

---

**AUTHOR:**Lloyd Melusi Maphosa<sup>1</sup>**AFFILIATION:**

<sup>1</sup> Postdoctoral Fellow,  
Department of Historical  
Studies, University of  
Cape Town

**EMAIL:**

lloyd.maphosa@uct.ac.za

---

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/SJCH46.v2.8>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)  
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)  
Southern Journal for  
Contemporary History  
2021 46(2):137-139

---

**PUBLISHED:**

31 December 2021

---

**BOOK REVIEW**

---

Abraham Mlombo, *Southern Rhodesia-South Africa Relations, and 1923-1953: Political, Social and Economic Ties*, Cham, Springer Nature, 2020, ISBN: 978-3-030-54283-2.

For those wishing to go beyond the often narrow history of relations between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, this book offers fresh perspective and insight into the multifaceted connection these colonies had in the twentieth century. In a somewhat political economy approach, Abraham Mlombo successfully breaks down Southern Rhodesian and South African relations into economic, political and social spheres. He deliberately chooses the period between 1923 and 1953 to provide a nuanced perspective of how these relations developed. It was during these years that Southern Rhodesians developed a strong identity, one closely associated with the United Kingdom and not South Africa. As he puts it, Southern Rhodesia was a cultural refuge for English South Africans whose influence was slowly being diminished by the strong emergence of Afrikaner Nationalism (p.85). The outcome was vigorous campaigns for Responsible Government in Southern Rhodesia and the Central African Federation. While the relationship between the two colonies seemed to be fraught with suspicion and wariness, it was characterised by cooperation in economic, political and social realms under different circumstances. This then brings us to the core of the book. Mlombo argues that relations between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa were far more complex and intricate (p.2). He does this by putting the settlers at the centre of his discussion. Using both primary and secondary sources, he shows that colonialism in southern Africa was characterised by antagonism,

competition, contradiction and interdependence in the settler communities. This permeated every aspect of their relations.

Although he is not a trailblazer in this subject, he is certainly the first to explore the connection between these two southern African colonies in this manner. He carefully draws from notable scholars like Martin Chanock, Ronald Hyam, Phillip Warhurst and Ian Phimister, who explore the topic through political and economic lenses. This is complemented by the book's chronological structure, enhancing the reader's understanding of how these dynamics shifted over time. Also worth noting is Mlombo's effective style of writing. He is indeed at his best when supporting arguments with evidence. This enlivens the book and makes it very approachable. The narrative unfolds in a sequence of five substantive chapters. Chapter two tracks Southern Rhodesian and South African relations back to the eve of the First World War. This sets the scene for what is to be a rollercoaster journey across the history of the two neighbouring colonies. It had long been anticipated that Southern Rhodesia's destiny was joining the Union of South Africa. However, after the war, talks about Responsible Government rang louder than those of joining the Union. With pride and honour, Southern Rhodesia offered her unwavering support to Britain during the war. South Africa, on the other hand, lacked the same enthusiasm. Although she finally pledged her support, she had initially resisted the instruction to invade German South West Africa on behalf of Britain (p.21). Such "rebellious" actions complicated the idea of inevitable union with South Africa. Afrikaners, both in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, were not to be trusted against the Germans. This was worsened by fears of the poor white problem, often associated with the Afrikaners, and the imposition of bilingualism in the event that Southern Rhodesia joined the Union. This was viewed as a threat to the availability of jobs in the colony (p.34). The outcome was a strong campaign for Responsible Government spearheaded by Ethel Tawse Jollie, the founder and organiser of the Responsible Government Association (RGA) (p.29).

Yet, after the RGA's successful campaign, Southern Rhodesia still could not boast entirely of being free from South Africa's influence. In chapter three, Mlombo explores some of the intricate ties the colony shared with its larger neighbour. These were partly due to the fact that many white settlers in Southern Rhodesia came from the Cape Colony (p.60). As a result, migration between the two colonies was inevitable. However, these migratory patterns went beyond just "blood ties" between white settlers and them sending their children to South Africa for tertiary education. They included African workers who journeyed to South Africa for better-paying jobs and tertiary education, too (pp.195-197). This specific pattern quickly turned into political connections as notable Southern Rhodesian Africans, schooled in South African Universities, returned back home armed with political ideas that

were to change the political landscape of the colony in the following decades (pp. 198-199). The two settler communities also shared the same sporting culture and often played against each other. Moreover, many of Southern Rhodesia's sporting bodies were linked to those in South Africa (p.86-88). Her policies were also based on South African law (p.61).

In chapter four, Mlombo examines the complex economic relations between the two colonies. Southern Rhodesia sought to grow her industry, but the 1930 Customs Union agreement smothered her aspirations (p.99). It enhanced South Africa's dominance in trade relations. However, in 1935, a new trade agreement was instituted, and it granted Southern Rhodesia greater autonomy over her tariffs and the ability to protect her industries. Although she maintained trade with South Africa, the persistent unbalanced nature of this trade relationship gradually diverted her interests towards North Rhodesia (p.114). Both politically and economically, Northern Rhodesia was a compelling partner. Not only did she present a lucrative market for Southern Rhodesian products, but she was well endowed with copper resources. Amalgamating with her also served as a strong counterpoise to the rising threat of Afrikanerism in Southern Africa (p.116). While this proved Southern Rhodesia's continued wariness of South Africa, the outbreak of the Second World War demonstrated that neither of the two colonies could exist in isolation. As trade with Britain became dislocated by the war, South Africa emerged as Southern Rhodesia's main source of imports (p.146). Furthermore, as the war intensified, Southern Rhodesian forces found themselves under South African command (p.134). It was this fickleness that made relations between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa unique.

By taking a broad thematic approach, Mlombo broadens our understanding on the various aspects that shaped Southern Rhodesian and South African relations. He is also commended for going against the grain, that is, exploring these relations after the Responsible Government and also engaging the subject from Southern Rhodesia's perspective. Preceding works often focused on the period prior to 1923 and usually explored the topic from a South African or British perspective. This limited our understanding of the subject and often implied that relations between the two colonies could only be understood through those lenses. However, the presentation of statistical records needed variation. While tables are appropriate to compare data sets, sometimes they can be overwhelming to the reader, especially if the figures are too large. In tables 3.1 and 5.1 Mlombo could have used bar charts. Furthermore, the book could have benefitted from the use of tariff data for the period under study. This could have presented additional statistical records on the goods traded between the two colonies. Apart from these minor issues, this is a well-written and expertly researched study that has significantly contributed to the historiography of southern African economic history.