



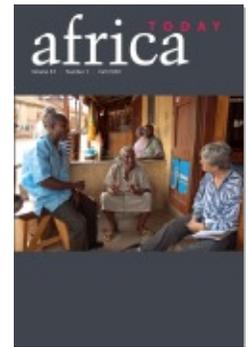
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Robert Mugabe by Sue Onslow and Martin Plaut (review)

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shaping politics, but although Limpopo is a demographically young province, it is not clear if this distinguishes it sufficiently from the rest of the country.

Nonetheless, the book is an important contribution to the study of South African youth politics, offering a view of BC and Charterist politics from the perspective of the often-overlooked rural North. Drawing on twenty interviews and a range of archival sources, especially the rich material at the Wits Historical Papers Archive, *Limpopo's Legacy* spans the apartheid-postapartheid divide to offer insights not only into the roots of South African politics, but into the contemporary period, too.

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BOOK REVIEW of Onslow, Sue, and Martin Plaut. 2018. *Robert Mugabe*. Athens: Ohio University Press. 208 pp. \$14.95 (paper).

In *Robert Mugabe*, Sue Onslow and Martin Plaut deliver a timely work, encapsulating the former Zimbabwean leader's thirty-seven years in power alongside his contributions to the country's liberation struggle. The authors occasionally downplay his eminence, but they are aware that his lengthy career was epochal. Their introduction observes that, because of his "extraordinary longevity in office, . . . [his] personal history is woven through that of his country" (18).

Accordingly, this slim, nine-chapter publication, part of the Ohio Short Histories of Africa series, is more than a Mugabe biography, as it traces the unfolding of key political events in Zimbabwe. Beyond Mugabe, the primary actor in this account is the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Given Mugabe's durability and prominence, this accessible work will be appreciated by students and generalist scholars of Africa alike; however, those looking for a deeper dive into Zimbabwean politics may desire a companion "Long History."

Onslow and Plaut are reluctant to typecast Mugabe, one of Africa's most divisive figures. Their views of Mugabe are overwhelmingly critical, but they praise his political cunning and acknowledge the "real achievements" of his early years in office (1). They further stress that "Zimbabwe's fortunes since independence cannot be distilled down to the attitude and actions of just one man" (13–14).

The contemporary aspects of *Robert Mugabe* offer incisive insights, but the historical components are more uneven. A nonagenarian when he was deposed in 2017, Mugabe had played a prominent role in ZANU-PF since cofounding it in 1963. The emphasis (and strength) of the work centers around his leadership of Zimbabwe from the late 1990s, when his policies

became the subject of international controversy and, for many African intellectuals, a litmus test for the authenticity of radical pan-African thought.

Compact explorations of Mugabe's evolving relationship with South Africa and China offer insights on the strategies and dynamics that enabled his long reign. Those who have highlighted positive aspects of land reform, the signature aspect of Mugabe's radical agenda, are largely portrayed as overreaching (106). The authors identify Mugabe's decision to intervene in the Second Congo War as a critical turning point, which facilitated corruption and massively strained the public purse.

It is in the telling of the developments following this intervention, when Mugabe's generally positive relationship with the West soured, where the book gathers strength. The exploration of Mugabe's leadership in the period before the 1987 Unity Accord and during the de facto consolidation of a one-party state over the following decade is less developed. In the light of Zimbabwe's political polarization, the brief discussion of the Gukurahundi atrocities of the 1980s, which according to the authors resulted in at least 20,000 deaths (81), is, even for a short history, conspicuous.

The treatment of the 1979 Lancaster House Conference, which guided the transformation to genuine majority rule, constitutes the richest pre-independence component of the book, undoubtedly a product of Onslow's detailed research on this critical diplomatic event. Close followers of Zimbabwean history will also appreciate the authors' decisive (albeit contested) claim that Rhodesian security forces killed ZANU leader Herbert Chitepo (53), while Mugabe is fingered as being "most likely" responsible for the death of ZANU military leader Josiah Tongogara (166).

The authors succinctly highlight an array of domestic actors shaping Zimbabwean politics following the resurgence of the opposition from 1999. This is perhaps a reflection of their source material; the narrative relies heavily on published works. In the later chapters, Onslow and Plaut profitably draw on online media accounts and technical reports, which diversify the heavy dose of academic tomes and memoirs that inform earlier chapters.

A byproduct of limited archival research is a muted consideration of the local forces at play during Mugabe's years of struggle. British diplomacy receives as much attention as the white Rhodesian interests that Mugabe was struggling against. Aside from Prime Minister Ian Smith, the archetypal Rhodesian bogeyman, military and intelligence officials like Peter Walls and Ken Flower are emphasized, nominally apolitical figures who stayed in office to support Mugabe in the early stages of his administration.

No mention is made of the National Democratic Party (NDP), the political party in which Mugabe was first introduced to the turbulence of Zimbabwean nationalist politics in 1960 and in which he quickly assumed a senior leadership position. The authors note that he "emerged only gradually as the principal political spokesperson for ZANU" (50) and emphasize that at the time of his release from a Rhodesian jail, in late 1974, he was a relatively unknown quantity (54–56). While he was less familiar to younger activists due to his imprisonment, this framing understates the leading roles he held

from the beginning of his political career. As the NDP's publicity secretary, he was literally the nationalists' leading spokesperson.

Although the authors repeatedly stress the "remarkable consistency" of Mugabe's political thought (17, 22, 23, 27), it remains that perceptions of Mugabe, both at home and abroad, shifted dramatically around the midpoint of his rule. Onslow and Plaut concisely offer a compelling account of the more immediate dynamics that drove this transformation in the last two decades of Mugabe's presidency. A *longue-durée* perspective—an essential consideration, given the enduring salience of the liberation struggle—may, of necessity, require more detailed treatment.

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