November 2010

Booklover-Age of Iron

Donna Jacobs
MUSC, jacobsdf@musc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5658

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
the Kokoda Trail, between Australian (and
later U.S.) and Japanese troops. The Japanese
military was still unstoppable at this point - the
Philippines, Wake Island, Guam, and Singa-
pore had fallen and now Australia itself was
threatened. The Japanese military decided to
land on the northern coast of New Guinea, near
the villages of Buna and Gona. Their objec-
tive was to take Port Moresby, on the southern
coast, via a “road” through the treacherous
Owen Stanley Mountains. Their beachhead
was located near malarial swamps, so by the
time the Japanese troops met the Australian
forces, they were in the throes of malaria.
Moving their bivouacs out of these swamps,
and using better anti-malarial practices might
have had a huge impact on the Japanese troops’
performance. The Aussies were using better
anti-malarial practices (basically getting rid
of mosquito larvae, defoliating, issuing insect
repellent, and so on) and thus were able to
fight at almost full strength. However, when
American forces joined the Australians late in
the campaign, they disregarded the successful
anti-malarial practices (more than likely, sup-
plies were low of bug repellent and defoliants)
and suffered greatly from a large outbreak of
malaria, impairing their performance. Not
surprisingly, U.S. forces made a habit of dis-
regarding local or Allied expertise in fighting
in the environs of the South Pacific.

With every soldier or Marine, food was of
utmost importance — even if only for keep-
ing morale high. Shipping the food across
the great expanse of the Pacific Ocean was costly.
Refrigeration was in high demand for blood
plasma, so food supplies were often canned or
dehydrated. Both combatants turned to local
gardens and native farming to help give their
troops some variety in the mess halls and in
the field. For the Japanese on isolated outposts
late in the war (after their naval link to the
home islands was cut), this local gardening
was all they had. Bennett does an excellent
job discussing the different types of crops and
methods used, as well as incorporating natives
and their practices into farming.

Fishing proved to be an important food
source for both sides, and they would even use
explosives (when they could be spared) to blast
the fish to the surface. Australian forces set up
fish processing stations using local Melanesian
labor and allowing the islanders to design their
own workshops. Americans took a different
tack. They supplied their support troops with
fishing gear designed to work in the cold waters
of New England. The tackle was too heavy to
use near the coral reefs that permeate the South
Pacific, so few fish were caught without modify-

ing the gear. Once fish was caught and ready to
be processed, American forces set up elaborate
processing stations for local labor to utilize,
with tables and benches. The islanders had been
fishing for many generations using their own
methods. They preferred to clean and process
fish sitting on the ground, cross-legged. Need-
less to say, satisfactory changes were made and
the islanders began processing record amounts
of fish for hospitals and outposts.

Bennett includes pictures, charts, maps,
and ample graphs. The book is heavily foot-
noted and has a substantial bibliography. Not
certly for the casual history reader, the book
is a good read and breaks new ground in an
important field of study.  ☞

Booklover — Age of Iron

Column Editor: Donna Jacobs (Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Core Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC 29425) <jacobsdf@musc.edu>

| Column Editor: Donna Jacobs (Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Core Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC 29425) <jacobsdf@musc.edu> | Booklover — Age of Iron | }  

G OOOOOOALLLL! I heard this trium-
phant cry many times earlier this summer.

Working at the Medical University of
South Carolina affords me a continued rich
diversity from other cultures. One of which
is sports — mainly football or what we Ameri-
cans call soccer. Many of the students, post-doctoral
fellows, residents, and professors hail from parts of
the world where watching this sport comes close to
the importance of observing religious rituals.

Football has it origins in Britain during the
19th century. The ball floated across the pond
in the mid 19th century with Americans and
Canadians taking up the sport. In the early 20th
century gridiron football or “American Football”
was becoming popular in the states and there
needed to be a term to distinguish the two games
from each other. The term “socca” had arisen
as an abbreviation for “association football” and
was used to differentiate this type of football
from “rugby football.” In the U.S. there was a
further evolution of this slang version to “soccer”
which we use today. Nevertheless, the terminol-
yogy debate continues, and there is actually a
Website with maps to show country by country
differences for the terminology usage. In South
Africa this summer the FIFA World Cup com-
petition unfolded in venues from Cape Town
to Johannesburg via Durban, Polokwane with
several cities in between, and once again
the world’s attention was on football/soccer
and South Africa. Competitions like World
Cup soccer and the Olympics bring together
the world in ways that few other events do.

They heighten our awareness of our need for
respect and understanding, and for a few days
we may even forget that war and inequities
are the norm for much of the world.

South Africa is no stranger to unfortunate
inequitable relationships. The legal system of
separateness known as apartheid was enforced
in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. Under this
system the “white people” ruled and curtailed
their practices into farming.

In the novel, Age of Iron, written by J. M.
Coetzee, the relationship between a dying
woman, Elizabeth Curren, and a homeless
man, Mr. Vercueil, provide the basis to explore
the influence of apartheid on South Africa. J.
M. Coetzee is of Afrikaner (the Dutch word
for Dutch settlers in South Africa) descent born
in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940, but has
recently become a citizen of Australia. When
awarding Coetzee the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003, the Swed-

ish academy noted that he “in
innumerable guises portrays
the surprising involvement of
the outsider.” This statement
very accurately reflects the story
in the Age of Iron.

Elizabeth Curren has been
told that she is dying of cancer,
and on this very day she discovers
a homeless man living at the end of
the alley next to her home. She
recognizes him from the street. Such power in the begin-
ing imagery of this novel. Apartheid has existed all
around her, and only now in the form of a
homeless man does she allow herself to become
aware and “recognize” it. The conflict/aware-
ness unfolds in a letter to her daughter who now
resides in America. She muses: “To whom this
writing then? The answer: to you but not to you;
to me; to you in me.”

This reader was drawn like fountain pen
ink to paper into Curren’s philosophical ques-
tions, her struggle with death, difficulties with
the language to use in writing to her daughter, a
developing relationship with Mr. Vercueil, and
the increasing awareness of the violence in her
society. Ultimately, Mrs. Curren leaves her
whitewashed middle class environment to help
her housekeeper whose son has been murdered.
She witnesses firsthand life in Site C of the Gu-
guletu township and recounts to Vercueil: “Now
that child is buried and we walk upon him. Let
me tell you, when you walk upon this land, this
South Africa, I have gathering feelings of walk-
ing upon black faces. They are dead but their
spirits have not left them. They lie there heavy
and obdurant, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting
for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of
figures of pig iron floating under the skin of the
earth. The age of iron waiting to return.”

As Mrs. Curren comes to grip with her fate,
the death of apartheid’s grip on South Africa, and
the future of the black youth (the age of iron), she
ends the agonizingly detailed letter of her dying
life with little hope: “I am going to release you
soon from this rope of words. There is no need
to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this
man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet
know how to fly.” ☞