

SUGAR AND SETTLERS: A HISTORY OF THE NATAL SOUTH COAST 1850–1910

by DUNCAN L. DU BOIS

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A sign of the times, perhaps, has been a notable increase in recent years of books written about KwaZulu-Natal and its unique history. Just what was it that turned this beautiful but otherwise seemingly unremarkable land between the Drakensberg mountains and the Indian Ocean into the source of some of the greatest South African stories, events, legends and characters on record?

Duncan du Bois based his book on his PhD thesis of 2014 completed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and it proves to be a notable addition to this mounting volume of literature. He describes it as “an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the settlement and economic development of a region which hitherto has been subjected to limited scrutiny. Although the primary focus of this study is on white settlers as colonisers and their sugar enterprise, their interaction with and dependence on the role of the indigenous African inhabitants and indentured Indian immigrants forms a substantial part of the work.”

He handles his cast of pioneers, farmers, missionaries, indentured Indian labour, the indigenous African tribesmen, the local and colonial government officials, the adventurers, the entrepreneurs and the builders with a sure hand, meticulously supported by an 11-page bibliography and an index that runs to seven pages. Yet though it is, understandably, a book of notable scholarship, Du Bois has also achieved a “good read”, well illustrated with contemporary photographs, adverts and newspaper cuttings. The famous and the lesser known are all there, the good, the bad and the ugly, warts and all, and the author sets out their battles, their triumphs, their faults and their failings without fear or favour.

In less than 50 years, the settlers on the South Coast transformed their difficult terrain into a “thriving and productive region”, says the author, based not only on its sugar industry but as time went on also as a place for seaside holidays and tourism. His book is in its own way a remarkable tribute to a truly remarkable achievement.

WENDY VINEALL