

Paul Faber and Annari van der Merwe (2003):  
„Group Portrait South Africa. Nine family histories“.  
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Foreword by Nelson Mandela:

*Can we learn from history?*

... Our country has been formed by the events of history, of which we have been the masters to a greater or lesser extent. We find evidence in the ancient metal foundries near Rustenburg, the Big Hole at Kimberley, the Johannesburg mine dumps, the sugarcane fields of KwaZulu-Natal, the wheat fields of the Free State and the vineyards of the Western Cape - all are imprints of history. Ours is a history of nomads, small-holders, slaves, labourers, traders and fortune hunters, foreign powers and local resistance; of rulers and the oppressed, of landowners and the landless. Tangible proof exists in the rock paintings in the Drakensberg; the Fort at Cape Town, with Sheik Yusuf's tomb not too far away; the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria; the prison of Robben Island, and the shanty towns on the outskirts of all our cities. There are other remains too, transient but no less poignant: our various traditions and customs; mieliepap, bobotie and braaivleis; colourful beadwork and the wearing of school uniforms; rugby, soccer and cricket; the click and nasal sounds in some of our languages; folk songs and praise poetry; our different places and ways of worship; the way we dance.

The traces of history do not disappear. Yet despite ever-present reminders, nothing is as elusive as history. We cannot hold onto the present, and the past can only be reconstructed - from memory, which is at best unreliable, and from documents: diaries and photographs, if we are fortunate. But even these records were created by individuals, often very self-centred, with only limited knowledge and understanding. No two people will ever record a shared or witnessed experience in exactly the same way. Their different versions will be coloured by individual emotions, convictions and beliefs, interests, physical limitations and earlier experiences. Nevertheless, personal records and memory are crucial when it comes to reconstructing the past.

This has become abundantly clear in recent times: the world over, official versions of history have proved to be as subjective as those of individuals. In authoritarian states, history is written by those in power, so what survive are the stories of kings and generals, chiefs, power-mongers and tyrants. The stories of ordinary people - the farmers, workers, sailors, housewives and children - are lost. For years, historians distorted South Africa's history, some deliberately, others perhaps unknowingly. The story of the powerful and wealthy was told in great detail, while the story of the majority remained largely unheard. Much of the history of ordinary persons has been lost and is still in danger of disappearing. For this reason this particular publication is so welcome. Like *The Story of my Life* (and the Afrikaans version *Ek en my Mensê*), in which twelve South African children portray their own reality through photographs and short written pieces, *Group Portrait South Africa* presents us with a composite picture of our "rainbow" nation - in this case, by looking at the weal and woe of nine different South African families over a century and beyond. It is interesting that both these projects were initiated in Holland, but executed mainly by South Africans.

No book can compensate for the lost past; that would be an impossible task. But *Group Portrait South Africa* goes a long way towards "writing" a different kind of history.

It presents us with a handful of stories, not an ultimate, definitive history of our country. But can such a history ever be written? I leave that question to those better qualified than I to answer. It does seem very valuable, though, to sample as many as possible of the countless stories of ordinary folk, their reconstructions of their own past and their memories, in order to arrive at a more intimate understanding of what lies behind the official versions of history. This history of ordinary people and families has indisputable value. It reveals the impact of major historical events, such as colonialism, the growth of African nationalism and apartheid, on individuals and their small circles. It takes us from the national stage and places us in a local setting. We encounter, not nameless representatives of a group, but unique, real persons. What in the end emerges is not their cultural or religious background, their colour, language or position in society; but their humanity, how they related to others and coped with prosperity and adversity.

I trust that this lovely book will remind us that recognition and knowledge of the past is a first, crucial step towards true understanding of the present; that despite all the outward differences, personal experience of loss and loneliness, happiness and success, is universal.

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