

BESPREKINGS / REVIEWS

A. DE V. MINNAAR. *Empangeni : A historical review to 1983*. Local History No. 2. Human Sciences Research Council : Pretoria, 1984. 100 pp. Illus. R7,00 (exclusive). ISBN 0 7969 0088 4.

In reviewing the first volume in the Local History series, which dealt with Postmasburg (see CONTREE, No. 14, July 1983), Dr O.J.O. Ferreira looked forward to further volumes with a sense of pleasure. This second volume, which deals with the cultural and commercial centre of the Lower Umfolozi district, one of the major sugar-producing districts in Natal, is a worthy successor. Much of what was said about the book on Postmasburg may be echoed in speaking of this volume, which like its predecessor is a slim volume, concisely and economically written, packed with information on a wide range of topics, and thoroughly researched. Mr Minnaar has consulted not only the official magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, records of the Town Board and Town Council, but also the minute

books and other documents relating to the local Bowling Club, Child Welfare Society, Planters' Association, Women's Institute, Horticultural Society, and Chamber of Commerce. He has made good use of the *Zululand Times* in particular, and his research includes a number of interviews with local residents.

Being short, the book is not likely to frighten off the layman, nor will its purchase tax his pocket heavily. It reads easily and contains a liberal sprinkling of photographs of old buildings, of the laying of church foundation stones, and of town councillors and school groups. Altogether this attractively produced book is good value for its money and will be welcomed in Empangeni, where it should find a place in many homes. Much of the book is concerned with the period after the 1920s, and the tale is taken right up to the 1980s. This book abounds in names of people: such as of the man after whom the second bowling green is named, members of the first town council, chairman of the local planters' association, the lady who drove the first ball off the first tee when the golf course was opened, and as such it should prove a most sought-after publication by the residents of Empangeni itself.

But this book should have a wider appeal than the Empangeni community. Although it is largely a chronicle of events and skirts round controversial questions that are the very meat of history, hardly asking any of the questions that a local historian should ideally pose of the region he is studying, it could well prove an important aid to anyone embarking on a larger study. Within the compass of 100 pages Mr Minnaar has done an admirable job in covering so many aspects of life in Empangeni, but he has not had scope to explore issues and to analyse the working community. He has however provided valuable pointers. Many students, for example, in starting to do research for a regional history, have no idea of what they will find. In the case of Empangeni, Mr Minnaar has already given a good indication of what may be waiting for a historian who wishes to clothe the bones laid bare by this study. The social historian may thus find a starting point in the rivalry (mentioned by Mr Minnaar but not analysed) that existed between the three groups of people in the vicinity of Empangeni: the commercial, business and professional people of the village proper, the railway employees of the Rail some four kilometres away, and the Mill area, occupied by the Indian compound and mill employees, many of whom were apparently Scots.

There are other instances where Mr Minnaar's work hints at larger themes, and although this would have no value for most of his readers, it is a pity that he did not make a short statement about his sources. This could easily have come in as a preface to his Source List. A brief discussion of the extent and nature of the sources he consulted would have proved useful to those who follow him.

Studies of this nature are to be greatly welcomed as fostering an interest and a pride in history in smaller communities; these may otherwise wait for years or never find themselves the subject of an historical inquiry that goes beyond a pamphlet brought out by a town council on the occasion of a centenary celebration. Even where major academic works have been undertaken, the results of the research are seldom presented in a form that is easily assimilated or accessible to the residents at large. A series such as this one could only be undertaken with official backing and resources, and the Human Sciences Research Council is to be warmly commended for embarking on this project.

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