There are also some points of criticism. The artistic layout could have been better. The attempts to base the artwork on the original Gedenkboek of the company (issued in 1895), is, to a large extent, a failure. More attention should have been given to a functional layout which might have saved considerable costs.

Furthermore, it may have been easier for the reader if the illustrations had been numbered, with suitable references in the text where they are visually relevant. In Chapter 1 there are a number of illustrations of steam locomotives which might have been discussed more comprehensively in a separate section elsewhere in the book.

The policy of supplying additional information in footnotes is impractical and clumsy. A lot of excellent information is lost to the average reader who does not consult footnotes. Blocks of information could have been fitted into the text without disturbing the artistic character. The conventional usage of a footnote implies that it is a device of reference to sources consulted.

Finally, it is a pity that the publisher — as a result of current printing costs and the prevailing demands of the market place — did not deem it fit to publish NZASM 100 in Afrikaans too, or maybe even the Dutch language. Perhaps a fund-raising campaign could be launched by the South African Transport Services to finance a translated version for which there might well exist a demand.

Johan W. N. Tempelhoff
University of Venda


Jackie Grobler’s aim was to provide a short, balanced account ‘for the uninformed reader’ of the politics of modern black protest from its beginnings in the Eastern Cape last century to the Soweto uprising. This was a worthwhile project, for much detailed work has been done on particular aspects of that protest. A short general account can, besides educating the uninformed, also show connections and — through periodization and reflective comment — advance understanding of the field as a whole. Grobler does synthesize much of the relevant literature; his bibliography reflects wide reading in primary as well as secondary sources. He furthermore adds useful biographical notes on 28 key black leaders.

A decisive clash? does not, however, make any substantial contribution to an understanding of the history of black protest, despite the 93 footnote references to a remarkable range of original archival material in various collections in the United States, Britain and South Africa. Not only are the complexities of the politics of black protest frequently lost in this sketchy history, but the framework into which the author has chosen to set his book is unfortunate, while in other ways the result is flawed.

The title — an extremely odd one for a work of history — is taken from one particular passage in a short extract from the Gedenkboek of the South African Railways and Steamships. Grobler stresses the ‘solidarity’ forged among blacks by the late 1970s, and plays down the issues that divided them. For many blacks, of course, the goal of protest remained the establishment of a non-racial, democratic system of government, a goal which even the ruling National Party came round to professing in 1989.

A decisive clash? not only displays a lack of analytical rigour at key points, but also contains many oddities and errors. We are told in the preface that ‘Because of security legislation no direct references could be made to banned documents’, but various banned items, including the ANC periodical Sesabha (e.g. p. 142), are cited. What is one to make of Grobler’s statement that by the late 1970s ‘Every Black individual in South Africa was, as far as possible, being forced to take part in the struggle — in the same way that every single White male was forced to defend the system’? (p. 175)?

It is hardly true that overseas organizations and countries ‘openly declared their full support for South Africa’s Blacks’ (ibid.). What such organizations and countries did want to see was a more democratic dispensation. It is misleading to say that Odendaal points out that the South African Native Congress ‘had its origin in the ethnical [sic] enmity between the Mfengu and other Xhosa-speaking groups in the Eastern Cape’ (p. 20); the ethnic factor was one among many. Grobler also fails to note the role of the squatter movements, and especially Mapanzu’s Sofasoneke Party, in pushing the ANC towards more direct action in the 1940s.

There are a number of typographical errors: the title of the second part of the book is correct on p. x, for example, but incorrect on the contents page and again on p. 77. More seriously, Grobler’s remarks on the Robben Island prison with its ‘healthy, moderate climate’ (p. 137), pretend to be objective, but appear apologetic. A decisive clash? may inform some readers, but as a reliable short survey of the history of black politics it is an opportunity missed.

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS
University of Cape Town