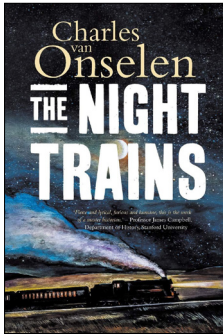




Check for updates

BOOK TITLE:

The night trains: Moving Mozambican miners to and from South Africa, circa. 1902–1955



AUTHOR:

Charles van Onselen

ISBN:

9781868429943 (softcover, 264 pp)

PUBLISHER:

Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg; ZAR260

PUBLISHED:

2019

REVIEWER:

Bill Nasson

AFFILIATION:

Department of History, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

EMAIL:

bnasson@sun.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:

Nasson B. Not the peace train but the piece train. *S Afr J Sci.* 2020;116(5/6), Art. #8136, 1 page. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/8136>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

27 May 2020

Not the peace train but the piece train

In what should fall foul of any literary trades description Act, Charles van Onselen describes his latest work as a ‘little book’ (p.14). It is, as anyone who opens *The Night Trains* will quickly discover, anything but that. Forged as a ‘self-contained outgrowth’ of a larger regional study underway into the historical nexus between ‘industrial and Protestant South Africa’ and ‘rural, commercial and Catholic Mozambique’ (p.209), this is a pioneering, relentlessly nightmarish transnational story of human exploitation. More than anything, what *The Night Trains* resembles is an insistently high-octane treatise or an extended forensic investigation with unimaginably disturbing recurring findings.

In his introduction, Professor Van Onselen suggests that any choice of the technological innovations of the early 19th century that had the deepest and most enduring influence on the making of world history well into the first half of the 20th century, would surely have to include the locomotive. Indeed, far more so than, say, the telegraph or the steamship, the locomotive train has long enjoyed the lion’s share of attention, with various notable writers having singled it out as a dazzling element of material progress by the age of iron.

Thus, in Tony Judt’s 2016 *When the Facts Change: Essays, 1995-2010*, the marvel of rail is its stupendous conquest of space and time. More cosily, J.M. Barrie of *Peter Pan* fame makes a showing in the lovingly crafted *The Arbroath & Forfar Railway* (2000) by Niall Ferguson – the obscure Scottish railway historian, not the other Niall Ferguson, Harvard University’s pugnacious praise-singer of modern empire. Even as the lethal carrier of industrial warfare, as in Christian Wolmar’s 2010 *Engines of War: How Wars were Won & Lost on the Railways*, the train still constitutes a tainted epic of ‘blood on the tracks’, or ‘an awe-inspiring tale of industrial might’. The author of *The Night Trains* is, though, far too acute an historian, and far too sensitive to ‘bitter historical experiences’ (p.8) to augment evocation with celebration.

As is to be expected of this country’s leading social historian, Van Onselen’s searing tale of the regional up-trains and down-trains of the Eastern Main Line between Mozambique and Johannesburg is composed not in a dining car, but is bellowed out from a stoker’s platform. Capturing the terrible dominion of South African industrial capitalism through the first half of the 20th century, this meticulous reconstruction of a night-time colonial conveyor belt which shuttled impoverished rural Mozambican migrants between a labour-repressive Portuguese East Africa and a labour-repressive Witwatersrand is about as close as it gets to history as nightmare.

Befitting so cold-blooded an operation, the privately operated night trains are characterised as ravenous snakes in a book which charts every inch and every hideous dimension of the rail journeys taken by ‘East Coast boys’ between Ressano Garcia on the Mozambican border and Johannesburg’s Booyens Station. Displaying his enviable capacity for making crucial connections, Van Onselen is always urging readers to see the links between the confined world of regimented labour portrayed here, and South Africa’s malformed society and politics in which what counted was not exposing ‘a squeamish white public’ to ‘the labour entrails of the mining economy’ (p.67). The hidden, squalid world of the night trains was the perfect oxygen to feed an ideal universe in which ‘African labour was recruited out of sight, delivered to the industrial centres invisibly, and then made to disappear into the darkness of the underground workings of the mines before being smuggled back home, also unseen, in the middle of the night ... All whites *knew* that the prosperity of the country depended on the mining industry but nobody wanted to *see* the coerced black labour that rendered the system possible and profitable.’ (p.66)

The real importance of this book, rooted in microscopic archival burrowing, is not that it is a further acerbic chapter on the usual staple elements of modern South African history – squalor and misery, exploitation and discontent, succumbing and enduring. The importance lies in it being a major milestone in historical retrieval. This portrayal of the miserable story of how some five million Mozambican migrant labourers came to be transported as imprisoned human cargo to the Witwatersrand and absorbed by its mines has been, in that often-overused phrase, hidden from history. *The Night Trains* is, in essence, a Southern African ‘tale of a parallel universe, one deliberately concealed and, with the passing of time, one now in danger of becoming completely forgotten’ (p.194).

Van Onselen’s approach to the railway is to bring it within the analytical ambience of his typically probing field of historical vision. To put it more plainly, this sombre account of the Main Line takes in the importance of branch lines. These convey a dazzling array of elements that shaped the lives of those propelled into coaches and of those who organised and implemented the whole shabby business, from the workings of alcohol, syphilis, tuberculosis and transport accidents to locomotive types and train speeds, mine compounds and wages, storekeepers, witchcraft and much else besides.

This puffing panorama of interlocking railway realities includes examination of the ways in which racist ideology became coupled to the ‘quasi-militaristic...operational realities’ (p.166) of the rail system. Fittingly, that is also neatly illustrated by the late-19th and early-20th century incidents involving the ejection from first-class carriages of Mohandas Gandhi and of the early ANC notable, Pixley ka Isaka Seme. These illustrated the high risk of assuming that class, education, status and a first-class rail ticket would surmount the barrier of train racism. In one of the instances in which he turns to inspired conjecture, Van Onselen ventures that the crude personal discrimination experienced on trains by educated and well-to-do Africans and Indians may have helped to feed later movements of political resistance.

As a powerful antidote to amnesia, *The Night Trains* is also a telling illustration that all past history is also present history. All works of history, the author reminds readers in a movingly personal Afterword, are products of their times. In South Africa’s xenophobic present, its inhabitants, ‘especially those who owned and own the coal- and gold-mining industries, need to acknowledge that much of the country’s past prosperity, wealth and relatively advanced infrastructure were built on the backs of black labour pushed and pulled out of colonial Mozambique’ (p.197).

Instead of that kind of weighty reckoning, what is on offer is an increasingly shop-worn nationalist display of re- reckonings of the grand figures of black liberation, the tinny sounds of ubuntu, the nagging mantras of continental African solidarity, and the conceit of this country’s selective ‘heritage-peddlers’ who trade in mostly ‘imagined versions of the past’ (p.13). Those familiar with the hallmarks of Charles van Onselen’s works will not be short-changed by the tone of *The Night Trains*. Deeply humane towards underdogs and contemptuous of top dogs, it is impassioned, strident and morally indignant.

© 2020. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.