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Public History and the School Curriculum: Two South African Case Studies

Case study provides an opportunity both to explore historical incidents or topics and to discuss the inherent questions that they raise. In considering the challenges faced by teachers and students in the public history content of prescribed school history curricula, it seems appropriate to select the most obvious cases to investigate. South Africans who went to school before the democratic era (pre-1996) would have no hesitation in identifying The Great Trek¹ as the dominant narrative and prevailing public history theme in the history they experienced at school. Similarly, anyone, citizen or visitor, who was asked to identify an iconic site in the history of apartheid and the political transformation of South Africa would be bound to identify Robben Island, on which Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for eighteen years (see Siebörger 2012 regarding the post-apartheid school history curriculum).²

Case 1, The Great Trek: When public history takes over the school curriculum

A colleague recently said to me, “All I remember from school history is that all we did was the ‘Great Trek’ and each time we did it I got less and less interested.” This echoes the experience of generations of school-goers of all races.

The trek is the iconic event in white Afrikaner history. It was the exodus of a significant proportion of the Dutch-speaking settler farmers from the south-eastern districts of Cape Colony (which had been annexed by Britain in 1806) between 1834 and 1837. They trekked north with their wagons, crossed the frontier of the Cape and settled beyond the Orange River in the lands which were to become trekker republics, that they named Natal, the Free State and the Transvaal (South

1 The trek is *die Groot Trek* in Afrikaans, which is ‘the big trek’. It was big because so many more farmers took part in that emigration than in previous treks within the Cape. The term “The Great Trek” is a contested one, as it is only great when considered from one perspective. A number of alternative names exist, including “Boer trek”, “Afrikaner Difaqane” and simply, the trek.

2 Rob Siebörger, “Dealing with a Reign of Virtue: the Post-apartheid South African School History Curriculum.” in *History Wars and the Classroom: Global Perspectives*, eds Tony Taylor and Robert Guyver (Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age, 2012).

African Republic). It was the centenary celebrations of the trek in the 1930s that brought it to public consciousness. In the depression years Afrikaners were lifted by the re-enactment of the trek and by a fervour which swept the country for all things to do with the *Voortrekkers*.

There are no existing contemporary illustrations of the trek but this gap was filled by artists and sculptors at the time of the centenary, who portrayed the Voortrekkers in heroic poses and the trek as a triumph against mountains and rivers and the indigenous people (Figure 2.1). Prominent in these depictions were battle scenes, particularly those of the battle of Blood River (the Ncome



Figure 2.1: Detail of marble frieze panel in the Voortrekker Monument. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2014-11-19_Marmorrelief_Voortrekker_Monument_Pretoria_08_anagoria.JPG)



Figure 2.2: Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:9_2_228_0003-The_Voortrekker_Monument-Pretoria-s.jpg)

river), where a small force of trekkers fought off a far larger Zulu force from a laager (ring) of their wagons. They had taken a pledge to God to celebrate the day, 16 December, in posterity as a remembrance to him if they were granted the victory. 16 December became a significant public holiday which assumed religious and political overtones in the twentieth century. It was on that day in 1949 that the Voortrekker monument (Figure 2.2) was opened, a towering symbol over the capital city, Pretoria. On the same day in 1971 a laager of 64 exact-replica Voortrekker wagons cast in bronze was opened at the site of the battle (Figure 2.3).

The enthusiasm for the trek was carried over to the school curriculum and textbooks – and even an Afrikaner youth movement, founded to inculcate *Voortrekker* values. As the National Party was in government from 1948 to 1994, it was easy for the trek to be accorded the dominant place in the school history curriculum. There was a significant proportion of the content of the Standard 4, Standard 6 and Standard 8 (Grades 4, 6 and 8) history syllabuses devoted to it. For many white teachers, however, it was the only history content that they knew well, so it spilled over into other grades and the classroom posters, illustrations and maps of the trek were so ubiquitous that anyone in their classrooms would be left in no doubt of its overwhelming importance. Outside the school, it was little different. The insignia of the National Party was a powder horn, the *Voortrekker* flags formed part of the national flag, while symbols of torches, wagon wheels and *kappies* (women's bonnets) were common all over. The public history had invaded the school curriculum.



Figure 2.3: Laager of bronze wagons at Blood River. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bloedrivier_laer.jpg)

Case 2, Robben Island: When public history struggles to find a place in the school curriculum

The prominence of Robben Island in the contemporary public history of South Africa is almost entirely due to its use as a prison for black political prisoners, most notably Nelson Mandela, during the apartheid era (from 1961 to 1991). The island, prominently located in Table Bay, 14 km from Cape Town and easily seen from Table Mountain (Figures 2.4 and 2.5), has, however a long and notorious history of incarceration before this time. One of its first notable colonial prisoners was Krotoa, who was ironically, also the first indigenous South African to be baptised. In the Nineteenth century the legendary Xhosa prophet Makhanda Nxele was imprisoned there and drowned in an escape bid in 1819, while the prominent Chief Maqoma died on the island during his second banishment there, in 1873.

Prior to 1996, many South African school history syllabuses ended in 1961, some only went as far as 1948. 1961 was year that South Africa declared itself a republic and left the British Commonwealth. To many Afrikaners, 1961 represented



Figure 2.4: Robben Island from Table Mountain. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robben_Island_from_Table_Mountain.jpg)



Figure 2.5: Table Mountain from Robben Island. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robben_Island_Tour_48.jpg)

the triumph of the “Great Trek” – the regaining of sovereign independence and the title Republic, which echoed the former name of President Paul Kruger’s South African Republic. This narrative had no place at all for the politics of black resistance in the 1950s and early 1960s, so Robben Island was never mentioned.

There had been frequent calls for contemporary history to be introduced into the school curriculum as part of the fight against apartheid and to popularise People’s history during the decade before the democratic election in 1994. It was something of a triumph that the new curricula developed from 1997 onwards allowed history to be taught till the present day. The new narrative which took the place of the old one focused largely on the key events of the anti-apartheid struggle and to a lesser extent on its leaders. The Treason Trial of 1956, the Sharpeville massacre, the Soweto uprising, the unrest of the 1980s and the negotiated settlement which led to 1994, are the staples of this account. There was little emphasis on personal biographies, so even the life history of Nelson Mandela has not been studied in detail in the school curriculum. There was no obvious place for Robben Island in this scheme of things either.

Other aspects militating against the inclusion of Robben Island were that it was history about a place, and local history at that. The history curriculum was organised by big questions, periods of political, economic or social history, and theories and interpretations. Both the history of places and a thematic approach to history play very little part in the traditional views of the South African past. Local history is also under-emphasised, unless it is built into individual projects and investigations. Robben Island is peculiarly Cape Town history and national curriculum writers are very careful to try to balance the history of all of the provinces and cities. An emphasis on Robben Island could weight Cape Town and the Western Cape province too heavily in relation to the history of other provinces. That admitted, it is possibly more likely that the omission of a focus on the history of Robben Island in the official history curricula since 1997 might simply have been an unintended oversight. The writers of one phase (the 12 years of schooling are divided into four phases of three years) might have assumed that it would be included in another phase, for example. If this sounds implausible, consider that the National Curriculum Statements in use from 2004 to 2011 neglected to include the mineral revolution of the 1870s – 1890s, which many consider to be the beginning of the modern history of Southern Africa, in the final phase, and that the first edition of a text written especially for schools on “Turning Points” in South African history³ completely omitted the South African (Anglo-Boer) war.

³ Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, *Turning Points in History* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004).



Figure 2.6: Robben Island Maximum Security prison. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robben_Island-006.jpg)

Robben Island has a special place in the conscience of many South Africans and many visitors from elsewhere (Figure 2.6). A peculiarly endearing post-apartheid tradition is that mass wedding ceremonies take place on it on Valentine’s Day each year. But the history of the island and of the lives and experiences of those imprisoned on it has not been given a place in the history curriculum, despite its iconic nature and its position in public memory and present-day tourism.

The two case studies present an interesting set of issues and questions regarding the relationship between public history and classroom history teaching. The case of the Great Trek is considered first.

A dominant single narrative

The Great Trek became the narrative that absorbed all others in the apartheid history curriculum. History for many was only the trek and they either liked it or hated it. The exigencies of the apartheid state made it a key narrative of the state: it represented both the triumph of the Afrikaner over the British and the triumph of white over black. It was also overlain with religious justification and, together

with what has become known as the “myth of the empty land”, established the right of the Boer (farmer) nation to its existence in Africa. Its classroom dominance was such that it side-lined all other historical avenues for investigation and discovery in South African history in schools, something that was true in both black and white education.

It was not only dominant in that it was so much greater than any other narrative in the curriculum, but also the one which had all the resources and which many teachers felt they had the most confidence to teach. It was presented in a singular fashion: the causes of the trek were laid out in such a way that the trekkers were seen to be righteous victims and the counter evidence was completely ignored; the actors were painted as bold, tactical and honest, though there was much to suggest the opposite; despite the precarious economic circumstances of the trekker states, Britain was always painted as the enemy, not as many would now indicate the colonial co-conspirator which brought prosperity; and narrative of the trek was adulterated by the subsequent experiences of the Afrikaner nation in the scorched earth policies and concentration camps for women and children during the South African war. This was the message of the public history, faithfully translated into the classrooms.

Repetition in the curriculum

The legacy of the Great Trek in the South African history curriculum has been that there is now a concerted attempt not to repeat content topics unless there is very good reason. The trek was repeated in each phase, presumably on the basis that not only was it worth revising the topic and bringing it to mind again, but that some students would leave school at the end of primary school, some would leave half-way through high school and the rest would complete high school. Every group should, therefore, it was believed, be exposed/re-exposed to the history of the trek.

Repetition was obviously also intended to convey importance. The more the repetition, the greater the impact, as public history often demonstrates in society: street names, statues, monuments, museums, heritage sites, magazines and books, popular speeches and celebrations, music and drama, video and films and websites all compound the impact of what might be a relatively small and shallow body of historical knowledge, which is accorded significance because it is endlessly replicated. The trek was certainly a case of this.

There have, however, been examples of repetition in post-apartheid curricula. Previously there had been little attention paid to Cape slavery. What there was had carried the message that slaves at the Cape were treated well when

compared with slaves in other countries. It also perversely conveyed within the Great Trek account that slavery was justified, in that it was the British who had freed the slaves of the Afrikaner farmers. They had lost capital and labour as a result and this was, thus, a legitimate cause of the Great Trek. The school curriculum needed, it may be argued, to correct this account, to provide a new narrative about slavery which was substantially bigger, included history from below and accorded a worthy place to the origins and history of those who were descended from slaves, who had previously had no place in school history. Not only was there an important story to tell within South Africa, it was also important to make the links between Cape slavery and the Indian Ocean, transatlantic slavery and the influence of slavery on the industrial revolution in England. It was deemed appropriate, then, that slavery should be a topic to be repeated in more than one phase. Another example of “new” and revised history that was also repeated was the history of the Holocaust.

Likewise, the history of the liberation struggle, specifically the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, deserved a prominent place in the school curriculum and, as the majority of students stop studying history at Grade 9 (it is an optional subject in the final three-year phase), it was only logical that this topic be repeated in Grade 12. There are, however, other opportunities to cover aspects of the struggle in the primary school, under topics of celebrating public holidays and democracy/citizenship. Some have unfavourably likened this range of coverage to that of the Great Trek, though it was far less systematic and much less doctrinaire.

What the Great Trek also demonstrated was that it was not just repetition that was an issue, but similar repetition. The differences between the histories contained in the three grades were not very significant. The maps and pictures used were virtually identical, the cast of characters and their assigned roles did not differ, the history was always top down and there was no emphasis on sources, either primary or secondary. There was some extra elaboration, longer lists of names and more specific dates mentioned, while extra information was provided, for example, about the names of the tribes engaged in conflict by the Voortrekkers and the forms of government developed.

The introduction of progression in historical understanding through skills and concepts has meant that not only does the procedural knowledge increase through the years, but that the substantive knowledge of the curricula can be approached and specified in far more sophisticated ways. How a topic is repeated is far more important than whether it is repeated or not. The influence of public history on the classroom is noteworthy. The public history represented in the Great Trek desired conformity and sameness, it encouraged shallow interpretations and wished to inculcate rote memorisation of the deeds of heroes and (a few) heroines.

Interrogating the public history by multiple narratives and explanations

The case of the Great Trek does, however, present fairly readily accessible examples of multiple narratives and explanations for classroom use. As there are relatively few written accounts of the trek, it is possible for a class to interrogate all (or almost all) of the primary sources for an event. The battle of Blood River is an example, and, unexpectedly perhaps, provides a range of conflicting details, which enable students to construct their own explanations or to interrogate and correct secondary or textbook accounts. These include the time of the beginning of the battle and its length, the numbers of the enemy and the number of the slain, the sequence of events during the battle, and, more crucially, whether a massacre was perpetrated or not. While it is not possible to contrast trekker written accounts with Zulu ones, the sources make the exercise of envisaging a Zulu counter history a very feasible one. Fictionalising missing aspects, using the techniques of drama and scripting are all facilitated, it is suggested, by the accessibility to the public history. As the history of World War I is providing at present (and the centenary of the South African War provided in a much more limited way in 1999–2002), the revived focus on both the big and the small details of the war through the intense public interest has enormous benefits for what it provides in terms of resources that can be used in schools.

Keeping history interesting for students

Often the need to keep history interesting overtakes other demands in classroom history. All teachers have their favourite history topics, which are the ones that they know they can teach in an interesting way, can sustain, or can get good responses to from their students – their “go-to” topics. The dedicated, well-prepared and well-resourced teacher is able to make most topics relevant, challenging or enjoyable, but even for them it isn’t always easy. For some teachers the Great Trek was the history that they returned to if they wanted to keep the history interesting (and familiar). For others, the trek was just the opposite – its very existence in the curriculum was calculated to make history uninteresting for students.

There are topics that have an appeal that is universal, that of themselves raise the interest levels for students and teachers. Ancient Egypt, slavery, the Industrial Revolution and the mining revolution, the trenches in World War I and the Vietnam War are examples of this in South Africa. It would be an inadequate curriculum that did not bear these realities in mind and chose a set of “higher”

priorities instead, something to which the Schools Council History 13–16 Project prominently drew attention in England in the early 1970s,⁴ but which has never been actively pursued in South Africa.

History that is public or that becomes public history can both kill or kindle interest. The Cape Town Holocaust Centre has a deliberate policy that it is not open to group visits by primary school children, as experience has shown that they have an inoculating effect on them in later years. Children leave with improperly formed understandings and emotions, but regard themselves to have “been there and done that” – the visit has effectively removed the interest which they would otherwise have kindled and deepened at a later age. Films and television series may have the same result. They may also do the opposite, as demonstrated by the popularity of university courses in film and history, or by the waves of interest generated by popular series with historical contexts among primary children. History curriculum designers need to pay far greater attention to the dialectics of the relationship between curriculum content topics and public history, in all its manifestations.

The second case raises similar questions. It enables discussion of what it is that can bring public history into school history, illustrating, though, that the two may have dissimilar logics at times.

Building selected or valued public history into the school curriculum

Granted that the Great Trek provides many examples of how not to introduce topics of public history, is there anything in the history of Robben Island that is conducive to inclusion in the school curriculum?

A neglected aspect of curriculum specification and textbook writing in South Africa is the construction of the narratives that will convey the history in the classroom. An laudable attempt to address this was made in the curriculum documents of the National Curriculum Statements.⁵ For example, in Grade 8 the topic “Changing worlds: industrialisation” begins with the industrial revolution in Britain, moves next to industrialisation in South Africa, then to sugar and labour in Natal and finally to early trade union movements. One might not necessarily agree with the chosen content or the sequence within the four themes, but

⁴ Schools Council, *A New Look at History* (Edinburgh: Holmes Mc Dougall, 1976), 43.

⁵ Department of Education, *Revised National Curriculum Statement: Social Sciences* (Pretoria: Department of Education, 2002). Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement: History* (Pretoria: Department of Education, 2003).

they attempt to present the history within the context of a pre-conceived narrative. Robben Island was not a part of any such proposed narratives but it could easily have been. The same curriculum contains within the topic “Apartheid in South Africa”: “repression and the armed struggle in the 1960s” (with no further elaboration). It could easily, instead, have woven a narrative of the experience of repression for those within the country and those exiled, and of the leaders who had been imprisoned and those who were on the outside. Other sites of heritage such as the Old Fort and Constitution Hill in Johannesburg and District Six in Cape Town, which are also icons of public history, could be included within similar curriculum document narratives.

Accessibility for students has been a reason why curricula (though not always textbooks) have not included sites such as Robben Island – a reason that has lost much relevance since virtual internet experiences have been possible. Contrarily, Robben Island can be looked upon as elitist history, as it’s only the rich in Cape Town who can afford the trip to the island and only the very wealthy in the rest of the country who are likely to make school trips to Cape Town. Robben Island’s history of political imprisonment is, however, richly documented by the memoirs of former prisoners and there is much scope for source-based investigations, tasks and project work. The present Grade 10 curriculum includes a compulsory “Heritage assignment”, which is open to any content, “[t]he focus and resources... are heritage sits, museums, monuments, oral histories, commemorative events...”. Assignments that could include Robben Island fit this rubric perfectly.

Going beyond the site of memory/commemoration to the lives and historical contribution of the people involved

The trek history was built around the leaders of the trek parties, the commandants of commandos and those who set up the trekker republics. Robben Island history is built around Nelson Mandela and to a far lesser extent Robert Sobukwe. There were, however, many other men in prison there who have become important political leaders in the post-apartheid period. The Great Trek history was heroic in that the leaders were cast in roles similar to Old Testament figures, conquering a new land for their children’s inheritance. Robben Island presents the opportunity to place the emphasis on people and groups from below: how the years on “the Island” affected them and their families, how they often grew by their experience and how they remained comrades after their release from prison. The South African history curriculum does not have many examples of groups of

people like this. The slaves, for example, are often nameless, or their names don't enable their history to be traced. Likewise, the many who fought the British and Afrikaners in the wars of dispossession in the Nineteenth century, or left their homes to work on the Witwatersrand mines.

The case of Robben Island presents the opportunity to study the histories of people who were not in the top rank of leaders and to move beyond a focus on the site the history to biography and political and social action. It is for this reason, a far richer resource than the first case study.

The popularity of the history and its relationship to the classroom

To what extent should the history curriculum reflect topics that are popular at the time? The Great Trek was obviously popular amongst Afrikaners and Robben Island enjoyed considerable popularity in the years after the release of Mandela and its establishment as a museum, which opened it to tourist visits. It may be argued that Robben Island is now less popular; if so, perhaps it should not be given as prominent a place in the curriculum? And, equally, should a future television series popularise it amongst school-goers, should it not then be promoted? Both the case studies reflect the results and the vicissitudes of popularity. Public history has a significant stake in popularity and some might say it feeds off it. School history also needs to be able to grasp the interest and attention span of students if it is to succeed in many of its more lofty aims to enhance skills and understanding and to create appreciation and values.

This paper has presented, by means of the case studies, many of the nuts and bolts considerations that inform content choices and their specification in school curriculum documents. It illustrates both the power and the weakness of public history to influence what takes place in classrooms and the arbitrary nature of this. By examining key aspects that the case studies raise, it is possible to inform the dynamics of the relationship between the prescribed curriculum and what in reality becomes "history" to students.

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