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Book Reviews-South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Government Information Collections in the Networked Environment

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Book Review — South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report.
5 volumes, plus CD-ROM. International ed.
London: Macmillan, 1999.

Review by **Simon Lewis**, Department of English, College of Charleston <lewiss@cofc.edu>

It is no exaggeration to claim, as its publishers do, that this enormous, painstakingly researched, shatteringly detailed report “may be the most significant historical document to come out of South Africa.” It may well be one of the most significant historical documents of the twentieth century. Consider: at the very beginning of this century **W.E.B. DuBois** prophetically declared that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” Nearly a hundred years later, we have witnessed interracial violence on an unprecedented scale and of an unprecedented intensity—in the Holocaust, under apartheid, and through “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans. But if apartheid was indeed, as **Jacques Derrida** put it, “racism’s last word,” then there’s hope in reading these terrible records: despite some remaining gaps, the process of recall instituted by the TRC has now, finally, rendered apartheid history, with one further consequence: that no longer can any nation-state hope for credibility in the international community if that nation is avowedly racist.

Taking a similarly century-covering view, it is also significant that at the last turn of the century the British and Boers were locked in a war that gave the world a preview of modern trench warfare under long-range artillery bombardment, commando raids, and concentration camps. While war will probably survive as a brutally effective means of waging politics, again, in the precedent of the TRC and in the new activity of the UN Court, these volumes represent genuine hope for the future not just that politicians and military

leaders will be held accountable for crimes against humanity, but that they can be so held without further ratcheting up of vengefulness and retribution.

Such is the global importance of the work done by South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: that is what these volumes might represent to non-South African readers. What, however, does their content consist of, and what is their significance in South Africa itself? Basically, the five volumes and CD-ROM have summarized in some 2800 pages the workings of the Commission over the years 1995-1998 while investigating all human rights abuses committed in the last three decades of the apartheid regime, whether committed by pro- or anti-government forces. The findings are laid out in clear, plain prose, as well as numerous chilling statistical tables, chronological tables, and maps. The narrative in volume 5 grafted by the Commission out of their findings and samples of testimony from the hearings juxtapose in a most striking manner the objectivity of any official report with the gut-wrenching accounts of victims and perpetrators; it is a juxtaposition that makes weirdly compelling reading.

While the hearings of the Commission were being held, the international news media tended to focus on the testimony of already well-known political figures such as former State President P.W. Botha, or ANC maverick Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. In so doing they overlooked some of the most poignant and sensational testimony by the everyday victims of apartheid: mothers who literally lost sons, wives whose husbands were bru-

tally murdered, children whose parents were blown to pieces by bombs. For these everyday victims of apartheid and the climate of violence it created, the TRC provided access to information they had formerly had virtually no hope of unearthing. While many remained unsatisfied by the TRC’s granting of amnesty to killers who could prove that they had made full disclosure and that their acts were “political” (rather than straightforwardly criminal), a large number found that the hearings provided them with the sense of closure they had so desperately needed. In a number of cases Commission Chairperson Desmond Tutu confessed to finding himself “amazed at some almost breathtaking examples of reconciliation that have happened through the Commission” (I.18), and Tutu’s benign obstinacy (call it faith if you prefer) shines through these blood-soaked pages.

For white South Africans the testimony has provided the definitive evidence that many had denied (or at least chosen to overlook in their daily lives) of the depth and scope of apartheid brutality. Even though polls have shown that a majority of white South Africans felt the TRC was racially biased against them, the evidence amassed in these volumes is irrefutable. Nobody any longer can say, “Oh, apartheid wasn’t so bad” when former police employees have confessed to killing thousands of people, and when state scientists have admitted having worked on toxins whose operation would be undetectable and on substances aimed at rendering black South Africans sterile.

There have been eighteen other truth commissions internationally, but South Africa’s was

unique in being held in open sessions and in the full glare of media attention. Indeed the provision of interpreters in all of South Africa’s eleven official languages and the broadcasting of the hearings indicated the seriousness with which the Commission tackled its brief attempt to bring about national reconciliation from the ground up. That very openness left the Commission vulnerable to attack from almost all political quarters (including threats of physical violence, mercifully unfounded), and it is to the Commissioners’ great credit that the presentation of these volumes in such a readable (and, dare one say, even attractive) format continues that commitment to a type of democratic openness unprecedented in the history of South Africa.

As such the Commission has already played an invaluable role in the formation of the new South Africa, but the Commissioners have gone further than that by making a number of challenging recommendations for the future in almost all spheres—private, public, national, regional, community, and in almost all areas—health services, education, housing, etc. The specific recommendations include the institution of a National Day of Remembrance, a wealth tax, and the possibility of using interest and capital repayments on the apartheid-incurred national debt “for purposes of reparation as well as reconstruction and development” (V. 319). And here is an interesting impasse. Under the aegis of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC operated according to idealistic principles of reconciliation and forgiveness—Tutu’s Christian faith was the rock which, frequently unpopularly, resisted pleas for retributive justice. In

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addition, although the TRC was appointed by the Government of National Unity, it was never an instrument of the government as such, with power to implement its recommendations but constrained by the political need to appeal to voters or interest groups. Thus, while the Commission's "moral-ethical" approach has made a profound impact at the level of the national psyche, it may not be only Commissioner **Wynand Malan** who decides that he cannot stand by its practical recommendations. Significant redistribution of land and

economic power will probably take a very long time, leaving many of apartheid's second-class citizens feeling that, although they may know the truth now, there hasn't been much reconciliation.

Whatever the future brings, however, through their unflinching presentation of what happens when a technologically sophisticated nation barbarously legislates according to race, and in their insistence that knowing the truth about such atrocities can help bring about healing, these volumes represent not just a comprehensive history of twentieth-century South Africa but a triumph of the human spirit. No library should be without a copy.

Government Information Collections in the Networked Environment: New Issues and Models,
edited by **Joan F. Cheverie**. New York: Haworth Press
1998, 0789006804, \$39.95.

Review by **Debbie Vaughn**, Reference Librarian, College of
Charleston <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

If the Internet and the World Wide Web have given people the gift of access, then Haworth Press' *Government Information Collections in the Networked Environment: New Issues and Models* (1998, 0789006804, \$39.95) is the key to access net-based government facts and figures. Editor **Joan Cheverie** of Georgetown University has collected nine to-the-point essays that address government information issues ranging from electronic dilemmas to user success to collection development partnerships.

Government Information Collections is superb from a theoretical standpoint—many of the articles present conceptual issues and how-we-did-it testimonials. Everyone can benefit from this genre of writing; it is how we as information professionals share ideas and learn from one

another. *Government Information Collections* shares a wealth of information. **Jim Gillispie** from Johns Hopkins University offers excellent advice about adapting to government collections in the networked environment and hones in on four crucial considerations: equipment and software, staff expertise, user instruction, and data preservation. In another article, **John Shuler** and **Jack Sulzer** (University of Illinois at Chicago and Pennsylvania State University, respectively) take a fascinating look at how our country's recent passion for information/technology mirrors a shift in our social climate. They prophetically point out that librarians will not only have to cope with the shift in terms of government documents onto the World Wide Web, but they must acclimate to the entire social shift.

Aptly stated, this shift will "demand a new form of cooperation among librarians, citizens, governments, and other organized community interests as well." Hailing from the University of Virginia, **Patrick Yott** expertly sums up the pleasures and the pains that we embrace as more and more government information becomes Internet-accessible. Representing the Colorado State-wide Network, **Janet Carabell**, **Susan Fayad**, and **Sandi Parker** explain resource and responsibility sharing. Their article examines collection development issues as well as technical factors.

The volatile nature of the Internet and the World Wide Web ensures that things—such as content, accessibility, format, and organization—are changing. It is for this very reason that some of the pieces in Cheverie's collection are more relevant than others. **Susan Calcari** and **Amy Tracy Wells** of the Internet Scout Project (<http://scout.cs.wisc.edu>) impart a brief glance at their mission to selectively disseminate electronic information, a good portion of which is government information. Although much of the content included in the Scout Project and its subsidiary the Scout Report remains the same, the format has changed drastically in the last eight months. Since the publication of *Government Information Collections*, even the information categories have been altered. These changes only serve to enhance the Scout Project, yet they diminish the helpfulness of Calcari and Wells' article. Unfortunately, this is true of any article in Cheverie's collection that makes specific reference to any of the aforementioned things—content, accessibility, format, or organization of networked government information. The good news is that

while things do change, they always seem to change for the better, and that "better" marks an improvement in technology and user-friendliness. And fortunately, even though the organization of a government information Web site might change, at least the Web address is not likely to do so.

One warning: *Government Information Collections* was co-published simultaneously as *Collection Management*, volume 23, number 3, 1998. Make sure you do not duplicate your holdings! If you do not already subscribe to *Collection Management*, or if you'd like to offer circulating material about government sources, then *Government Information Collections* is ideal for your library—be it a public, academic, or special institution. Since the essays in Cheverie's monograph focus on a variety of topics that address all angles of digital government documents collections, any library can gain insight from reading and/or circulating this book. *Government Information Collections* is especially handy for small libraries that are not government document depositories or for those that are only partial-depository libraries.

We are all facing the advantages and challenges of electronic environments; specifically, we are all trying to keep up with Web-based resources. The beguiling spirit and speed of networked data is attractive to all of us in the information business, but that spirit and speed comes with a price; we have to know how to make the network work in order for those character traits to shine. *Government Information Collections* is a must-have for any institution that has an interest in gaining a conceptual understanding of the electronic government network and all of its magnificent presence. 🌳

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tronomy over the last century. This is followed by chronology of specific events listed by year, and then by a short chapter of biographical sketches of 28 influential astronomers. The next three chapters offer pointers to additional information. The first is a directory of organizations, observatories and facilities containing descriptions, addresses, phone and fax numbers, as well as e-mail and Web addresses. The second is a brief, but selective and annotated bibliography, and the third is a list of useful Web sites, which

is also annotated. The last chapter is the biggest and takes up more than half of the volume's 284 pages of text. It consists of a dictionary of nearly 600 terms and concepts that relate to astronomy. *Innovations in Astronomy* is intended for the non-specialist and beginning student. As such, it is an interesting and useful introduction to contemporary astronomy, and should find a home in high school and public libraries where there is interest. Academic libraries where there is need might want a copy in circulation. *Innovations in Biology* (1999, 1576071162; \$50) and *Innovations in Earth Science* (1999, 1576071154; \$50) are the other two volumes in the series thus far. 🌳