Journal of African History, **46** (2005), pp. 135–7. © 2005 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0021853704000398 Printed in the United Kingdom

REPLY

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'THE discipline of history', E. P. Thompson once said, 'is, above all, the discipline of context; each fact can only be given meaning within an ensemble of other meanings'.[1] By disputing points of detail Beinart elides the original review's central criticism that the book suffers from the omission of the political economic context. I will address the contested details before restating the gist of the original critique and by so doing suggest that it still stands unanswered.

Beinart objects that the essay review suggested 'the argument is only about environmental improvement'. So what else is it about? Beinart cannot say for sure if there was degradation – though his sources are far less equivocal – or when the low point was reached – either 'in the first few decades' or 'the first half' of the twentieth century. He could have used a proxy measure from the published census data to provide a rough indication of the health of the pasture in key divisions over time. In any case, a prior state of degradation is surely implicit in any notion of environmental improvement. And if progressives were not above all else environmental improvers, what claim do they have to a book-length study of their 'conservationism' or to our attention? The altogether much bolder claims that they 'stabilized' the Eastern Cape environment, which Beinart defends, and enhanced its 'biodiversity', which he does not, are his own.

Beinart devotes a paragraph to correcting a footnote aside about the botanist MacOwan. What I meant to convey was not that MacOwan was not mentioned in the book, but that Beinart's was now the fifth substantial essay-length treatment of his predecessor, Croumbie Brown, who only held office for four years and, unlike MacOwan, had no perceptible impact on state policy or settler farming practice. MacOwan has yet to garner a single scholarly social biography (neither Beinart's nor my own previous discussion of his role can claim to do this).[2] The reason for this neglect is that by far the largest part of MacOwan's writing on the Cape environment, generated over a 25-year tenure, is unpublished, unlike that of the vainglorious Croumbie Brown, and can only be read by working through the vast correspondence of the agricultural department in the Cape Archives Repository. In this sense MacOwan is 'invisible' from the metropole. That Beinart worked this archive, but made Brown the focus of his chapter on 'progressive' botany, is difficult to understand. The justification offered, that Brown's writings have 'had a surprisingly long afterlife', is extraordinary based on three citations and the claim 'Many others could be cited', next to MacOwan's quarter

[1] E. P. Thompson, 'Anthropology and the discipline of historical context', *Midland History*, 6 (1972), 45.

[2] See L. van Sittert, 'The seed blows about in every breeze: noxious weed eradication in the Cape Colony, 1860–1909', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26 (2000), 655–74.

century of private and public correspondence with settler farmers, civil servants and politicians throughout the colony. This is not a question of adjectives and index references, but goes to the heart of the original criticism of the book's inability to assess the relative importance of its main protagonists because of their removal from a wider social context.

A similar question can be asked about the chapter devoted to *Wellwood*. If, as Beinart claims, the asides he cites scattered throughout the book can be construed as signalling its unrepresentativeness from the outset, why devote a chapter-length treatment to it at all? Why not, for example, use the published census data to generate a profile of a more representative aggregate 'progressive' farmer? Surely, by continually referring to one particular farm throughout the book and according it a chapter of its own, readers are entitled to assume Beinart regards it is representative of 'conservationism', and, if not, then to some plausible explanation for its otherwise inexplicable prominence.

This brings us to the question of the number of 'progressives'. Here Beinart makes the surprising claim that, 'There is no space … to debate the issue of calculating progressive numbers, which is not central to the argument'. But just how much space is required and how else are we to evaluate progressives' historical significance? Apparently not by their 'holding direct government power' either. Beinart refuses to accept the highest available circulation figure for the Cape *Agricultural Journal* (1889–1910) as a fair census of late colonial progressives, but would conveniently claim both the Dutch and institutional circulations for 'progressivism' if he did. Instead he prefers to discuss the circulation of the short-lived national journal (1911–14). But it must be noted that its impressively larger print run covered not only the Cape, but Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal (and, in the case of the Drought Commission, Namibia as well). Even allowing Beinart what I would regard as the inflated 15 per cent of settler farm heads as late colonial progressives, this is still a very long way short of a majority.

On the efficacy of the Cape colonial state as ally and implementer of 'conservationism' Beinart concedes an early 'fragility', but claims that the post-1880 agricultural civil service was more robust, once again, however, without providing the published numbers. The small budgets and staff complements not only point towards endemic 'fragility' down to 1910 and beyond, but often enough complete failure (witness the fate of the national journal above). When Beinart evokes the post-1948 apartheid state as an example of how a small minority can impose its will on a majority, he again inadvertently affirms the veracity of the original criticism – that state means and hence capacity matter – and highlights the inadequacy of his own treatment of this important issue. Where the apartheid state commanded the revenue stream from a mining-industrial economy, the Cape colonial state did not. In this sense power most certainly can be reduced to numbers.

But what of political economy? This is apparently an optional extra in Beinart's 'broad-ranging approach to history' and he dismisses any insistence on its salience as a sadly reductionist and 'paradigmatic' malaise afflicting those 'immersed in African history or subaltern views'. In Beinart's telling, the pastoral 'production system' is stripped of relations of power and reduced to an assessment of output. Land and labour are ignored and yet the key challenge facing settler commercial pastoralism throughout its history down to the present was not environmental but social – the maintenance by a small

minority of secure private tenure and subservient wage labour on land stolen from a conquered majority. Beinart's white farmers and officials, however, float outside relations of production, struggling against pasture degradation, pathogens, drought, predators and weeds, but not vagrancy, trespass, squatting, stock theft, incendiarism, poaching, fence-breaking and the innumerable other ways in which the Eastern Cape rural underclass disputed and disrupted settler claims to the land and its usufruct. The published colonial budget data for expenditure on policing and prisons compared to botany and veterinary science, or the figures on criminal prosecutions for vagrancy and stock theft as against those for noxious weed infractions, provide crude but unambiguous measures of the overwhelming importance of the social rather than environmental enemies of settler progressive pastoralism.

Beinart attempts to justify his failure to examine these multifarious social challenges to the commercial pastoral order in the Eastern Cape by 'arguing that whites in South Africa need to be considered not only as agents of oppression'. This is a straw man long ago disposed of by Charles van Onselen and done without jettisoning political economy.[3] That Beinart should reclaim it as the *raision d'être* for a book-length treatment of settler commercial pastoralists removed from their social relations of production, as 'bearers of complex and disputed ideas that had a significant impact and should be taken seriously' is a misconceived revisionism. The either/or choice posited by Beinart is misleading. Contrary to his claim that political economy is an issue whose inclusion 'depends on what questions are being asked', attempts at framing and answering questions – 'when and by what measures' – without reference to issues of political power and social contestation lead invariably to disembedded neoliberal histories in which elite ideas acquire an agency of their own. Nor is this a novel observation. Eighteen years ago Ian Phimister, in rejecting Beinart's thesis of a southern African 'conservationism' as wrong in all respects about Southern Rhodesia, noted that

> Beinart's over-emphasis of conservationism's importance … grows directly out of his method. Because he attempts to establish conservationism's significance by exploring 'its own social roots and momentum', his study inevitably lacks contextualisation. By its very nature, discourse's signification does not admit of external appeal. Consequently conservationism's self-ascribed importance is catalogued and asserted, but hardly ever weighed against other factors.[4]

Whether the same can be said of my treatment of the Cape Town middle-class enclosure of the Table Mountain and *fynbos* commons, readers can decide for themselves.[5]

[3] See C. van Onselen, 'The social and economic underpinnings of paternalism and violence on the maize farms of the south-western Transvaal, 1900–1950', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 5 (1992), 127–60, and C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (New York, 1996).

[4] I. Phimister, 'Discourse and the discipline of historical context: conservationism and ideas about development in Southern Rhodesia, 1930–1950', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12 (1986), 275.

[5] See L. van Sittert, 'The bourgeois eye aloft: Table Mountain in the Anglo urban middle class imagination, c. 1891–1952', *Kronos*, 29 (2003), 161–90, and L. van Sittert, 'From mere weeds and bosjes to a Cape floral kingdom: the re-imagining of indigenous flora at the Cape', *Kronos*, 28 (2002), 102–26.