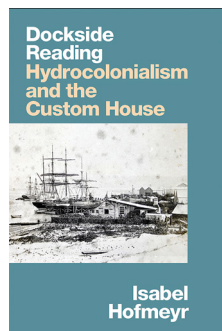


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## Books on the hydrocolonial margin

Isabel Hofmeyr is one of South Africa's most highly esteemed academics and has an impressive international reputation. She refers to the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand as her "intellectual home since 1984" (p. ix), where she was based until her retirement in 2023. She is currently Professor Emeritus and an active member of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER). From 2013 to 2022, she taught biennially in the English Department at New York University and is prominent in the worlds of Indian Ocean Studies and the Oceanic Humanities. With her global as well as national profile, Hofmeyr is widely respected and has garnered many awards for her work.

As befits a literary critic and scholar of English literature, her research field is print culture, and her speciality is in analysing how this relates to southern African literary history. Her best-known books include *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (Wits University Press; 1993), *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton University Press; 2004) and *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Harvard University Press; 2013).

Hofmeyr is a creative thinker and imaginative scholar who probes unusual issues. Her latest publication moves away from book authorship and reception to what she calls 'bookhood' (p. 84), namely the materiality of a book. Her aim is to consider the book as an object: its appearance, its manufacture and publication, its travels, and what it has undergone physically in order to survive and to find a reader. In our current world of conversations over tariffs, migration and free speech, what Hofmeyr has uncovered in *Dockside Reading* is her analysis of the book as commercial object and traveller. This makes for a fascinating tale. This is a short book, 121 pages in total, but the notes and bibliography attest to the huge number of sources that she has been able to consult, despite the COVID lockdown period during which much of the book was written.

There are many threads to unpack in this experimental book which narrates the goings-on at the Custom House in South Africa, particularly that located in Durban. It was the customs and excise staff at the dockside through which books were funnelled as they arrived on ships as items of cargo. There, at the hands of the officials, they were scrutinised and evaluated before being released onshore and into the interior. For some of this story, Hofmeyr uses the documented career of George Rutherford, the Customs Collector at Durban's harbour, and she provides some comparisons with Australia. Hofmeyr leads from this theme to the changing and rather idiosyncratic censorship procedures that were applied to books as officials flicked through the pages.

Published in 2022, *Dockside Reading* was eagerly read and quickly acclaimed in scholarly reviews in a wide range of journals including, for example, *American Historical Review*, *Journal of British Studies*, *African Studies Review*, *South African Historical Journal*, and *South African Journal of Cultural History*, as well as on H-Net. Moreover, *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Enquiry* contains a 'Book Forum' in which Hofmeyr explains the aim and content of her book and gives her response to three specific readers.<sup>1</sup> By perusing some of these assessments, readers of the present review would be rewarded with far more detail than is possible here. The numerous peers who have reviewed *Dockside Reading* home in on how Hofmeyr works with the concept of hydrocolonialism – the theory she advances to dissect the complex interface between land and sea during the colonial era. Literary scholars who have reviewed this book tend to concentrate on the theoretical possibilities and limitations of the concept, and suggest the further interrogation required to bring it into full use.

My interests as an historian were slightly different. I wondered about the careers of the dockside officials, their qualifications and backgrounds for this type of employment as it changed over time and with the political context. Apart from Rutherford, what type of men were the others? How was copyright legislation aligned to import duties and specific decisions made? Hofmeyr's descriptions of the fate of some of the books that landed in Cape Town during the South African War of 1899–1902 are illuminating.

Thus, *Dockside Reading* opens new and exciting avenues of enquiry for many fields of research. Hofmeyr has shown how rich the archival sources are and how much more there is to learn about, and to understand, the past through the lens of customs and excise at the harbour. Moreover, the long history of the power and control in the hands of dockside officials, both white and black (naturally all men), in the colonial era and the use of the 'tariff handbook' would certainly reward further historical investigation. So too, would the role of colonial book publishers and booksellers, Thomas Maskew Miller (1863–1930) in Cape Town for example, be instructive.

In her concluding chapter, Hofmeyr quotes from a collection entitled *Book Parts*<sup>2</sup>, in which a book is defined as "an alignment of separate component pieces, each possessed of particular conventions and histories". In *Dockside Reading*, Hofmeyr has captured many of these pieces, using a truly impressive range and variety of sources, and has encouraged her readers to think about the many lives, cultures and travels in which books were enmeshed in the colonial era.

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