

CHALLENGES IN A COLONIAL COUNTY

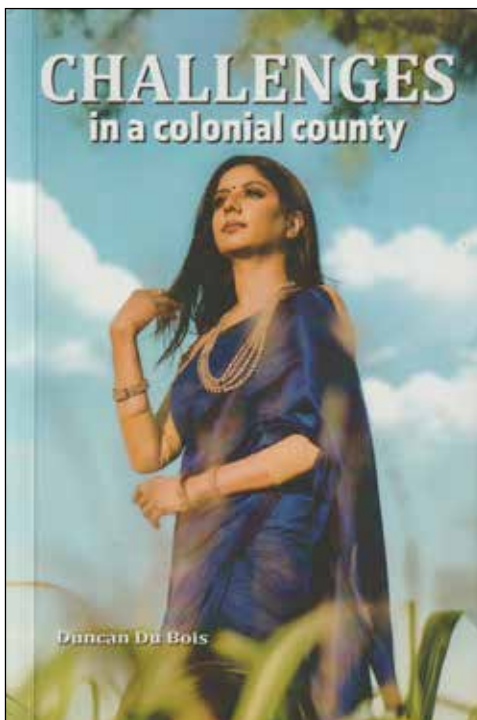
by DUNCAN DU BOIS

Durban: Sakura Book Publishing, 2024

Duncan du Bois has written what he describes as a ‘critical fabulation in that it inserts credible experiences in the gaps and silences of the historical record.’ The book covers a three-year period beginning with a farewell to resident magistrate Moodie in 1886 and ending with the farewell to resident magistrate Lucas in 1889. These events take place in Alexandra County on the South Coast of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal).

The main character is Sarika Singh, a previously indentured Indian woman, who had cohabitated with Moodie’s son before his and their baby’s unfortunate deaths. Few Europeans were willing to socialise with her. Bravely, Sarika attempted to buy a plot of land on which to build a home and trading store. She overcame petty bureaucracy, vandalism and ostracism with the assistance of forward-thinking individuals and, over time, became a successful businesswoman, employing white women as assistants in her three stores. Her story is that of a strong woman determined to overcome any form of prejudice.

The writer has used his knowledge of government procedure to fill in the gaps of what would otherwise



be a dry historical account. He describes problems – mainly concerning transport, the lack of adequate communication and alterations to the voters’ roll – that were largely ignored by authorities in favour of other counties. The trial of Janki, a female escapee, highlights the cruel treatment meted out by owners and sirdars to labourers on sugar estates. Big money and influential residents seemed to control civil servants. The Wragg Commission of 1885, which was meant to find a suitable solution to the ‘Indian Problem’ was (as are many commissions today) ineffective. It seems that not much has changed.

A competent proofreader would have corrected some obvious errors such as repetitive explanations, speechy conversations, some careless punctuation and the incorrect use of discretely (pp. 59 and 147) and immigration (p. 322). The excessive use of the word ‘libidinous’ is particularly irritating. Indeed, Du Bois’ colourful descriptions of his characters’ steamy sex scenes threaten to dominate and detract from his interesting historical account.

MABEL DALBY