

BOOK REVIEW

Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi, Noel Solani, André Odendaal, and Khwezi ka Mpumlwana, eds. *Robben Island Rainbow Dreams: The Making of Democratic South Africa's First National Heritage Institution*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2021. 415 pp. Appendix. Endnotes. Select Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-928246-29-9.

Robben Island Rainbow Dreams: The Making of Democratic South Africa's First National Heritage Institution, edited by Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi, Noel Solani, André Odendaal, and Khwezi ka Mpumlwana, is essential reading for all history, heritage, political science, and tourism scholars. The four editors have done a superb job of compiling this collection of thirty-seven chapters (divided into five parts) with contributions from a myriad of multi-disciplinary authors. The corpus of scholarly as well as experimental writings offers a unique and multi-faceted perspective of this traumatic yet hope-filled place called Robben Island. Nelson Mandela and Ahmed Kathrada (both well-known political prisoners who were incarcerated there) feature in separate chapters, through the address they each delivered when the Robben Island Museum (RIM) was officially opened on September 24, 1997 (now an official public holiday in South Africa called National Heritage Day).

This fascinating and informative read traces and unpacks “the making of democratic South Africa’s first national heritage institution.” Robben Island (33.8076° S, 18.3712° E) is a roughly oval-shaped island, 5.08 square kilometers in extent, located in the Atlantic Ocean north of Cape Town, just under seven kilometers off the coast of South Africa. The “New South Africa” turns thirty on April 27, 2024, celebrating three decades as a true democracy and what many have called “the rainbow nation.” President Nelson Mandela was elected as the first black president of the country on the southernmost tip of Africa, which has suffered over 372 years of oppression and political discord, including colonialism, segregation, and then apartheid, which have all soiled the South African bedrock with the blood of people oppressed along racial lines. Each chapter in this book addresses the struggle of the freedom fighters to unleash South Africa from the demonic, racist, and oppressive hold of a white minority, through nation-building and reconciliation espoused by Madiba himself over the last fifty years or so.

This book celebrates and documents the reconciliation and democratic freedom that was realized in 1994. Each of the thirty-seven chapters is eloquently written to capture the making of the Robben Island Museum (RIM) over many decades, from the time when it served as a fully functional prison until today, when it is one of ten World Heritage Sites (WHS) in South Africa. Robben Island

was added to UNESCO's WHS list in 1999. The book traces the ups and downs of the whole process of making Robben Island what it is today—an icon of hope, epitomizing the spirit of the freedom fighters who were imprisoned for their beliefs and actions, who envisioned a democratic South Africa, free from a racist regime and supremacist government.

The book's meticulous research was based on archival material as well as the firsthand personal experiences and perceptions of the former political prisoners, along with historical records and work done by the capable Professor André Odendaal and the team at the Mayibuye Centre of the University of the Western Cape. Throughout the book, photographs and visuals associated with the development of the Robben Island Museum (RIM) beautifully illustrate the genesis of this rich and essential heritage institution for South Africa.

Part One of the book (thirteen chapters) lays out the making of the Robben Island Museum, documenting the highlights and lowlights of what it takes to make an inclusive heritage institution in today's age. Part Two (twelve chapters) traces the struggles of making RIM a permanent institution. Part Three (six chapters) outlines the various exhibitions and memory-making processes in a sacred space such as RIM. Part Four (four chapters) discusses RIM's various voices and debates. Finally, Part Five (two chapters) brings the book to a close, concluding with "curious coincidences," and warns of the impending threats to democracy, such as state capture. RIM, which will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary in 2024, has had quite a tumultuous history already. Has South Africa made enough progress as a fledgling democracy, you may ask? Read this book to find out!

I made the trip to Robben Island in 1997, and I highly recommend a visit to RIM. Overall, this book is an impressive read about the complex and multi-faceted history and struggle toward democracy that South Africa endured for nearly four centuries; it is a must-read for everyone interested in South African politics, our diverse heritage and people, reconciliation, and the making of "the rainbow nation."

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