

King Solomon's Mines Revisited

*Western Interests
and the Burdened History
of Southern Africa*

WILLIAM MINTER

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**For the Peoples of Southern Africa
and especially
for the People of Mozambique**

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best you breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

—RUDYARD KIPLING, 1899
"The White Man's Burden:
The United States and the Philippine Islands"

Lord, I'm bearing heavy burdens,
Trying to get home, Trying to get home.

Going to lay down my burden,
Down by the riverside, down by the riverside,
Down by the riverside.

—Negro spirituals
Nineteenth century

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PREFACE

"APARTHEID IS REPUGNANT," or, alternatively, "abhorrent." So runs the ritual condemnation of South Africa's racial system now favored even by conservative Western politicians. Pretoria's own leaders have repeatedly proclaimed apartheid dead or outdated. Conservatives in the West say it can best be abolished by trusting South Africa's rulers, now doing their best to reform. Liberals propose a variety of measures to accelerate change. A growing movement calls for comprehensive economic sanctions to hasten the downfall of the South African regime. Virtually no one, it seems, wants this institutionalized racism to survive.

Yet the vehemence of the debate reveals significant disagreements behind the apparent moral consensus. These disagreements, while predictably correlated with the debaters' general political inclinations, often rest as well on unexamined assumptions defining the terms of debate. If "apartheid" is only the explicit ideology and rigid system tagged in newsroom shorthand as "introduced in 1948 by Afrikaner nationalists," its defenders are now largely confined to the far-right opposition to Pretoria's ruling nationalists. But if one means instead the South African system that has reserved political power and economic privilege for whites for over a century, *that* is still in place, albeit challenged as never before. And it is bolstered by a multitude of ties to many of its nominal opponents overseas.

The image of South Africa as moral outcast, isolated before the bar of world opinion, is of real but limited usefulness in understanding the outside forces affecting the southern African system, either in its origins or in its present crisis. To treat South Africa as a unique creation of the exotic "white tribe of Africa," disconnected from the broader process of Western conquest and economic domination in the region, is to propagate a misleading partial image. To see the persistence of white-minority rule into the 1980s as unrelated to Western policies and practices of the last three decades is equally short-sighted. In understanding why apartheid still lives, blaming the Afrikaner is too narrow an approach.

My personal contact with southern African issues began in 1961, when I was an American exchange student in Nigeria. A fellow student, a black South African, had arrived only after an extended detour: taken off a ship in Angola by Portuguese authorities, he had been sent to Lisbon and held

in solitary confinement for months, before eventually gaining release to take up his scholarship. Looking back, I see my colleague's story as an apt reminder of the interlinked fates of Angola, South Africa, and other countries in the region. Later, two periods of teaching in Tanzania and Mozambique gave me more direct contact with southern African reality. From that vantage point, apartheid, Rhodesia's white-minority rule, and Portuguese colonialism were an interlocked set of issues—each deeply affected by the policies of London and Washington.

The initial impetus for this book came from the repeated discovery, when writing or speaking about the area, that crucial connections were missing from even relatively well-informed discussions. Current policy issues were debated, or news stories written, with relevant background of only a few years earlier blithely ignored, or with long-term phenomena recently brought to public notice presented as novel evidence of change. Events in different parts of the southern African region, although deeply interrelated, were presented as if a continent away. The media spotlight in the West, even in the more distant and historically ignorant United States, sporadically illuminated southern Africa. But significant trends often escaped the camera, and that which appeared, deprived of background, was sometimes so distorted as to be almost unrecognizable.

My aim is to draw out some of the most important connections, focusing on the role of the West in southern Africa. I define the geographical scope of the region broadly, by the presence of significant white settlement and mining wealth. Since the late nineteenth century, these characteristics have both shaped the internal unity of the subcontinent and defined its special place in the global domain of Western interests.

Since my topic is the relationship between the West and southern Africa, I pay primary attention to "outside" influence and perceptions. The internal dynamics of the region, which would properly dominate a book on southern Africa's own history, appear in less elaborated detail. The term "West" as I use it refers to both Europe and North America. I give greatest emphasis to the powers that have dominated in defining the issues internationally: Britain in the earlier period, joined later by the United States.

Similar criteria have dictated the chronological scope of the book. The development of southern African societies for which historians have significant data stretches back at least a thousand years, and Western presence along the coasts roughly half that period. I have focused, however, on the last hundred years, which began with the discovery of new mineral deposits and European conquest of the interior. These changes marked a qualitatively new level of strategic importance for the region, as well as the implantation of basic features of the political economy that persist today.

Chapters 1 through 4 deal with the period up to 1960; 5 through 9 with 1960 to the present.

In substantive terms I have sought to relate two levels of analysis most often considered separately: the political economy of interests of classes, nations, and ethnic groups on the one hand, and the political practice of foreign policy making on the other. I have sought links between the two levels, particularly in the ideas and operational assumptions of Western policymakers. Behind most policy decisions lie premises and prejudices that are rarely the subject of debate, but which serve as common ground for what are seen as policy alternatives. What changes and what remains the same in this contextual framework for decision, amidst changing political developments, is a recurring theme of my study.

Much of the book takes the form of narrative. In part this is simply the easiest way to present basic background information. But it also reflects my conviction that one of the best places to seek clues to social structure is in the interplay of events. In each case I not only ask "what happened?" but try to probe the "taken-for-granted" assumptions of key actors and to relate those to the interests of the groups for which they speak. In particular, I am concerned with isolating the perceived and actual interests in southern Africa of Western ruling circles, their views of appropriate local allies, and the consequences of their actions for the people of southern Africa.

My method relies on a series of comparisons—among colonial powers, between colonial and white-settler regimes, among policies in different time periods, between European and American involvement, among successive U.S. administrations. This kind of investigation occupies a middle ground between the historian's or the journalist's pursuit of particularity and the social scientist's quest for generalized truth. Moving from one comparison to another, I hope to give the reader a sense of both the variety of factors at work and the underlying unity of an historical epoch only now drawing to a close. Although repeatedly tempted to do so, I have refrained from delving into particular cases in great detail, or drawing out the theoretical implications of particular comparisons. The specialist, or other reader interested in pursuing a topic in greater depth, can find a guide to sources at the end of the book.

In general terms secondary historical literature predominates among my sources for the period before 1960. For the subsequent period, my sources are more varied—from contemporary news stories and pamphlets to scholarly monographs, conversations with a wide range of those involved with the region, research in the archives of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. For perspective I am most indebted to colleagues over the

years in FRELIMO, with *Southern Africa* magazine, *Africa News*, and the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars, and to the "New School" of southern Africa scholars who have been reanalyzing the region over the past fifteen years.

The research and writing for this book benefited, at various stages, from grants from the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation (for archival research), and the Social Science Research Council (making possible an extended research trip to southern Africa in 1984).

My fourteen-year-old son, Sam, recently told me that one of his earliest memories is of me coming up with the title for this book. I hope that he, and others who have been patient with me over the years of finding time to work on it, will find it worth the wait. I am grateful for the consistent moral support and other assistance of my parents, David and Sue Minter. Also essential has been the encouragement of Ann Dunbar, Allen Isaacman, Nzongola Ntalaja, David Robinson, Carol Thompson, Immanuel Wallerstein, Dave Wiley, and other Africanist scholars and friends, whose positive responses to the idea of such a book helped keep me keeping on.

The persons whose ideas and information have enriched this book are too numerous to name, but I can identify many who made specific contributions. Ruth Minter shared with me the teaching in Tanzania and Mozambique, and helped establish ties of confidence with people directly involved in the southern African struggle. The keen insights of Jennifer Davis, executive director of the American Committee on Africa, have often been a significant resource for me, as for others working on southern African issues. Reed Kramer's investigative reporting at *Africa News* has repeatedly uncovered aspects of U.S. African policy that might otherwise have remained hidden. Carol Thompson and David Robinson have each provided valuable critiques of virtually the whole manuscript. Catherine Sunshine has advised me on rewrite after rewrite, even while seeing her own book on the Caribbean into print.

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—W. M.
Washington, D.C.
April 1986

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