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Booklover-Age of Iron

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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 Singapore 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 objective 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, supplies 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 disregarding 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 keeping 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 workstations. 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 modifying 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. Needless 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 footnoted and has a substantial bibliography. Not exactly 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

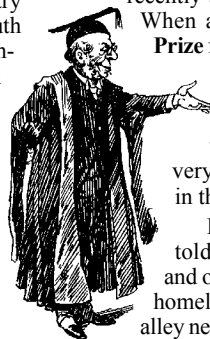
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GOOOOAAAALLLL! I heard this triumphant cry many times earlier this summer. Working at the **Medical University of South Carolina** affords me a continued rich diversity from other cultures. One of which is sports — mainly football or what we Americans 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 its 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 terminology debate continues, and there is actually a Website with maps to show country by country preferences for the terminology usage. In South Africa this summer the **FIFA World Cup** competition 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 the rights of non-white inhabitants, which represented the majority. Racial segregation began during colonial times, but it was introduced as an official policy during the 1948 election. This policy not only classified individuals and restricted their movements, but also segregated residential areas, education, social services, and medical care. It took until 1990 for negotiations to begin for the end of apartheid, and in 1994 **Nelson Mandela** of the **African National Congress** won the multi-racial democratic election.

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 Swedish 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 beginning 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/awareness 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 questions, 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 Guguletu 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 walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, 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." 🌿