

Jacob Knight, *Shoshong: A Short History*.

Gaborone: Kwangu, 2014, 72 pages, soft cover, ISBN: 978-99968- 0- 225-6

It is amazing. I have long been advocating the need for this sort of book about all the major settlements in Botswana, hoping that one day someone would pull it off, wanting to have a first shot at it myself but never quite getting around to it. But now it has been done and this new book deserves the loudest of all trumpet calls of welcome. But how ironical it is that this book is on Shoshong. This is a place of immense historical significance but one which has found no favour with guide book writers who have been able to find little of interest in it. Shoshong is a place which has been left behind both by history and by our own inability or sheer disinterest to peer into the past and to get a feel, an understanding as to what happened there, and why.

Think about those arms of government, and the country's varied institutions and the substantial resources available to both, which could or should have published this book at any time during the last fifty years. Yet again, however, it has been left to a single individual to go it alone and to put together this remarkable self published book. Even more remarkably, the book has been put together at home by someone who freely admits that he is generally bored stiff by history. Unusually, too, the author, Jacob Knight, ducks the routine of providing basic biographical information about himself presumably because he regards this part of a normal book as irrelevant stating simply that the book is dedicated to his son, Letsopa. So now, we have the great good fortune to welcome a lavishly illustrated, privately, computer-put-together book on one of the country's most evocative and important historical sites. What use are we going to make of it?

Firstly, I suggest that all the larger towns (do we still have to call them settlements?) should get themselves a copy and decide if this kind of book represents the way that they too might want their town to be portrayed. Who would work out how this might be pulled off. Once a breakthrough is achieved, the follow up becomes so much easier, as so remarkably happened once Everest was first climbed.

Secondly, it is merely to state the obvious that this book should be in all secondary school libraries but it remains a mystery to me how this can happen. Given the non-existence of trade publishers in this country, and indeed of a general book market, more and more authors have been obliged to take the varied self publishing route. The result now is that the majority of books about this country, both fiction and non-fiction, are being published in entirely new ways. Indeed, because old style commercial publishing no longer offers anything to writers and authors in this country, the creative writer, of one sort or another, is obliged to go it alone. I doubt very much that the Ministry of Education has yet to grasp the extent of this change.

With my own books, I am advised that my best marketing bet would be to visit every one of the junior and senior secondary schools in the country and to seek interviews with a few hundred principals and school librarians to solicit their interest. It is unlikely that there are any authors who are willing or able to undertake such an expensive marketing exercise.

Which brings us back directly to the awkward case of Jacob Knight whose motive in producing this book was solely to encourage his young son, as he grew up, to know something about the history of his home town, and to cherish it. Prevailed on by people such as myself, however, he inched sideways, and agreed to print a few copies for sale in Gaborone –at Botswanacraft and Exclusive Books –so that others might benefit from his unusual initiative. Inadvertently, it seems to me that Knight has contrived to bring our long-standing problems to the fore.

What happens when someone, privately publishes a book that is of major importance for this

country but has no initial interest in marketing it? Given his disinterest in trying to ‘sell’ his book to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry’s unwillingness or bureaucratic inability to work outside its rigidly established parameters, the conclusion must be that this wonderful book will be lost both to young children at school, who really do need to know about the history of this country, and to foreign tourists.

Or might there be a way by which those involved in the country’s tourism enterprise could snap up and make use of such a stunning book? Or even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies and high commissions or indeed all government ministries and departments and with other institutions, and, why not universities? How do our ambassadors and high commissioners respond when asked if they can recommend books about this country?

Knight has made a tremendous contribution, not just to Shoshong, which was his intention, but also to the country as a whole.

Reviewed by Sandy Grant

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