GEOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT, DEMOGRAPHY

Kate B. Showers. *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. xxix + 346 pp. Photographs. Maps. Figures. Tables. Diagrams. Bibliography. Index. No price reported. Cloth.

Kate Showers's book on soil erosion in Lesotho has been in gestation for twenty-five years. It has now emerged as a work of mature scholarship that sets a benchmark. Showers is a soil scientist by training, not a historian. In 1978 she went to Lesotho for a two-year stint to investigate soil erosion at a small research site. Unafraid to question accepted wisdom—even that which lay at the heart of her discipline—she sought answers that were fundamental to understanding the processes of erosion for which the Lesotho landscape is so notorious. Her inquisitive mind and increasing familiarity over almost three decades with the people, the history, and the land that is Lesotho has resulted in an all-embracing environmental history which she rightly describes as "holistic" and which maximizes the outcomes of fieldwork, archival research, and oral history. Her book thus offers a "comprehensive perspective [on]... the interactions among very different cultures, land use systems, ideologies, and a changing environment" (281). Indeed, *Imperial Gullies* is a most useful history of Lesotho because it takes as its starting point the crux of the human-landscape interface: the relationship with the soil.

Showers has a number of previous publications on the theme of soil erosion in Lesotho and first came to the notice of this reviewer with her article "Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho: Origins and Colonial Response, 1830s–1950s," published in 1989 in a special issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*. In a manner similar to the work of James Fairhead and Melissa Leach (*Misreading the African Landscape; Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic*, 1996), Showers delved behind the scientific and political rhetoric to discover a relationship between people and land that was far more complex than had been postulated and that indicated a more active African conservation response. These many threads constitute this book, a longer and definitive study, which is also written in an extremely accessible style.

Imperial Gullies is divided into three sections, followed by useful appendixes on climate, special soils, and methodology. A long list of references and a fascinating bibliographical essay complete the book, which is also replete with photographs, figures, tables, maps, and diagrams. Section 1, "Lesotho Landscape History" (three chapters), provides the wider and regional background. This includes the construction of the Lesotho kingdom, the economic and social order of British governance, and an exposition on the weather and climate of Lesotho. Section 2, "A Point in Time" (two chapters), shifts the focus to a particular district, the isolated Ha Tšilo Valley, southwest of Maseru on the sandstone escarpment. Using the detail

of this research site, Showers presents a meticulous and comprehensive account of the landscape, the people, the soils, and the kind of erosion found here. These chapters give the reader a sense of what was and is going on in this valley with respect to agriculture, culture, and politics. Section 3, "Perceptions of Erosion and Conservation" (three chapters), explains the reasons for soil conservation intervention by the British authorities and describes the rationale that was offered for contour bank construction. The Basotho perspective on this time period and this technology is captured in interviews that are presented in some detail. The details of the political and social order and perceptions about changes in land use and the processes of erosion—as well as the descriptions of Basotho indigenous conservation activity, particularly the sabotage of contours—make for a riveting narrative. Certainly there is no evidence of the attitudes that the Basotho were accused of—neither ignorance nor lack of concern. By immersing herself in the life of the local community and becoming sensitive to their stories, Showers shows that their contradiction of a dominant theory is valid, and only now becoming a part of the accepted repertoire of soil scientists. She distinguishes between science as technology, as ideology, and as a "spirit of science," and argues convincingly that the Basotho are past masters of the last. She concludes by offering practical suggestions for further research.

Although it deals with a small country and sometimes with even smaller divisions within it, Showers's book should be read by all environmental historians or anyone interested in the history of Africa, because what she has to say—and says so unambiguously—has far wider relevance and should stimulate scholarship on similar issues in other parts of the continent.

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