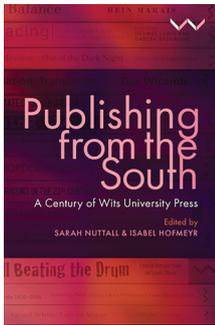




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Publishing from the South: A Century
of Wits University Press



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Sarah Nuttall and Isabel Hofmeyr

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REVIEWER:
Janet Remington^{1,2}

AFFILIATIONS:
¹Department of African Literature,
University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa
²Department of English and Related
Literature, University of York, York,
United Kingdom

EMAIL:
janet.remmington@wits.ac.za

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Publishing from the South: Authenticating Southern intellectual publics while not precluding worldliness

The story of Wits University Press is at the heart of this book while it asks broader questions about power, position and place.

This thoughtfully curated edited volume offers readers a twofold experience: a deep dive into South Africa's oldest university press (founded in 1922) and a wider exploration of what it means to publish from the South in the global knowledge economy. It does so via a stable of expert contributors – scholars from a range of disciplines, publishers, writers and cultural analysts – who cover extensive ground in examining the complex history of Wits Press and its meanings today. Far from this volume being a self-laudatory undertaking, it trains a critical eye on 100 years of publishing across segregationist, apartheid and post-1994 eras.

Starting with Wits Press's beginnings as part of a new university in the young city of Johannesburg, the book goes on to examine its institutional ambitions, resource pressures, sociopolitical faultlines, changing currents and impacts near and far. The volume delves into the Press's accommodations with, and departures from, the state and capital.

The editors, Sarah Nuttall and Isabel Hofmeyr, both leading commentators with professorial links to Wits, provide a substantial introduction which explores the intriguing history and development of the Press. They situate their analysis of the publishing house within larger discussions around African knowledge production, evaluation and dissemination. The Introduction, together with the book's 16 chapters, engage with what it has meant to publish hundreds of works across the social sciences, humanities and sciences over the past century; what is involved in publishing in, for and from the South today in the unequal global knowledge environment; and what may or should come next.

Divided into four sections, the volume opens with a focus on the materiality of publishing: Wits Press's great range of publications read through its changing covers and formats. The book brings discussion about visual signposting, production channels and forms of distribution right into the digital present, while also discussing the evolving nature of author contracts and legal arrangements. The Press's first ever publication was an economic survey, *The Natural Resources of South Africa* (1922), with a preface by then Prime Minister Jan Smuts, jointly published with Longmans, Green & Co in the UK. Although a comprehensive Wits Press catalogue across a century is not available as the archive is incomplete, we know the Press covered many fields, including chemistry, natural and botanical sciences, archaeology, economics, urban studies, literature and linguistics. It was particularly strong in anthropological studies and liberally underpinned studies of 'race relations'.

The second section explores the Press's impetuses, ambivalences and realities in relation to race and place. From the start, Wits Press boldly set out to "contribute to the world's knowledge of anthropological and allied subjects" from its Southern location. Northern research institutions and their presses, including Oxford and Cambridge, remained "points of both aspiration and envy" for the Press even as it sought to carve out its niche. It is no exaggeration to say that Wits Press was fraught with contradiction. It sought to build the university's research profile from the South, yet the South of the time was organised around highly racialised structures, which arguably provided the basis and means for many of the institution's distinguishing research outputs. As the editors comment, the Press was established to publish research undertaken at Wits, much of which "had been shaped, directly and indirectly, by prerogatives from the mining industry", although publications varied a great deal and many included critical perspectives of industrial policy and practice, and of the state.

Although a key founding motivation was to establish provincial white excellence, the Press drew on the intellectual and creative capital of black scholars, writers and linguists in various ways, and it employed black staff in its operations. Until more recently, contributions of all kinds by black people were under-acknowledged. The *Bantu/African Treasury*, founded in the 1930s, has been one of Wits Press's most successful series, giving voice to African expressivity in indigenous languages, including, for example, Sol T. Plaatje's Setswana translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The journal *Bantu Studies* published black anthropological, linguistic, literary and historical pieces alongside white from its earliest days. Launched in 1921, the journal was renamed *African Studies* in 1941, and is still going. The names of BW Vilakazi, John Henderson Soga, Regina Gelana Twala and Robert Sobukwe live on in the print and digital editions while new voices join their ranks.

The book's Afterword by award-winning writer Ivan Vladislavić points to the Press's generally cautious approach during apartheid. As social studies editor of oppositional publisher Ravan Press in the 1980s, Vladislavić reflects on the edgier academic projects that Ravan undertook, often at great cost and risk: "My colleagues and I used to joke – not always kindly – that we were the external wing of Wits University Press." From the 1970s, Wits Press did, however, publish Es'kia Mphahlele and Chabani Manganyi, Wits faculty members in African Literature and Psychology, respectively.

The third section examines "women in the house". It discusses, among other things, the backroom roles for women (and black staff more generally) in the Press for many decades. It also covers increased recognition and leadership positions for women since the 1990s, as well as their initiatives in diversifying authorship in the past two and a half decades especially, not least in publishing ground-shifting texts from black female scholars including Gabeba Baderoon.

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The final section adds a set of “author-book biographical” essays that offer contemporary reflections on publishing with Wits Press in the heightened globalised publishing ecosystem. Sociologist Srila Roy, for example, does not shy away from the challenges of navigating North–South, and some South–South, complexities where considerations of ratings, funding, influence and reach loom large. She does not hold back, though, on making a case for publishing from the African South, where she sees great attentiveness, innovation and commitment to the intellectual project. Similarly, for literary scholar Baderoon (who holds an academic post in the USA, but who prioritises South African and Southern publishing routes), the “infrastructure for generating and publishing African thought that consists of a community” is paramount.

While this thought-provoking and highly readable volume ranges deep and wide across Wits Press territory, it brings to the fore key issues along the North–South faultline for those engaging with the dynamics of higher education, research, publishing and policymaking today. It looks back in a clear-eyed way, while looking ahead with some boldness and belief. What I take from this book (in glossing words from the Introduction) is that 21st-century Southern knowledge-making at its most compelling does not preclude worldliness and the importance of reaching and interacting with the international community, but it shifts the terms of reference to publishing in and for the South first. Overall, the volume meditates on the role of authenticating Southern intellectual publics and African infrastructures in the pursuit of knowledge.