

WELCOME TO GREATER EDENDALE – HISTORIES OF ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH AND GENDER IN AN AFRICAN CITY

by MARC EPPRECHT

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Welcome to Greater Edendale – Histories of Environment, Health and Gender in an African City, is a critically timed publication addressing a history, and an area, that have been marginalised in the last century of historical discourse. This is more so given the current social and political crisis two decades after the election of the democratic government, in which, this publication highlights, little has changed for the people in Edendale. Further, the approach that the author takes is one which presents multiple aspects of these histories: not content to present a one-sided slant in the historiography, Epprecht engages with the arguments from as many perspectives as possible in order to showcase an active, critical community that has sought to define itself over many decades of the twentieth century.

In general, Epprecht has been very careful in leading the reader through his work. Each chapter is carefully laid out, systematically introduced and concluded, so that it can be read as a series of discrete papers. Where the publication does fall down is in the variety of illustrations: graphics which are informative and evocative may have highlighted the complexity of the debate around environment, gender and health in a much more focused and nuanced manner. The work is packed full of useful and varied source material and follows the articles through to the agreeably natural conclusion in the late 1930s. I appreciate the manner in which the author engages with a diverse subject

material, suturing the three themes of environment, health and gender which in itself, is a massive endeavour. I also appreciate the sincere effort to balance the discourse to include other voices and include a broader theme of the city's continuous participation in the promotion of marginalisation through dumping waste, as well as ignoring the calls for inclusion and support. What is important in this work for the reader, however, is the systematic introduction and conclusion to each section which does aid in a readable and continuous thread, particularly given the density of the subject matter.

Epprecht approaches the chapter addressing the 'Native Village debate', largely focused upon the eventual development of what is today known as Sobantu, more inclusively than many historians in the past. He positions himself firmly as a moderator, engaging with literature that is both official and journalistic, which present the multiple frameworks of the historiography. Significantly, he sees the removal of African people from densely populated shanty areas around the city into Sobantu village in the late 1920s as being more to do with resettlement of people living in insanitary conditions, rather than a direct forced removal on racial separation grounds. He argues that, were this so, many people of colour would not have remained resident in the city and on its periphery for as long as they did. Further, he interrogates the role of the Edendale *amakholwa* in using the Native village debate to

their own ends, substantiating their position on the mission and reinforcing their power in the region. This picking apart and reinterpreting of the historical sources is imperative in reimagining the past, particularly with respect to contemporary discussions about colonisation and upheavals based on race.

Chapter 5 engages more fully with the integrated gender, environment and health aspects of Edendale, in particular continuing the two-sided debate presented in the previous chapter and adding depth to the social history which has been obscured in research in the last five decades. Of interest is the presence of the potential of women in Edendale to engage with the social and political operations of the area, certainly as landowners and volunteers, but it is also strongly positioned that the voices of these women were actually missing in the critical debates around the Edendale Local Health Commission and the general political operations of this organisation. Further, Epprecht interrogates the humanity of the role players, presenting icons such as Josiah Gumede, A.W.G. Champion and others in multiple lights, exposing them as people compromised by their position in society and time.

Indeed, the work of the highly experimental Edendale Local Health Commission, also known as *KwaPoyinandi*, foregrounds much of the continued discussion. Epprecht continues in Chapter 6 deconstructing the petty politics of the *KwaPoyinandi* – its move towards the establishment of Ashdown, and its immersion in community, local and regional politics and the discourse of this as the ‘Experiment’ at Edendale. He continues to interweave the role of women in this process (or rather

highlight their absence) and reinforces the mixed and inarticulate population of Edendale, pointing firmly to histories captured from Indian residents by the Sinomlando Oral History Project. He contextualises the advent of the Group Areas legislation, and the gradual development and incursion of the predecessors of the Inkatha Freedom Party. This chapter reflects the tensions embedded in the relationships of the old *amakholwa* descendants and the rapidly increasing numbers of new immigrants into Edendale.

The final chapter not only draws the threads of the discussions in the previous chapters together, in discussions around ‘degrowth’, but also consolidates the story of Edendale by bringing it firmly into the contemporary realm. It positions the intentions of development and the work by the latter-day Greater Edendale Development Initiative (GEDI) against the unexpected swell of the impact of HIV/AIDS, reducing effectivity of development as a result of fundamental shifts in a social reality. Epprecht is often provocative in his assertions, pointing to the unmentionables of privilege and race, and how privilege itself has skewed through societal change in the last two decades, allowing for the devastation of tender abuse and rampant corruption. Although Epprecht tries to suggest answers, there are few to give – significantly, however, his reiteration of seven decades’ old wartime mechanisms of growing food, recycling and reusing are practices that have happened in Edendale in the past – and the potential to carry these principles and move towards transition type towns are avenues of possible rescue for the area.

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