

The Redemption of the Kalahari: White Settler Society and the Agrarian Imagination in Southern Africa

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In 1920, a geology professor named Ernest Schwarz proposed diverting two of southern Africa's major rivers into the continent's interior—an action he said was necessary to save South Africa from a downward spiral of desiccation that threatened to destroy the world whites had created there. Written off by the South African government as a crackpot, Schwarz's "Kalahari Thirstland Redemption Scheme" found popular support among many whites, who feared for their future in a region where both the environment and the indigenous population seemed hostile. Schwarz died in 1928, but his idea lived on. *The Redemption of the Kalahari* charts the strange career of an idea that seems fantastical today but garnered enormous public support in the early twentieth century. Schwarz's plan found support from an American munitions manufacturer, a British coal magnate, native commissioners, German Namibian businessmen, professors and engineers, dozens of urban professionals, and hundreds of struggling white farmers. Over the next three decades the government reluctantly bowed to public pressure and investigated the scheme three times, while white South Africans themselves ferociously debated its merits—and the broader question of whether the country was becoming drier—in a variety of public and private forums.

This book follows the debates that played out in the newspapers, farming magazines, scientific journals, and government offices of South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Britain, Germany, and Angola, in order to understand how white settlers grappled with the climatic and environmental realities of southern Africa's semiarid environments and created a body of knowledge about those environments. My book engages with historiographies of climate, environment, and settler colonialism. In studies of science and the environment, too many historians have assumed that white settlers largely shared the worldview of the "experts" who created official scientific knowledge. The debates around the Kalahari Scheme open a window into a very different world of white vernacular knowledge systems that were built on a mixture of scientific discourse, lived experience, religious ideas, and African ideas.

The Kalahari Scheme also reveals how South Africa's settlers were linked to a wider intellectual world. White farmers saw themselves as part of a community of Europeans who had colonized, and sought to conquer, arid environments. They followed agricultural experiments in Australia and Kenya, the theories of organic farming guru Sir Albert Howard and Montana wheat farmer Tom Campbell, the doings of the US Bureau of Reclamation and Russian attempts to farm the steppes, and they participated in debates about the "desiccation of the earth" that were raging at the time.

Schwarz's idea was not unique. In the first decades of the twentieth century, men dreamed of diverting rivers and altering the climate in central Australia, northeastern Brazil, and North Africa. Individually, these plans have provoked more amusement than serious scholarly scrutiny. This book argues that plans to reengineer nature—plans that were imagined but not built—not only tell us a great deal about the times and people that produce them; they also shape the future in unexpected ways, in part by normalizing certain discourses about the environment, its management, and its links to political affairs. The story of the scheme to flood the Kalahari is thus much larger than that of an eccentric professor and his band of followers. It speaks to a global moment where a variety of settler colonies around the world began to face environmental limits—limits their ideologies of expansion and the virtues of "white civilization" had ill prepared them to comprehend.