

A history of neighbouring cousins

Stassen, Nicol. 2010. **The Boers in Angola 1928-1975.** Pretoria: Protea Book House. 762 p. Price: R335,00. ISBN: 978-1-86919-395-9.

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The subject of this book is dirt poor but thoroughly decent people (*brandarm mense maar edel van inbors*). The author sets out to paint a picture of the Afrikaner community in Angola during the period 1928-1975. In history the passage of time is sometimes scarcely perceptible. Like a slow-flowing river, time cannot be dammed-up. We cannot detach ourselves from our environment. It is man that lends colour to his environment, just as colour determines the seasons. Like the seasons, our history is one of endless repetition, where change happens slowly. Our environment, and the cosmos,

also put its stamp on us. The mountains with their hump backs, the climate, the vegetation and the animal life around us all help determine how we make a living in particular circumstances. The writer describes this ecology with such accuracy and fluency that the readers feel that they are living there.

Social history is explored next – the history of groups and groupings. The population groups of Angola and their economic activities are perceptively examined. The third section deals with the history of the Boers in Angola and the events of life there. It is a chronicle of brief, rapid and almost random fluctuations. The two turning points of the research occurred in 1928, when the majority of Afrikaners left Angola (about 400 Afrikaners remained behind while about 2 000 Angolan-Boers were repatriated to South-West Africa, known as Namibia today) and 1975, when the last Angolan-Afrikaners fled the country.

South Africa's fortunes are closely linked with those of Africa. From 1975 to the end of the Cold War in 1989, Angola and South Africa were engaged in a regional war. Although the civil war went on until 2002, today's close contact between the two countries exist through the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Because of its fabulous oil wealth, Angola is playing an increasingly important role in this region.

History is more than the description and interpretation of a forgotten and arid past. There are themes and events that are reflected in the present and which point the way to the future. This book impresses on the reader that it is possible for minorities to coexist and survive in a larger entity. Isolation and withdrawal mean atrophy. Cultures can enrich each other. The reader realises afresh that countries – in this case South Africa and Angola – are interdependent and nature also serves to create this interdependence.

The research is based on documents, archival material and a literature study. The researcher learned to speak Portuguese. With the assistance of Fritz Berkemeier of the *Livraria Histórica e Ultramarina* in Lisbon, this enabled him to trace extremely rare books on the colonial history of Angola. This was only possible because the researcher was able to read and interpret Portuguese. What makes this book so meaningful is that the writer conducted personal interviews with the descendants of the pioneers who were repatriated in 1928 and 1958. The oral tradition and the stories recounted by the subjects interviewed were checked against published sources

whereby the picture of events was built up to be as accurate as possible.

This book is not an accumulation and interpretation of facts, but a journey alongside living history – history made by people who are alive. The reader is struck by the fluent, lucid and gripping style of writing. It is like a living drama from the past that is being played out in the present. It has an impact on both intellect and emotions. For example, when a young couple wanted to get married in the fifties, they were threatened with being the last couple who would be allowed to marry in that district if their marriage failed. The reason was that the marriages of the previous three couples had failed (p. 266).

What we are presented with here is original, accessible and meaningful research, based on primary sources and original interviews. No previous research of this kind has been carried out on this topic.