

Nelson Mandela and the ‘White Man’s War’: two new cultural routes in South Africa

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As a broad concept, formally structured cultural routes have in one form or another been part of the South African landscape since the early 1970s when tourists were offered the opportunity to travel what are still formally marked and mapped ‘wine routes’ in the districts around Cape Town. These began simply as opportunities to taste wine at a number of allied estates and co-operatives and make bulk purchases at prices somewhat below those found in the city. The routes expanded rapidly in both number and nature and many now offer an extensive culinary experience with additional attractions such as fine restaurants and cheese sampling. In the historically more established wine producing area they also from an early stage combined food and wine with a heritage experience in the form of the elegant eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century buildings that characterise the estates and villages of the area.

This link between heritage and other aspects of culture on tourist-oriented routes has continued elsewhere where others seek to emulate the national institution that the wine routes have become. The very successful ‘Midlands Meander’ an arts-and-crafts route near Pietermaritzburg in central KwaZulu-Natal is a good example. It has brought into the experience visits to heritage sites along its circular route. Nevertheless, cultural routes in the purest sense, that is as the concept is understood by heritage conservationists, are a fairly recent phenomenon in South Africa where they first came to prominence in KwaZulu-Natal Province in the early 1990s with the creation of the ‘Natal Battlefields Route’, a linking of battlefields, fortifications, cemeteries and museums illustrating four nineteenth-century wars that took place in close geographical proximity.¹ Since then several heritage routes have been or are in the process of establishment. Amongst these are the Diamond Fields N12 Battlefields Route and the Nelson Mandela Route with which this paper deals. Both projects are central to understanding the direction that heritage conservation is taking in South Africa and it upon these that this paper concentrates.

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, heritage has become an important instrument in fostering a new, or revised, national identity. The creation of the Diamond Fields N12 Battlefields Route and the Nelson Mandela Route have been part of that purpose and, in the former case, illustrate the manner in which distorted perceptions of the past can be successfully challenged, and in the latter how new national identity can emerge through the celebration of achievements that in the time of apartheid were ignored, derided or suppressed.

In addition to understanding the changing nature of the depiction of the past, the two cases also well illustrate the necessity, in the African context, of placing heritage conservation in a situation where it plays a significant role in the economy. In South Africa at the present time it is an extremely rare occurrence for any major heritage project to take place simply on the basis of the cultural value of the site around which the project revolves.

In 1997, at the instigation of the Council of Culture Ministers,² the Cabinet resolved that over the

coming five years nine high-profile heritage projects would be embarked upon. What are now known as the 'National Legacy Projects' broadly deal with three areas of national heritage: viz. changing the public perception of colonial conflicts; commemorating the Liberation Struggle and celebrating the achievement of democracy.³

The Nelson Mandela Museum and Route

The Nelson Mandela Route is part of the National Legacy Project that established the Nelson Mandela Museum, an institution that contains an exhibition the life of Nelson Mandela and the collection of gifts, awards and other curiosities given to him during his time as President. This route through a section of the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape Province links the formal museum in the historic Bunga Building in Umtata with the village of Qunu, 30 km west, along the N2 national road, and Mvezo 20 km south of the N2. The two sites are respectively where Mandela grew up and now lives in retirement, and the place of his birth. In the medium term there are plans to link other sites associated with him and which are along the same stretch of national road.

The Transkei is an area of communally held land where traditional lifestyle and subsistence economy persist. It is a densely populated area and enjoys the dubious distinction of being the poorest region of the poorest province in the country. In identifying this project the economic potential presented by the presence of the legacy of the former President was a major consideration. It could have been argued that the formal museum component would be more accessible and hence draw more visitors if situated in one of the large urban centres. This is undoubtedly true and there were several initiatives prior to the advent of the National Legacy Projects to create such a museum in, amongst other places, the city of Pretoria.

Placing the project in what is effectively an economic vacuum was a challenge. Unlike the second route examined by this paper, government could not play its preferred role, that of creating opportunities for private initiative and depending upon capital and expertise in the local community to make the economics of the project work. In an area like the Transkei where there is no capital and very little business expertise, economic opportunities would have been lost or exploited by outsiders and little benefit derived to the impoverished community that owns the land upon which the sites are located.

In contrast to the second route this project has been driven almost entirely by a government department at national level and consultants 'parachuted' in to ensure that it delivers as expected. By late 2000 the museum in Umtata had been open for almost a year and was drawing large numbers of visitors. These were apparently local, domestic and international and according to staff of the museum visitor figures had exceeded expectation. Developments at the other two sites were still under construction, with the bulk of the work at Mvezo having been completed and that at Qunu still very much in progress. Nevertheless it is the intention, if not yet a measurable outcome of these two projects, that is of interest in the context of this paper.

In post-apartheid South Africa several government initiatives have been created to assist communities in former homelands⁴ like the Transkei to enter the economy. These include

policies which require that projects in such areas be labour-intensive and that local labour be used in construction and maintenance. It is also policy that insofar as a skills base permits, or can be created, local people be recruited into jobs created as a result of State-sponsored development. In the case of the Nelson Mandela Route this has been the case and small local construction companies using local labour were used in all phases. Local youth have also been trained as guides on the two sites and caretakers and other staff have been recruited from the surrounding communities. In addition to the work associated with the creation of site museum infrastructure, other spin-offs for the community have been road works. This has occurred at Mvezo in particular where prior to the opening of the site the 20 kilometres of gravel road between it and the N2 were of very poor quality. Local women have been employed in upgrading and ongoing maintenance. By first-world standards wages are low and work still precarious in the sense that there is no certainty as to what levels of employment will be sustainable in the longer term once visitor numbers stabilise, but there has nevertheless been a significant injection of cash into local communities.

Running a project at distance and with a community that is uninitiated in many of the basic principles of development and project management has not been easy. The governing body of the Museum is made up almost entirely of local people and has grappled with many problems, including amongst others neglect of its responsibilities under the permit system required by heritage legislation for development of heritage sites. The relationship between the community and well-meaning outside agents has also not always been an easy one with fear of exploitation, no doubt based on bitter experience, being a barrier to the creation of trust. However, there is solace in that given the subject matter of the project it cannot but succeed in some fashion. Whether or not this turns out to be in the fashion envisaged by the heritage bureaucrats who worked on the initial vision remains to be seen.

The Diamond Fields N12 Battlefields Route

Whilst not directly part of the Anglo-Boer/South African War National Legacy Project, in the sense that it was an initiative of provincial rather than national government, the Diamond Fields N12 Battlefields Route from the outset, and even before the advent of the legacy projects, saw itself and was accepted as part of the overall national programme to commemorate the centenary of the Anglo-Boer/South African War in a manner that befitted the times. Initially this was probably in the vain hope of securing national funding, but as the project progressed and national government attitudes to the commemoration became clearer it increasingly adopted the same approaches to sensitive issues around interpretation of the war and its meaning in post-apartheid South Africa.

The core area of the route lies along the N12 national road between the Northern Cape's provincial capital, Kimberley, and Hopetown, a village on the Orange River 120 km to the south. It links sites in Kimberley that are associated with the four month siege of the city, during which almost 2500 people died, with battles and skirmishes that were part of the several attempts made by the British relieving force to break through the Boer siege lines. It also flows into the area of post-siege movement of the theatres of war to Mafekeng (Mafiking), to the north, and Bloemfontein in the east. Most famous of the sites on the route is the Magersfontein Battlefield,

scene of one of the many British disasters during the course of the war. Also included along the route are museums that illustrate various aspects of the war and fortifications that were erected along the predecessor to the N12 and the parallel railway line in the period of guerilla war that continued for almost two years following occupation of the Boer republics by the British.

The area around Kimberley is semi-desert and only sparsely populated. The villages of Modder River, Ritchie, Belmont and Hopetown are small with populations and economies that are shrinking as more and more services are delivered from larger centres like Kimberley and Bloemfontein. Nevertheless, and by contrast to the Nelson Mandela project, the N12 Battlefields Route has taken a more conventional view of development in the form of a typical public private partnership that has been of mutual benefit to both the tourist industry and the provincial museums and heritage services. The project was greatly assisted by the fact that the route in effect already existed in everything but name and identity. Over the years memorials had been erected at several sites marking engagements along the route of the advance to the relief of the siege Kimberley and at the McGregor Museum in the city there were sizable exhibitions on the siege as there were also at Magersfontein. Tour operators in Kimberley and from other places were familiar with the sites along the route and used them in their itineraries.

The aim of the project was to use the opportunity of the commemoration of the centenary of the Anglo-Boer/South African War to improve the facilities along the route and to create for it an identity. At the same time political factors were that the core objective of the Anglo-Boer/South African War legacy project be a key consideration (that being a changed understanding of the war on the part of the population of the country) and that there was a need to place the project firmly in the realm of national economic reconstruction. Without these factors significant public funding would have been impossible.

As a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism during the apartheid era 'Die Vryheids Oorlog' (The War of Liberation) was, after the Great Trek,⁵ the second pillar of the historical mythology that underpinned apartheid ideology. It is true that Afrikaans people suffered horrendously as a result of Imperial policy and more directly at the hands of the troops of Britain and her dominions, but these aspects of the war and the often exaggerated heroics of the Boer forces and bungling of Britain and her dominions were exclusively focussed upon. The role in and effects of the war upon others who shared the country at the time, and who then as now constituted the majority of the population, were totally ignored. Myths and distortions were propagated in government-run schools and the history departments of many universities. State programmes for commemoration of the war via activities like the conservation of war graves and the erection of memorials made truth of the myth in terms of the evidence that ordinary South Africans saw on the ground.

The purpose of the legacy project was first and foremost to undo the myth of the 'white man's war'. That is to show that the war was neither one that was fought without the participation of black South Africans, nor that its economic and social impacts were not felt by black people in the same fashion as their white compatriots. It was also to show that as many black as white civilians suffered disease and starvation in the concentration camps to which the rural population was consigned by the British in the guerilla phase of the war, and indeed that the number of deaths in these camps were much the same for both communities.

At national level several research projects were funded, and conferences held. These culminated with the erection of a number of new memorials and the identification and conservation of previously unknown and neglected cemeteries. In terms of the N12 Battlefields Route it led to a complete re-evaluation of existing exhibits in museums and the identification of new sites for interpretation. An exhibition devoted to the impact of the war on the black population was set up in the former Kimberley home of Sol Plaatje, a prominent political figure in the early twentieth century, who amongst his many achievements is well known for his account of the siege of Mafekeng where he worked for the British as an interpreter. Elsewhere exhibitions now reflect the multi-ethnic nature of participation in the war and the impacts on different communities. Facts like the variation in the volume and type of rations permitted to people of different ethnic background trapped in Kimberley during the siege are shown and sites such as the place of the first civilian casualty of the Boer artillery bombardment, listed in the newspaper simply as an 'unknown black woman', are being marked.

Whilst certain projects still continue, there is already significant evidence that the creation of the N12 Battlefields Route has had an impact upon the attitudes of the people of Kimberley to the events of 1899-1902. This can be seen in the articles in the local press which differ markedly from those of the past in terms of the views they express and the prominence given to participation of and impact upon the black communities that would in the past have been ignored. Whilst the Route and its impacts must be seen in the sense of a national programme to change understanding of the war, it nevertheless deserves recognition as a significant part of a project that has in this regard succeeded beyond expectation.

At the economic level opportunities for the growth of tourism were the major reason for the securing of a large grant for infrastructure improvement made by the Diamond Fields District Council, the local authority at district rather than city or village level. The Council is part of a consortium of local and provincial governments that promote the N12 as an alternative route between Cape Town and Johannesburg. This initiative has been undertaken both from a perspective of bringing revenue into the areas through which the road passes and as an issue of public safety. (The main N1 route is particularly congested and dangerous during holiday seasons.) Tourist attractions aimed at attracting holidaymakers onto the only slightly longer N12 are hence a major thrust of the strategy.

District Council funding enabled the public-private partnership that ran the project to upgrade facilities at sites via the construction of parking areas, erection of interpretation points and the publication of a variety of guides and brochures. It also funded the upgrading of the facilities, both interpretive and otherwise, at Magersfontein Battlefield and saw the erection of a new auditorium at the McGregor Museum. But most fundamentally it led to the erection of formal road signage along the entire route and all around about the city of Kimberley, in the latter case to the extent that no one visiting Kimberley can claim ignorance of the route even if they do not visit any of the sites. These standard road signs, in the brown and cream that designates tourist information in South Africa, show turn-offs to sites and provide distances to others that are in the vicinity as well as showing other sites of cultural interest, eg: the city's art gallery. District Council funding in the three-year run-up to the commencement of the centenary period also partially sponsored an annual promotion in the form of a tourism expo for the route.

Whilst the centenary has not brought to the Diamond Fields the number of tourists military history buffs projected when hawking the project to potential funders, there has nevertheless been considerable growth. Whilst at the time of writing it was still too early to quote figures, there is for example evidence of this in the number of Bed & Breakfast establishments that have sprung up on farms and in the villages along the N12 national road. This phenomenon is indicative of the fact that whilst there may not be the predicted increase in volumes of tourists, those that there are stay longer due to the greater number of attractions and greater depth to the interpretation they find at the sites which they visit. This in turn has had the projected spin-off in terms of providing employment to rural working women who struggle to find employment, but can now enter domestic service in support of the middle class women who invariably run the guest facilities and have provided the independent capital needed to develop them. This in effect proves that in a small, but growing way the project is starting to impact upon those whose economic empowerment is a priority of government spending. (In a sparsely populated region even a few jobs have great impact.) The extent to which this remains sustainable after the end of the centenary period in May 2002 remains to be seen.

By comparison with the Nelson Mandela Route the investment by government has on the ratio of Rands⁶ to the number of job created probably been considerably less along the N12 than along the N2. This is due to economic circumstances which allow others to exploit the opportunities created by government investment in the basic infrastructure that is the route.

These two projects have been important in that they begin to prove that heritage projects can change attitudes to the past, this being particularly so in the case of the N12 Battlefields route. More importantly for the well-being of the heritage sector, they also illustrate for politicians and others who determine what funding comes to the sector that heritage projects can contribute to the economy in a way that not just brings more tourists to the shores of South Africa, but channels some of their spending power into areas where it can begin to change the lives of ordinary people in the way that the economic policies of government envisage.

Endnotes

¹ These are: the confrontations of the Great Trek, most notably Blood River Battlefield (1838); the Anglo-Zulu War, most notably Isandlwana and Rorkes Drift (1878-79); the Zulu Civil War (mid-1880s); the Anglo-Boer/South African War (1899-1902)

² The national minister and deputy minister responsible for arts and culture in council with colleagues from the nine provinces.

³ The full list is as follows: 1. Freedom Park, Pretoria; 2. Freedom Square, Kliptown, Johannesburg; 3. Constitution Hill, Hillbrow, Johannesburg; 4. Blood River Battlefield, Utrecht District, KwaZulu-Natal; 5. Albert Luthuli Memorial, Groutville-Dukuza, KwaZulu-Natal; 6. Nelson Mandela Museum, Umtata-Qunu, Eastern Cape; 7. Anglo-Boer/South African War Centenary; 8. KhoiSan Legacies; 9. Women's March Memorial, Union Building, Pretoria.

⁴ Homelands were the attempt by the apartheid government to create independent ethnic states within the boundaries of South Africa. Those which like Transkei that were gained 'independence' were re-incorporated under the constitutional settlement of 1994.

⁵ The large scale migration of Afrikaans-speaking people into the interior of South Africa in the late 1830s following dissatisfaction with British governance of the Cape Colony following occupation during the Napoleonic

Wars.

⁶ The Rand is the South African unit of currency.