

**Book Review:**

*A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000*

Reviewer: Gregory Solik

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*A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000* (2006)

Author: Saul Dubow

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Saul Dubow's, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000* (2006), is a moving account of colonial self-discovery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This detailed chronicle begins by underlining the primordial need for British settlers to make sense of a new geographical and psychological space – a new continent, Africa – in order to establish a new identity independent of their British roots. Deeply metaphysical in its search, these colonialists, who became South African settlers (as opposed to imperialists or British conquerors), were forced to challenge their understandings of the world. In developing a new world in form and meaning, knowledge became bundled up with the process of national self-understanding; and the result was that it created an identity based on the discovery of knowledge. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine an assemblage of white-skinned settlers desperately trying to understand what it means to call South Africa home. It is here where Science – a medium for knowledge creation – becomes so important in the development of a sense of belonging.

In his previous work, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (1995), Dubow explored the idea of white supremacy under apartheid. In *A Commonwealth of Knowledge*, his latest project, he engages with the broader “relationship between social and scientific thought, national identity, and political power.”<sup>1</sup> Dubow challenges the view that Afrikaner Nationalism was the purest expression of South African-ness, by extending the concept of white South African-ness to include the very real influence of the early colonists. His principle contention is that knowledge and knowledge-centered institutions from as early as 1820, “served to underpin white political ascendancy and claims to nationhood.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it was science and the creation of a commonwealth of knowledge that helped unite white Afrikaans and English people to develop a sense of pride, gain acceptance both locally and globally, create personal happiness, inject morale, “decipher” (or misunderstand and misrepresent) Indigenous knowledge and, of course, provide hard evidence for the development and entrenchment of scientific racism.

In order to support his contention, Dubow analyses the role of science at different times along his continuum, which broadly speaking covers four fifty-year periods. He begins by examining the roots of South Africanism in Cape literary and scientific institutions, and focuses on the influence of the *Cape Monthly Magazine*. By the 1870s the British colonial regime was dealing with an array of particular constitutional and legal issues, which arose out of the quest for self-government. Post-1902 the meaning of South Africanism was reconstructed when “meanings of loyalism, patriotism, imperialism, nationalism and progressivism were tested and contested.”<sup>3</sup> Dubow ends the work with an exploration of the role of science as an instrument for the discursive practice of racism, and closes with a fascinating take on issues of HIV/Aids and Thabo Mbeki’s anti-Western hypothesis.

For the early settlers at the Cape, power, ownership, wealth, rights, conquest and independence gave rise to the need for control and influence – both over people and over the landscape. This meant that the elite liberal colonialists began to construct the sameness (of white skin) and the difference between black and white, in order to survive as a minority in a land conceived by Joseph Conrad’s Marlow as “one of the dark places of the earth.”<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, the emergence of an elite Anglo-Dutch upper class was more fully strengthened and articulated in order to secure power and ascendancy. This integration is present in the evolution of a hybrid Roman-Dutch legal system, and stands as the perfect allegory for the tale of power and control, order and responsibility. Law as a body of knowledge, rooted in European models and discourses of law, soon became a key nation-building project and the “appropriate” legal system in a “future unified white nation.”

A significant minority of settlers who desired to make the Cape their permanent home sought to engage intellectually with the land and its people, not only for the purposes of governance and control, but also to lay political and aesthetic claim to the country, to conceive of its unity, and to nurture a shared sense of white identity and ownership.<sup>5</sup>

I am not convinced, however, whether Dubow’s main contention holds. Science certainly played an influential role in shaping settler identities and fostering claims to nationhood. However, the extent of its influence in white political ascendancy has to be questioned. White ascendancy was part of a more general interaction of political, economic and social factors, and it was the combination and overlay of these factors that gave rise to white political supremacy. In developing one’s own epistemology, we might suppose that gathering knowledge about the world is a natural and obvious process. But, if Dubow’s argument about science is to hold, then he should have discharged the term “science” of any ambiguities surrounding its popular meaning to illustrate that he was alluding to a more general definition, which implies “[a] branch of knowledge involving systematized observation and experiment.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, his assessment of British settler’s categorisation of their world in a *generally* scientific manner of classification would have been more plausible. But even then, it was “sensibility” – the search for social belonging, and

of course the limits of social exclusion – more than science *per se*, which played a pivotal role in the development of settler knowledge and identity.

Indeed, the *Cape Monthly Magazine* (a periodical which promoted the advancement of early institutions such as the South African Library, Museum and Botanical Gardens) was to be one of the most influential institutions that furthered the mission of making sense of settler life – and it was hardly “scientific.” It was in and through this magazine, and these institutions, that we see the development of a colonial public sphere (much like that of the revolutionary clubs in France or the town hall meetings in revolutionary republics), which were “places of freedom” that allowed people to come together, exchange ideas, talk about affairs and re-imagine the world in which they found themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, nearly half of the work deals with the early influential settlers of the Cape, and the discussion in his final chapter on the rationalisation of knowledge, although emphasised in the abstract on the back of his book, is clearly an afterthought. In terms of style, while Dubow’s account of settler life is probably unparalleled, his writing is complex, verbose and sometimes difficult to navigate. When the subject matter is as intricate and detailed as that of South African history, clarity in writing should be preferred over pedantry. What is most concerning, perhaps, is that Dubow’s book makes no effort to link the commonwealth of knowledge to issues of Indigenous knowledge and the complex discursive interplay and exchanges between the settlers and South Africa’s pre-colonial populations. He is, in effect, writing a history about a people that no longer exist, and although he makes no apologies for this, it has to detract from the overall value of his endeavour in an epistemologically contested South Africa.

That notwithstanding, Dubow’s book makes a valuable contribution to its field and is an important read for any South African charged with challenge of understanding their own sense of place and history. The most enlightening aspect of the book, as a Capetonian, is the way in which it has forced me to rethink the meanings of the city that I have grown affectionate towards. Unlike today, where the Cape is thought of as one of the most aesthetically pleasing destinations in the world, it was initially regarded as fiercely inhospitable; always welcomed by a strong south-easterly from the heart of the Atlantic and the harsh, rugged, vacant hills playing host to an odd sense of predestination.<sup>8</sup> And that tells me something about the city, 34° S and 18° 30W, as a place made home – about its people, its culture, its architecture and its *spirit*.<sup>9</sup> Next time you walk the city pay closer attention to the houses, oak-lined streets, street-names and you will come to value the city’s history in a way which will force you to reconsider its future.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2006), v.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>3</sup> Dubow, A *Commonwealth of Knowledge*, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Den: London, 1971), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Dubow, A *Commonwealth of Knowledge*, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press: Cape Town, 1992), p. 814.

<sup>7</sup> H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 243.

<sup>8</sup> For a wonderful rendition of the Western and Eastern Cape's sense of place, see M. Poland, *Shades* (Penguin: New York, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See P. Anderson, "On Common Ground" in S. Watson, (ed.), *A City Imagined* (David Philip: Cape Town, 2006), p. 88.