

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-81470-6 — Reading Spaces in South Africa, 1850–1920s

Archie L. Dick

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Cambridge Elements

Elements in Publishing and Book Culture

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READING SPACES IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1850–1920S

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108814706

DOI: 10.1017/9781108887076

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First published 2020

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-81470-6 Paperback

ISSN 2514-8524 (online)

ISSN 2514-8516 (print)

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First published online: November 2020

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ABSTRACT: Voluntary societies and government initiatives stimulated the growth of reading communities in South Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. A system of parliamentary grants to establish public libraries in country towns and villages nurtured a lively reading culture. A condition was that the library should be open free of charge to the general public. This became one more reading space, and others included book societies, reading societies, literary societies, debating societies, mechanics institutes, and mutual improvement societies. This Element explains how reading communities used these spaces to promote cultural and literary development in a unique ethos of improvement, and to raise political awareness in South Africa's colonial transition to a Union government and racial segregation.

KEYWORDS: reading, voluntary societies, reading spaces, improvement, reading communities

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For Cali, Kelis, and Lacie

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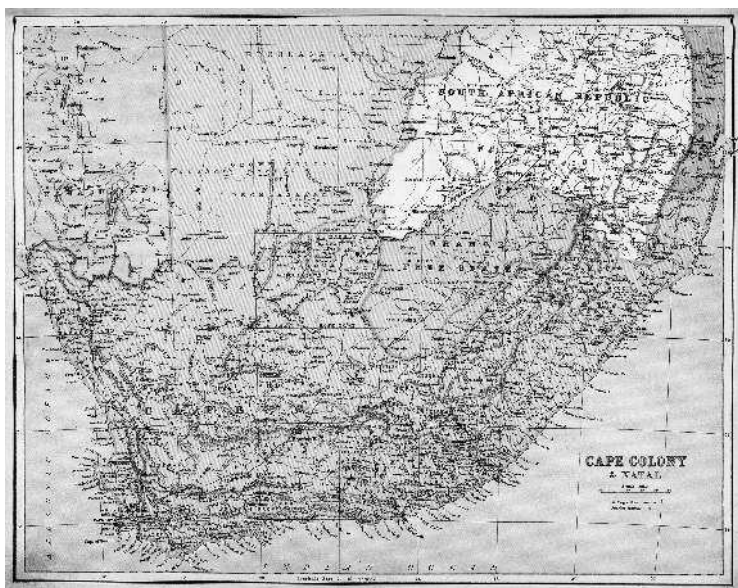
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Map 1 South(ern) Africa, 1897, just before the South African War. Getty Images / duncan1890

Basic South Africa Historical Timeline*

ca. 8000 BC: San hunter-gatherers inhabit the south-western regions of southern Africa.

From AD 200: The semi-nomadic Khoikhoi begin farming the land.

From 1100: Other African peoples migrate into the southern African region from the north.

1488: Portuguese navigator, Bartolomeu Dias, lands at Mossel Bay.

1497: Vasco da Gama discovers a sea route to India via the Cape.

1652: Jan van Riebeeck sets up a supply station for the Dutch East India Company.

1667: Malay political exiles arrive at the Cape.

1688–1700: Huguenot refugees settle in the Cape.

1779: First of nine frontier wars.

1795: The British annex the Cape.

1803: The Cape Colony reverts to Dutch rule.

1806: Britain reoccupies the Cape.

1814: The Cape is formally ceded to Britain by the Dutch government.

1818: Shaka becomes king of the Zulus.

1820: British settlers arrive in the Eastern Cape.

1820–28: Shaka extends his territory, leaving large areas devastated and depopulated in his wake.

1834: Slavery is abolished.

1836–54: The Great Trek. Over 16,000 Voortrekkers travel northwards from the Cape in order to escape British domination.

1838: Voortrekkers under Andries Pretorius defeat the Zulus under Dingane at Blood River in Natal.

1845: Natal becomes a British colony.

1848: British sovereignty is proclaimed between the Vaal and the Orange rivers.

* Adapted from South Africa historical timeline. www.insightguides.com/destinations/africa-middle-east/south-africa. Accessed 20 May 2020.

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Basic South Africa Historical Timeline

1852: Boers found the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek.

1854: The Boer Independent Republic of the Orange Free State founded.

1867: Diamonds discovered at Kimberley.

1877: Britain annexes the South African Republic.

1879: The British defeat the Zulus at Ulundi.

1880–1: The Transvaal declares itself a republic. First Anglo-Boer War.

1883: Boer leader Paul Kruger becomes the first president of the Transvaal.

1886: Gold mining begins in the Transvaal and the mining town of Johannesburg is founded.

1899–1902: The South African War, or second Anglo-Boer War.

1910: The Union of South Africa is proclaimed.

1912: The South African Native National Congress is formed, known after 1923 as the African National Congress (ANC).

1913: The Native Land Act is passed, limiting land ownership for Blacks.

1925: Afrikaans replaces Dutch as the official ‘second language’ after English.

1948: National Party wins general election. Acts enforcing apartheid follow.