South Africa, Greece, Rome

How have the histories of ancient Greece and Rome intersected with that of South Africa? This book canvasses architecture, literature, visual arts and historical memory. Some of the most telling manifestations of classical reception in South Africa have been indirect: for example, neoclassical architecture or retellings of mythical stories. Far from being the mere handmaiden of colonialism (and later apartheid), classical antiquity has enabled challenges to the South African establishment, and provided a template for making sense of cross-cultural encounters. Though access to classical education has been limited, many South Africans, black and white, have used classical frames of reference and drawn inspiration from the ancient Greeks and Romans. While classical antiquity may seem antithetical to post-apartheid notions of heritage, it deserves to be seen in this light. Museums, historical sites and artworks, up to the present day, reveal juxtapositions in which classical themes are integrated into South Africa’s pasts.

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South Africa, Greece, Rome

Classical Confrontations

EDITED BY GRANT PARKER
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Preface

South African engagements with ancient Greece and Rome, in their many facets, form the subject matter of this book. The contributors’ collective aim is to explore the country’s past in relation to classical antiquity – a loaded term, to be sure, used here as shorthand for Greaco-Roman antiquity, broadly conceived. Conversely, the book offers a range of South African interpretations of classical antiquity. Between these covers we have sought to contribute to the cultural histories of both South Africa and of classics. With ‘confrontations’ in the subtitle we emphasise the inequalities and tensions involved in those histories.

The challenges of such a bifocal project should not be underestimated. Despite the recent growth of interest in the classical tradition, often under the mantra of reception, it remains hard to persuade northern-hemisphere and especially US classicists that Southern Africa has anything significant to offer. By the same token, most (South) Africanists currently writing would probably be surprised to hear that classical antiquity deserves their attention. For intellectual and political reasons, there remains much bridge-building to do.

At the time when work on this volume neared completion, a heated debate raged at the University of Cape Town, my alma mater, about the presence of a prominent statue of Cecil John Rhodes, a major figure in the essays that follow. On 9 April 2015 the statue was removed to an undisclosed location by the university administration, following weeks of student protests which converged under the hashtag #RhodesMustFall. Other universities witnessed similar exchanges; statues elsewhere in the country were defaced or otherwise contested. While much of the discussion involved wider issues about education and the economy, there is no doubt that the symbolic power of monuments – even of traditional, figurative ones – came dramatically to the fore. In the intervening months ‘Fallist’ activism has moved on to a FeesMustFall campaign throughout the country’s campuses. Nevertheless, the original RhodesMustFall initiative would suggest that the classical tradition continues to play a role in South African public history. Confrontations indeed.

I warmly thank all the contributors for their patience in the lengthy gestation of this project, and for dialogue through its twists and turns. For their wise counsel I especially thank Jonathan Allen, John Atkinson,
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* All URLs were functioning as of 9 March 2016.