

## Reviews

**Robert Mugabe (Ohio Short Histories of Africa)** by SUE ONSLOW and MARTIN PLAUT  
Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp 208, \$14.95 (pbk)

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Sue Onslow and Martin Plaut carried the unenviable burden of writing about a man known simultaneously as one of Africa's greatest freedom fighters and worst despots. That they took on this task when Robert Mugabe's story was not yet closed makes this small book even more remarkable. At its publication date, Onslow and Plaut wrote about a still-unfolding drama as Mugabe, the leader of Zimbabwe for 37 years, was being ousted in a confusing series of coup-like events, and it is at that dramatic moment that the authors start their examination of Mugabe's life and legacy.

It goes without saying that this addition to the Ohio Short Histories of Africa series is timely, given that it was published during such a tumultuous time in Mugabe's life and in Zimbabwe's history. With his recent death, this thin volume packs an even heavier punch. Onslow and Plaut present a complicated examination of a man who is both loved and vilified. Their dive into Mugabe's life is sophisticated enough to be interesting and informative to scholars familiar with his uneven story, and their engaging writing style and clear analysis allows students and an audience unfamiliar with Mugabe and Zimbabwe a clean entry into the complexity of his narrative.

While the text is biographical, it also does an excellent job contextualising Mugabe in important ways. Onslow and Plaut offer sufficient background of the colonial history that created the Southern Rhodesia that Mugabe would eventually disrupt, but without belabouring it. They bring texture to his life story, providing brief but impactful coverage of the various sources of inspiration and education that led him to become a revolutionary. In juxtaposition to the 93-year-old despot the authors introduce readers to on the first page, they concisely cover his intellectual curiosity, studiousness, Catholic upbringing, and his time in Ghana, highlighting his admirable qualities as a young revolutionary in the making. Despite the short length, Onslow and Plaut cover the many seasons of Mugabe's life, forcing readers to push past the image of Mugabe in the headlines but also reminding us that we cannot rely on the memory of Mugabe as Freedom Fighter if we want to understand how he came to be one of Africa's longest-running heads of state.

Onslow and Plaut's text is structured in such a way that readers follow not just Mugabe's trajectory as president but also Zimbabwe's pre- and post-independence evolution. This organisation weaves Mugabe and Zimbabwe tightly together, leaving readers contemplating whether Mugabe made the state or the state made Mugabe. Chapter 1 gives readers a glimpse of Mugabe at the end of his presidency, with a brief overview of some of the most controversial moments of his tenure, then Chapter 2 pushes readers back several decades to meet Mugabe as a child and young adult in colonial Southern Rhodesia and then in newly independent Ghana. It is in Chapter 2 that readers are introduced to Mugabe's first wife Sally, a legendary figure

who helped Mugabe build loyalty among his constituents, and to Joshua Nkomo, a fellow revolutionary with a shaky relationship with Mugabe that eventually deteriorated, ending in toxic rivalry.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer a highlight reel of Mugabe's path from freedom fighter to head of state. In Chapter 3, Onslow and Plaut outline the political manoeuvring that allowed Mugabe to consolidate his power through an uneasy merger of his political party, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) with Nkomo's party, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). Together, these parties fought for and won independence. Eventually this merger would give rise to Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), with Mugabe as its head and it as the only official political party of independent Zimbabwe. It is here that Mugabe's infamous Fifth Brigade is discussed, showcasing an early and extreme act of brutality as he had North Korean trained soldiers commit atrocities against the ZAPU opposition. Onslow and Plaut's treatment of the Fifth Brigade is measured and perhaps does not clue in unfamiliar readers to the degree of violence of this campaign and the way its consequences continue to affect the political and social landscape of Zimbabwe. In Chapter 4, Onslow and Plaut present readers with Mugabe's grab for extreme power, explaining his tightening grip on absolute control. This is also the chapter when the authors focus heavily on the issue of land access, which they declare to be 'the key issue in the newly liberated country' (p. 84). Onslow and Plaut demonstrate their deep understanding of this point of contention, offering a timeline of tension over land access starting as far back as 1830 and allowing readers a surprisingly deep dive into the topic of land ownership.

Chapters 5 and 6 present what is probably a more familiar image of Mugabe, at least to readers who primarily get news about him from media in the Global North. Each of these chapters cover Mugabe's increasingly embattled presidency. Chapter 5 highlights growing opposition to his presidency and offers examples of how Mugabe dug in his heels in order to ensure that the opposition was unable to upend his regime. Onslow and Plaut dedicate space to examining the issue of war veterans, the bust agricultural sector, and the increasing popularity of Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) – an opposition party that began winning local elections, giving it a larger platform to speak against Mugabe and ZANU-PF. Chapter 6 covers the hotly contested and seemingly unending 2008 election that pitted Mugabe against MDC candidate Morgan Tsvangirai, though Onslow and Plaut's treatment of this felt a bit sparse considering that they (rightly) identified it as the point when the growing 'political crises came to a head' (p. 110). The chapter does offer interesting discussion of Mugabe's need to look for friendly states as an increasing number of countries, including African states, began backing away from Zimbabwe and spoke critically of Mugabe.

The last three chapters give readers a glimpse at Mugabe in the waning years of his regime, a period when even as he stubbornly maintained a grip on power, he became a more reclusive figure. Onslow and Plaut do a solid job examining what that last decade of Mugabe's tenure entailed, despite it being a period of growing uncertainty as rumours whirled and speculation intensified about who might succeed the ageing leader. Perhaps one of the most valuable chapters of the text is Chapter 9 where the authors try to make sense of the sort-of-coup that ended Mugabe's presidency. Linking the disavowal of Emmerson Mnangagwa, one of Mugabe's former right-hand men and heir apparent, Onslow and Plaut do a nice job sorting through the events in late 2017 that led to Mugabe being removed as

the head of ZANU-PF and eventually being forced to resign the presidency. They also offer insight into the turmoil within the party and government as it worked to establish itself without Mugabe.

There are some shortcomings to the text, but this is to be expected from a book that promises to be a 'short' history. At times, coverage of certain topics feels rushed and/or superficial. In addition to the above-mentioned critique about the light coverage of the Fifth Brigade, another point worth exploring was how Mugabe's marriages affected how Zimbabweans viewed him. While both Sally and Grace Mugabe were given some discussion, it was more about how they fit in (or did not, as the case may be) with his staff and party management. Zimbabweans themselves reacted strongly to both women, adoring Sally and being critical of Grace, and this influenced the way many Zimbabweans thought of their president at different points in his tenure. Finally, there could have been more discussion detailing the crisis in the 2000s. The authors do discuss the challenges during that period, but the combination of astronomical inflation, increasing food insecurity, and tens of thousands of Zimbabweans fleeing to neighbouring states was Mugabe's own doing and created a country truly on the brink. That said, Onslow and Plaut do an admirable job covering a lot of information with clarity and brevity, which will work well especially for a more general readership.

By the end of his turbulent life, it is impossible to think that history will be generous to this man, turning a blind eye to his many wrongdoings. Onslow and Plaut's careful treatment of Mugabe as a complex figure offers a balanced consideration of an African leader who remains a lauded freedom fighter by some and a despised dictator to others. The contributions and horrors of Mugabe's leadership will be long debated, and Onslow and Plaut's text reflects why it will be a difficult debate to be conclusively won. They do not sugarcoat this divisive leader, but they also avoid the trap of vilifying him. Mugabe was not a one-dimensional man or leader; this small book emphasises that point and offers its readers much to contemplate as they weigh Mugabe's rights and wrongs. It is an important book that is needed now, as Mugabe's death has reinvigorated discourse about what his legacy will be in Zimbabwe, in Africa, and in the world.

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**Politicizing Sex in Contemporary Africa: homophobia in Malawi** by ASHLEY CURRIER  
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In 2010, the Malawian government prosecuted Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Steven Monjeza for contravening the colonial-era anti-sodomy law. The arrest and subsequent trial attracted international attention and marked the beginning of an intensified period of persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the country. The incident appeared similar to anti-gay persecution in Uganda, Nigeria, Liberia and Senegal at around the same time. As such, popular media, and even some academic accounts, relied on racist and essentialist notions of African sexuality to claim these instances as part of pervasive cultural homophobia on the continent. Ashley Currier, in her engaging and persuasive book,