



Regular Newsletter/Gereelde Nuusbrief

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**NOTE: That this is not an edited publication but merely a compilation of the contributions and comments as received from members and participants
A regular edited annual will be available shortly**

**Contact Linda Grimbeek at Kruger Lowveld Tourism at linda@klcvt.co.za or 013 755 1988.
Membership is R175.00 per year.**

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NEXT OUTING/VOLGENDE UITSTAPPIE

HERDENKING EN VERKENNING VAN DIE VELDSLACHTERREIN BY HELVITIA

08:00 Saterdag 14 Maart

By die graffterrein

Afdraai vanaf N4 tussen Bambi en Machadotolhek

25°34'30.0"S 30°17'49.9"E, -25.574998, 30.297189



Die slag by Helvetia op die oujaar van 1900 geniet vanjaar sy 120ste herdenking.

As seker een van die mees merkwaardige militêre kontakte tussen die Boere en Britse magte in die guerrilla-fase van die Anglo Boereoorlog, was hierdie ook van die belangrikste op die platorand en Laeveldgebied. Kenners soos ondermeer dr. Tian Schutte en kol. Piet Schoeman en belangstellendes uit die omgewing besoek die terrein op 14 Maart. Lede van Mpumalanga Erfenis wat eerstehands die jongste veldwerk oor die gebeurtenis wil ervaar is ook welkom om die dag mee te maak.

Gebruik 'n voertuig met 'n goeie grondvryhoogte soos 'n bakkie of dubbelkajuit. Viertrek nie nodig nie. Pak eet en drinkgoed en onthou 'n hoed en stapskoene.

VISIT TO OLD CAR HAVEN MUSEUM AT BRONDAL

Sat. 21 March 08:00 at Kruger Lowveld Tourism at Crossing next to Mica or at 08:30 on the road to Lydenburg (R37) at the gates to Elmswood GPS 25°22'46.9"S 30°52'22.3"E

The museum contains numerous examples of old Ford as well as other motor cars.



The morning visit will also include a short Annual General meeting when our chairman will give feedback on the activities of the past year as well as offering the current financial state. Those interested in joining our committee are also welcome to volunteer and join the ranks.

Bring a picnic lunch and refreshments to enjoy after the visit together with some chairs. A nominal entrance fee is payable on entrance.



LATEST/JONGSTE

NOSTALGIC TOUR OF OLD NELSPRUIT

The following was published in Lowvelder Friday 14 February:



For many it was a morning filled with nostalgia. For others it was a journey of discovery when Mpumalanga Heritage recently took its members on a tour of the city.

Over the years, changing demographics and modern outlaying shopping facilities have transformed the old inner town into a somewhat forgotten world for many.

The excursion, in the comfort of a modern bus, started at the Orion Promenade Hotel - that used to be the old city hall and civic centre. Its prominent lookout tower is still intact, much as its original architectural features in the Spanish-hacienda revival style that was very popular here in the Lowveld in the fifties.

After a slide show of a collection of old town photographs, the first stop was at the railway station.

This was the initial centre point from where the old town was developed. The fact that the Nelspruit railway station later became a junction for the branch lines to the agricultural, forestry and gold-mining hinterland along the escarpment contributed much to the initial growth of the town as regional business centre.

Old Nelspruit, today Mbombela, does not contain buildings of great architectural significance. In this case it is the assembly of buildings that once formed a functional core for the needs of a specific community that gives it a cultural historical value, said Duncan Ballantyne, chairperson of Mpumalanga Heritage.

One also does not find many historic squares scattered with statues and memorials. The few that are left are fairly obscured by the current inner-city clutter and decay. However, they still recall historic occasions such as the centenary commemoration of the Great Trek in 1938, the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria in 1849 and the Van Riebeeck Festival of 1952, as well as the reburial of the original brothers Nel in 1975.

They were farmers from Ermelo seeking winter grazing in this area. With the planning of the railroad between Delagoa Bay and Pretoria, their name was used in the mapping of the various refuelling stations along the way.

The visitors could yet again visit the half-circled sidewalk terrace of the old Paragon Hotel or walk through Ponting's Arcade, the first covered shopping mall in all of the Lowveld.

During the early seventies, with the completion of the old Legal & General building - nowadays the Mkholo Trust Building - across the road from the main post office and for years the tallest in town, money was spent on decorating the foyer with a mural by the well-known Italian-South African artist, Armando Baldinelli.

It became obscured later when the spacious downstairs area was divided into smaller retail facilities. While exploring this part of the old town as well as the building, all were alerted to be on the lookout for the artwork and great was the surprise when this was discovered unlit and covered behind a glass - during one of the current scheduled blackouts - in the back of an African-style eating house.

This magnificent period artwork is well worth a visit and the restaurant offers a good meal of Russian and chips or chicken and pap to enjoy while admiring it.

Join Mpumalanga Heritage. More on this excursion, as well as other monthly outings to follow, will be reflected in its regular newsletter. Contact Linda Grimbeek at Kruger Lowveld Chamber of Business and Tourism at linda@klcvt.co.za.



HERITAGE ASSOCIATION SA NEW WEBPAGE NOW AVAILABLE



Mpumalanga Heritage is an active associate member of the Heritage Association of South Africa (HASA). The year before last, Mpumalanga Heritage together with the Friends of the Barberton Museum staged the annual HASA symposium in Barberton. Last year the AGM and the symposium were held in Tulbagh in commemoration of the restoration work done there since the devastating earth quake of 1969 - fifty years ago. Both Mpumalanga Heritage chairman, Duncan Ballantyne and vice chair, Marius Bakkes, attended the event. This year during October it will be in Swellendam, home to the oldest heritage association in South Africa. All members are welcome to attend and the programme will be made known here as soon as it is available.

HASA used to be the old Simon van der Stel Foundation which for many years was an important lobby group for heritage conservation in South Africa owning several buildings of historical significance. These protected structures are currently for sale.

The vice chairman of Mpumalanga Heritage, Marius Bakkes also serves on the management board of HASA and currently is tasked to find new owners for Fort Merensky at Botshabelo.

The current Chairman of HASA is Jacques Stoltz, a heritage practitioner of Johannesburg. He has recently announced the new webpage of the organisation:

We have been working very hard to create an improved online presence for the Heritage Association of South Africa. You can visit our new website at <https://heritagesa.org/>

Associate listing

Some of the new features we've introduced include a list of our associates. Please visit <https://heritagesa.org/about-us/> and scroll down to the 'Our associates' subsection. Please review your details and feel free to request changes/ corrections. We realise that many of our associates have social media accounts so we will add these in the next few days. Please confirm your social media account details if you haven't done so already. Note that we have only listed fully paid up associates, so if you haven't paid your annual sub yet, please do so. To join as associate please complete this form <https://heritagesa.org/associate-application/>

Events calendar

We have set up an online calendar which allows us to post the events of our associates to our website. Please send details of upcoming events to info@heritagesa.org. Please feel free to include images for events or alternatively send us your logos in a reasonably high resolution. Note: the calendar is not live as yet as we would like to populate February – April first. We hope to go live soon though.

News

Reminder to continue to send us your news. We can post your news to our website and distribute via our social media accounts. We now have a Hootsuite account which makes the scheduling and sharing of news more targeted and effective. We will issue our first newsletter for the year in early February so please forward us your news/ stories.

SEO

We've invested in improving the Search Engine Optimisation of our site and we can already see the difference this is making in driving traffic to the site.

Guides

In 2019 we started publishing 'how-to' style guides. The three guides published to date are:

[The student's guide to studying heritage in South Africa](#)

[Historical research: a guide for communities](#)

[Guide to conducting a heritage survey](#)

We are looking for volunteers to propose and write new guides. Let me know if anyone is interested in suggesting/ writing articles.

FAQ

The FAQ section consists of two sub-sections: "Heritage and your community" and "Heritage and your home". We invite you to review these and suggest ways in which we can improve existing 'answers'. Feel free to also suggest new 'questions'.

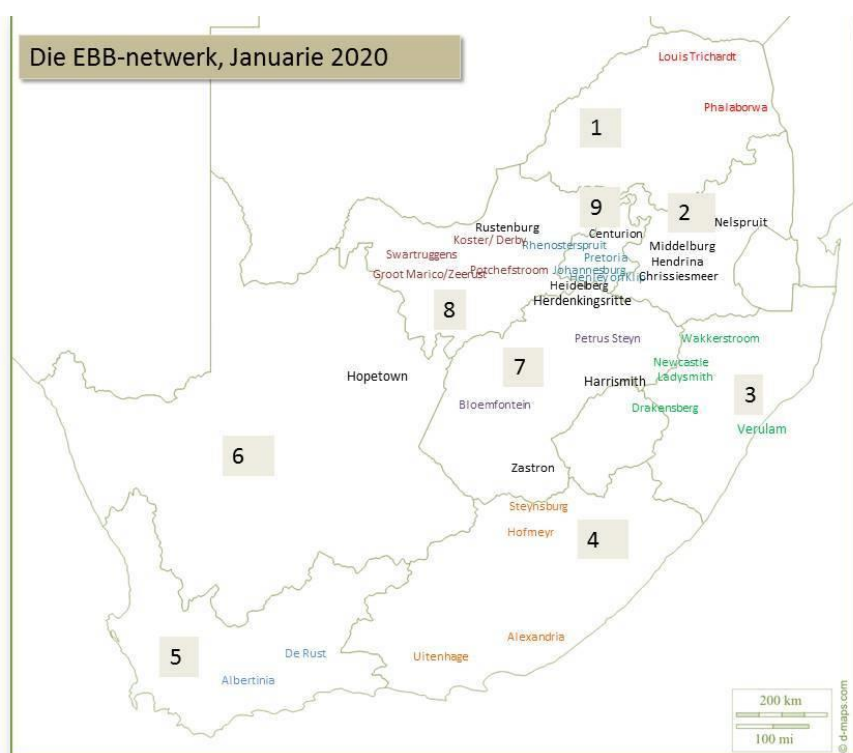
DIE ERFENISBEWARINGS BEWUSMAKINGSPROJEK (EBB)

Riana Mulder van die Erfenis Stigting skryf:

Die Erfenis Stigting se EBB-projek het die afgelope twee-en-'n-half jaar gegroei tot 35 komitees reg oor die land. Die komitees, wat uit entoesiastiese vrywilligers bestaan, doen in hulle eie gemeenskappe waardevolle werk: party fokus op die dokumentering van erfenisterreine, terwyl ander boeke skryf oor die geskiedenis van hul streke. Daar is selfs 'n paar komitees wat hulle beywer met die herstel en onderhoud van monumente en die bevordering van kultuurtoerisme.

In Januarie het ons ook geskiedenis gemaak met die stigting van EBB Pretoria-Sentraal, wat byvoorbeeld saam met ons sal werk aan 'n konferensie in 2022 om die einde van die Anglo-Boereoorlog te herdenk. Die lede dien op uitnodiging op die komitee en ons is vol vertroue dat hulle groot dinge gaan vermag.

Ons is baie opgewonde oor die ondersteuning wat die projek geniet en moedig almal aan wat in die behoud van kulturele erfenis belangstel om deel van die EBB-netwerk te word. Vir meer inligting, kontak asb vir Riana Mulder by museum@es.org.za.



SA AT RISK OF LOOSING RICH INSIGHTS INTO AN ANCIENT FARMING SOCIETY

The following piece by Peter Delius, Professor emeritus University of the Witwatersrand was published on The Conversation AFRICA on January 23:

The Conversation is funded by the National Research Foundation, eight universities, including the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Rhodes University, Stellenbosch University and the Universities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Pretoria, and South Africa. It is hosted by the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Western Cape, the African Population and Health Research Centre and the Nigerian Academy of Science. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is a Strategic Partner.

The remnants of a forgotten world can be found all along the Mpumalanga escarpment. You can see glimpses of it if you watch the passing countryside when driving through this area.

You will see sections of buildings in stone near the sides of the road, further away on the hills above you and the valley sides below.

An aerial view of the escarpment reveals clusters of stone walling and sprawling expanses of stone circles, mazes of stone ridging linked by long stone passages. These structures span 150 kilometres from Ohrigstad to Carolina and connect over 10,000 square kilometres of the Mpumalanga escarpment.

It's a world of stone settlements and agricultural innovation that archaeologists have been aware of for many decades. But these structures have not received the attention they deserve from researchers, heritage agencies or tourist authorities.

Part of the reason for this historical neglect was a racist insistence that because these sites were built from stone, they can't have been the work of Africans. Various outsiders, including ancient Indians and visitors from outer space, have been credited with constructing them. One consequence of these risible assertions was to distract resources and attention from serious research and much needed preservation.

But in recent years interdisciplinary research has formed the core of new understandings of the stone-walled structures. These sites are the remnants of the Bokoni society which once dominated the escarpment.



The rock structures, built from 1500, were carefully planned to house and safeguard cattle. Peter Delius/Wits University

Ancient master farmers

The settlements emerged around 1500 and lasted until the 1820s. They were based on intensive farming techniques including massive investment in stone terracing and cattle paths which allowed for the cultivation of rich volcanic soils on the hillsides of the escarpment.

Crop cultivation was combined with closely managed livestock production. Cattle were kept at the heart of settlements at night and moved out during the day to feed on the diverse grasslands that existed on the higher lying slopes and in the valleys below.

This pattern ensured that highly nutritious milk could play a central part in the diet of these communities. And this probably contributed to an unusually large population developing in Bokoni by the standards of the time. This system was unique in South Africa and was the largest intensive farming system in south or east Africa. It connected to systems of long distance trade which spanned the interior and linked to the east coast and the vast and ancient Indian Ocean trading system.

A documentary called Forgotten Worlds captures the incredible structures on film.

Trade pioneers

Visitors to Delagoa Bay made mention of a 'Grain King' living in the interior. The sorghum and millet produced on the escarpment were exchanged for copper and iron goods from Phalaborwa and Messina. This regional trade connected to an international network of exchange and currency which was based on the export of gold, ivory, cloth, glass beads and, increasingly, slaves.

This system of trade and production was the beating heart of a regional economic system that long preceded development of mining-based processes of development which are conventionally seen as the beginning of South African economic history.

The walls also stand in mute but eloquent reproach to the host of commentators who have suggested that prior to the arrival of settler farming, African agriculture was rudimentary, subsistence-oriented, transient and barely capitalised. The terraces mock the academics who have argued that production for markets only became prevalent amongst Africans in the last decades of the nineteenth century and were rooted in colonial pressure and opportunity. Bokoni provides ample evidence of high levels of innovation, skill and agrarian specialisation.



The Bokoni made a massive investment in stone terracing, becoming one of the most advanced farming communities in history. Peter Delius/Wits University

The end of an era

The way of life that had emerged in Bokoni was destroyed in the 1820s as a result of attacks by the armies of new, more militarised states such as the Ndwandwe, Swazi and Zulu kingdoms which intruded on this area. The Bokoni settlements – which were rich in people, cattle and grain and organised on the basis of production

– were no match for armies skilled in warfare. The population was either taken captive, especially women and children, or fled to safer areas.

This sudden tragic ending helps to explain why the history of Bokoni has been undervalued. History has a tendency to focus on the winners and ignore the losers no matter how successful they might have been. Given the rapidly expanding body of work on this lost world one would have expected state and provincial heritage agencies to be at the forefront of protecting and promoting them.

This, sadly, has not been the case.



The stacked stones of the site are becoming increasingly battered, littered and neglected. Peter Delius/Wits University

A criminal neglect

A degree of disinterest was more understandable in the context of apartheid, which ignored forms of African heritage that could not be used to buttress ethnic divisions. But the neglect of Bokoni after 1994 is an indictment of the effectiveness of national and provincial heritage agencies. It is an expression of the blinkered and self-referential vision of the dominant political organisations in relation to history and heritage. The Bokoni settlements have received no official recognition as a heritage site. Even more alarming is the fact that little in the way of protection has been extended to prevent the destruction of key sites and artefacts. Many of them are in a state of dereliction and decay, open to plunder and strewn with litter.

Walls that have stood for hundreds of years are in grave danger of finally being toppled by official indifference, vandalism and unregulated development.

Important preservation initiatives have been taken by local landowners and communities, but a huge amount more needs to be done to ensure that the marvels and puzzles provided by these myriad sites are available for future generations to visit, research and debate.

THE STEVENSON-HAMILTON MEMORIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM AT SKUKUZA

Article submitted by Duncan Ballantyne:



On a recent visit to the KNP we briefly stopped at Skukuza for some refreshments. On the way out I noticed that the doors of the Stevenson-Hamilton Memorial Library and Museum at Skukuza were open. In light of the past closure and scandals surrounding this national treasure I decided to go in and have a look around.

The museum houses a vast selection of ecological and history-related books, as well as paintings, documents and artifacts related to the history of Kruger National Park and the area. The library was opened on 14 October 1961.

We were efficiently and politely welcomed by the receptionist and asked to sign the visitors' book as they are in need of showing how many people pay visits. Inside was a revelation. The original library is still there and is beautifully curated. Guests are free to read any of the books inside the library but may not borrow any of them. The entire west wall of the library is home to a mind-boggling collection of Africana, mainly dealing with early hunters and explorers and the like.

However, a big surprise was in store. There is a new museum now open to the public. It takes visitors on a tour through the KNP's history from the earliest times up to the present. The exhibits are excellent and they complement some of the recent books on the KNP's history. We were most impressed and strongly urge all visitors in the area to go and have a look at and support this museum.

DATUMS & GEBEURE/DATES & EVENTS

YEAR PLANNING/JAAR BEPLANNING

Note that these dates and events are subject to change. Always see your latest newsletter.

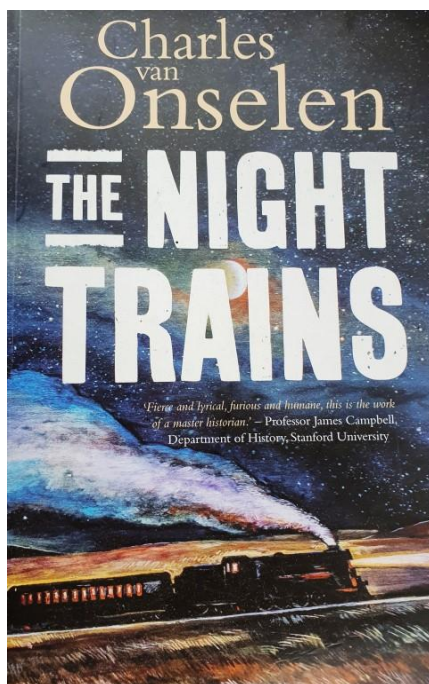
April	18	Hendriksdal and Spitzkop.
May	9	Dullstroom Battlefields – Vlakfontein & Henningspas, Elandskloof
June	13	Spekboom River, Mount Anderson, Lydenburg
July	11	Mozambique Jock Plaques (Bus)
August	8	Barberton Prison – Struggle Women (Women's Day)
September	12	Malalane, Dumaneni Ochre Mine
September	24	Heritage Day – Annual Awards Ceremony
October	10	Coromandel, Lydenburg
November	14	Cullinan – Diamond Hill

ABOUT BOOKS/OOR BOEKE

THE NIGHT TRAINS, A FASCINATING READ ON THE HISTORY OF OUR REGION

From the desk:

This is an important read on local history and an essential publication to all of those collecting books on the history of our region.



The Night Trains: Moving Mozambican Miners to and from the Witwatersrand Mines, 1902 - 1955

Charles Van Onselen

Jonathan Ball Publishers

Publisher's notes:

On the night trains, the last stop was always hell. The price exacted from across the African sub-continent for South Africa's stalled 20th century industrial revolution is in human terms still largely hidden from history. It

was the people of southern Mozambique, bent double beneath the historical loads of forced labour and slavery, and then sold-off en masse as contracted labourers to the new coal and gold mines of the Witwatersrand by a Portuguese administration intent on securing a guaranteed volume of rail traffic for its east coast port, that paid the highest price for the development of South Africa's primary industry. An iniquitous inter-colonial agreement for the exploitation of ultra-cheap black labour in the extractive industries was only made possible through the use of the steam locomotive on the trans-national railway linking Johannesburg and Lourenço Marques. The privately-operated, nightly labour trains running between Booyens and Ressaou Garcia left deep scars in the urban and rural cultures of black communities whether in the form of popular songs, such as Stimela and Shosholozu, or in a belief in nocturnal witches' trains that captured and conveyed zombie workers to the region's most unpopular places of employment. By tracing the up- and down-rail journeys undertaken by black migrants over half a century it is possible to reconstruct how racial thinking, expressed logistically, reflected the evolving systems of segregation and apartheid. Mozambican migrant labour formed an integral part of a largely hidden, parallel universe that created the wealth of 20th century South Africa and some of the deepest roots of an on-going tragedy lie, to this very day, besides the rails of the Eastern Main Line.

Book Review | The Night Trains by Dennis Webster:

For over half a century harrowing 600km train journeys between Mozambique and the Witwatersrand goldfields were a central feature of gold mining under racial capitalism on the Rand.

Nine short years after gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand, a snake hatched in Southern Africa. With its tail languishing in the Indian Ocean at what was then the port city of Lourenço Marques in Mozambique, and its venomous fangs sunk deep into the earth below Johannesburg, the Eastern Main Line train line carried the majority of mineworkers to and from South Africa's early 20th-century mineral boom. The story of how the Eastern Main Line destroyed human life wholesale in the service of that boom has since entered the region's folklore.

African miners in Hugh Masekela's Stimela cursed the train that brought them to Johannesburg. An earlier Tsonga song mourned their passage home. At a time when South African mining had reached across a border to infect one in every four Mozambicans with tuberculosis, the tune closed with: "The sun has set for me. Oh, my father, I am dying."

Northern Sotho stories reflecting the barbarity of colonial relations told of stimela sa baloi, the witches' train, which abducted anybody wandering about at night before transporting them as zombies to places of work. Sometimes, they never returned.

In *The Night Trains*, Charles van Onselen, the long-time research professor at the University of Pretoria's Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, has penned the latest stanza in the fable of the Eastern Main Line – the snake that poisoned Southern Africa.

Van Onselen uses the rail lines between Mozambique and South Africa's goldfields to etch out the brutality of South African capitalism, and lay bare some little-recognised truths about the workers on whom it depended: they were mostly migrants, they were counted as things and not people, and there was nothing free about the market that brought them to the Witwatersrand.

The migrants who built Johannesburg

At the time the metal was discovered in 1886, the Witwatersrand produced only 1% of the world's gold. Four years later, only £22 million of capital had been invested in the mines. But by the outbreak of World War I in 1914, mines on the Rand were responsible for 40% of global gold production and had devoured £125 million in capital investment.

South Africa's foetal mining industries were nothing if not ravenous. And the grotesque umbilical cord connecting them to their primary source of fuel – migrant black labour – was the Eastern Main Line.

The majority of South Africa's black mineworkers between 1903 (when there were around 77 000 men working in the gold mines) and the 1950s (when that number had swelled to more than 300 000) were from Mozambique. This recognition – that South Africa's "past prosperity, wealth and relatively advanced infrastructure were built on the backs of black labour pushed and pulled out of colonial Mozambique" – is The Night Trains' organising theme.

A popular choice

The Portuguese colonial authorities guaranteed the Chamber of Mines in Johannesburg carte blanche access to the labour reserves in the Sul do Save – a region in the south of Mozambique – through its recruiting arm, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA). In exchange, the Chamber of Mines offered huge traffic through the port at Lourenço Marques.

The deal between the two colonial powers – one Protestant and mineral-rich, the other Catholic and eager to increase traffic through its port and generate taxes from its abundantly cheap labour reserves – left psycho-social gashes from which the region is yet to recover.

Mine owners championed the system's free market fundamentals – the choice of workers to sell their labour where it was best remunerated. It was an exercise in business logic and reasonableness.

The truth, however, was decidedly grimmer. "Exposed to the transformative agency of time," writes Van Onselen, "the arrogance, condescending nature and deceptions of class and culture assume the dark hue that characterises obscene graffiti left staining the walls of abandoned alleyways in what was once a thriving colonial economy."

Indeed, there was very little that was free about the market forces driving the exodus of men from southern Mozambique.

At the time that South Africa's mining started gobbling labour from the Sul do Save en masse, slavery was still a festering wound on the Mozambican psyche after Portugal took longer than most colonial powers to formally abolish the practice in 1878.

In its place emerged shibalo, a system of forced labour conjured by the Portuguese colonial authorities to put men to work on public projects, and tax their meagre wages. Van Onselen describes the system as the "bastard child" of slavery and indentured labour.

The "choice" of the hundreds of thousands of Mozambicans who travelled 600km to toil for declining wages underground was less "popular" than mine owners imagined. Instead, it was a rational response to the alternative of a slave-like labour system at home administered by a colonial regime prone to violence.

Cargo trains

The Eastern Main Line's primary purpose was to move heavy mining equipment and timber props from Mozambican ports to the mineral riches stranded on the Highveld. It was a rail system hardwired for commodities, not people.

As Van Onselen notes, however, "there seems to be something in the very design and operation of the railway, the steam locomotive and the train as a form of temporal mobile incarceration that lend themselves to ... social engineering and marginalising the vulnerable".

The classification of workers from the Sul do Save as "human freight" being "imported" to the South African mines underscores the systemic designation of generations of men as chattel and not people.

The WNLA imposed train fares on workers for the trip to the mines, during which they were kept in locked carriages to stop them deserting. (More than 100 000 men were sentenced and incarcerated for attempting to escape mine labour between 1902 and 1937.) So, before they had stepped on to the Booysen's platform in Johannesburg, workers were indebted. It required at least the first month of their 12-month contracts to repay the fare.

Stimela: The train and South Africa's musical heritage

Penniless peasants on the up train, however, were turned into cash-flush proletarians on the down train by a year of wages on the mines. But insidious ways were found at both ends of the Eastern Main Line to profit even from these wages.

During the first decade after gold was discovered on the Rand, for instance, the amount of Vinho Para O Preto – “Wine for Blacks” – shipped into Mozambique from Portugal, which was struggling to sell its surplus wine on European markets, grew by a staggering 1 123 %.

Mine owners in South Africa also sensed an opportunity to recoup the money they were spending on wages, and advocated against prohibition while investing heavily in spirit distilleries that received their fruit from Afrikaner farmers.

Flooding a workforce under severe stress from its overcrowded, dangerous and oppressive work environment with cheap alcohol was but one of the examples of how the Southern African mineral-industrial complex destroyed both the bodies and minds of workers.

History and biography

By some lyrical chance, Dylan Thomas summed up *The Night Trains* more than a half century before its publication: “Brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching ... Nothing is too prodigious or too trivial to put down in this tall, devilish story.” (This is from the Welsh poet’s 1950s review of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in *The Observer* newspaper.)

In *The Night Trains*, the torture of South African capitalism neither ebbs nor flows. Free of hesitation or delay, it drips from every page. Van Onselen’s real success has been to make such an unmitigated purgatory readable.

History and biography are the two motive forces behind the slow march of time. The first is the province of structure. The latter, the domain of agency. And it is from the unfolding ballet between them that the human story emerges in full.

It is a dance that has marked Van Onselen’s uniquely brilliant writing in the past. In *The Seed is Mine*, Van Onselen, who has spent his career laying meticulous waste to the notions and fruits of nationalism, manages to tell the story of dispossession in 20th-century South Africa through the life story of one man, Kas Mein, and his family.

Filled with history, *The Night Trains* is largely absent of any similar biographical substance. We do not learn the names, for instance, of any of the Mozambican workers sacrificed for South African profit. Van Onselen says this is a result of deficiencies in the archival material available to us.

It is a mistake, however, to commit the horrors of the Eastern Main Line entirely to the archive. The debris of the mineral-industrial nightmare outlined in *The Night Trains* is strewn across South Africa’s rich mineral deposits. Today, about 150 mineworkers, who were mostly recruited by mining houses from their homes in southern Mozambique in much the same way as those who rode the Eastern Main Line, have been abandoned on the platinum belt, dying of hunger and disease.

Van Onselen rebukes the treatment of workers on the Eastern Main Line as “first and foremost as a collective, as a commodity, as a factor of production and only thereafter as individuals with distinctive characters, temperaments and histories”. Without a fuller engagement with either the lives of the men devoured by those trains, or with the living horrors of their successors, his otherwise excellent account repeats the mistake.

Dennis Webster has a research background in labour, land and housing. He writes about cities, farm work and popular politics in rural areas.