), Mellet plots the trajectories and origins of migrants of colour to the Cape. Including mainly slaves, but also encompassing convicts, labourers and merchants, he identifies their far-ranging origins in Africa, East Asia, China, and establishes that these migrants of colour outnumbered European migrants up to the middle of the 1800s.

In his explanation of the evolution of the category “coloured”, Mellet draws the conclusion that slavery both at the Cape and in South Africa was far more extensive and had a much more profound role in shaping ancestry than is often assumed. Moreover, the fixed “heritage” that some South Africans lay claim to is far more complex and intricate than they assume when it comes to matter such as, for example, cuisine. Overall, the book provides fascinating glimpses into the centrality of South Africa's Pan-African and African-Asian experiences, and questions the definitiveness of the European-African encounter in shaping ancestry and identity.

Mellet uses land struggles as a lens to view the connected subjects of economic rights and autonomy, social and political justice, and memory, consciousness and belonging. Chapter 3 spans the period between the first acts of resistance to land expropriation by the Dutch in the 1650s to the 1800s, when Britain massively expanded colonial efforts to monopolise resources both in the Cape and beyond. Although this chapter deals directly with the “land

question”, broader struggles for justice and dignity are threaded throughout the book.

Mellet emphasises that the distinctive way in which colonial myths about occupation and ownership have been deployed must be central to struggles for restorative justice in South Africa. The doctrine of the *terra nullius* discovery of “empty land” was designed to serve colonial capital accumulation but was promulgated as “international law”. This meant that European settlers, like settler societies in Australia and North America, were defined as founding peoples, whose discovery of land seen to be unowned and unpopulated gave them the right to absolute control. Mellet argues that the implementation of oppressively racist and economically exploitative norms by which to live, *alongside* an economically exploitative economic and political system, has bequeathed us with impoverished models and hopes for creating futures.

This is passionately dealt with in a conclusion titled “From restorative memory to restorative justice”. The brutal and multifaceted centuries-long legacy of land theft from Africans should be acknowledged for the violation that it is, and neither the violent tactics of land seizure, nor the proprietorial, market-based and imperialistic language used to rationalise economic rights to land should be emulated.

Throughout the book, we are reminded that the will and spirit to struggle towards broadly emancipatory futures must be driven by critical knowledge, marginalised memories and a determined capacity to imagine decolonial worlds. This makes the book extremely compelling and prescient. At a time when radical hope is urgently needed to support social struggles, Mellet's study will contribute to a vital, though still neglected, archive of new knowledge-making for confronting pasts, presents and futures. **NA**