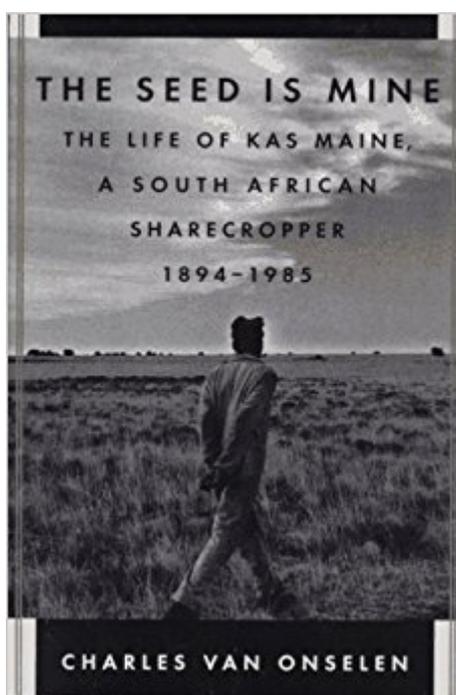


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The Seed Is Mine: The Life Of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985



Synopsis

Winner of the Sunday Times (South Africa) Alan Paton Award for Nonfiction Winner of the Herskovitz Award from the African Studies Association. 'The seed is mine. The ploughshares are mine. The span of oxen is mine. Everything is mine. Only the land is their's.'--Kas Maine A bold and innovative social history, *The Seed Is Mine* concerns the disenfranchised blacks who did so much to shape the destiny of South Africa. After years of interviews with Kas Maine and his neighbors, employers, friends, and family--a rare triumph of collaborative courage and dedication--Charles van Onselen has re-created the entire life of a man who struggled to maintain his family in a world dedicated to enriching whites and impoverishing blacks, while South Africa was tearing them apart. Winner of The Sunday Times Alan Paton Award for Nonfiction Winner of the Herskovitz Award from the African Studies Association "The seed is mine. The ploughshares are mine. The span of oxen is mine. Everything is mine. Only the land is theirs." --Kas Maine A bold and innovative social history, *The Seed Is Mine* concerns the disenfranchised blacks who did so much to shape the destiny of South Africa. After years of interviews with Kas Maine and his neighbors, employers, friends, and family --a rare triumph of collaborative courage and dedication --Charles van Onselen has recreated the entire life of a man who struggled to maintain his family in a world dedicated to enriching whites and impoverishing blacks, while South Africa was tearing them apart. "If ever one wondered whether the life of a single man could illuminate a century, [this] brilliant biography . . . proves the point." --Carmel Schrire, *The Boston Globe* "An epic . . . [that] tells of the loss of human potential generated by a politics that surrendered generosity and openness to self-interest and bigotry. It reveals the way an ordinary man can survive with dignity in such a world." --Vincent Crapanzano, *The New York Times Book Review* "A magnificent book [with] implications beyond its modest claims . . . This remarkable story compels foreboding but also kindles hope, for it shows the extraordinary courage of 'ordinary' men under severe difficulties." --Eugene Genovese, *Emory University* "[Van Onselen] teases out the subtleties of the paternalistic relationships between rural whites and blacks which gave rise to real friendships but also to much betrayal, anger, and humiliation . . . It is a monumental masterpiece of research, and a poetic evocation of the human spirit to survive . . ." --Linda Ensor, *Business Day* (South Africa)

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Customer Reviews

History forgets the small and powerless. It is to South African historian and journalist Charles Van Onselen's credit that he has remembered one of them in a sprawling biography: an illiterate black South African tenant farmer who lived out his days under apartheid. The existence of Kas Maine (1894-1985) had hitherto been formally acknowledged only in official state records, and then only once, for having been arrested in 1931 for not having a license for his pet dog. From that sketchy base Van Onselen creates a powerful life study of a man who lived as best as he could under the most trying circumstances. But he does much more than that: he reinforces Maine's story with a long and fluent account of South African history in the last century.

A historian in South Africa, van Onselen has organized a prodigious amount of research-not only from the well-remembering Kas Maine, farmer, healer and patriarch, but also from other family members and those in his community-to tell "the story of a family who have no documentary existence." Yet the Maines, sharecroppers in Transvaal Province, lived through South African history while the "emerging South African state" clamped down on sharecroppers to provide white landlords a labor force under apartheid capitalism. The most interesting portions of the narrative recount how, especially before apartheid was enacted in 1948, racial lines were somewhat fluid, as Africans such as Maine could play banker to poor Afrikaners, and Kas, in a wise presage of South Africa's future, concluded that individual behavior meant more than skin color. General readers may find this lengthy book too detailed; for those studying South African history, it is a vital contribution. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a fantastic book that tells an amazing story of Apartheid era South Africa.

Not just a biography of an unknown man and his family but a sweeping portrait of a country and a landscape. Van Onselen is a gifted writer who manages to tease from dry facts and decades of drought, true literature. It is a compelling book whose humanity is both humbling and magnificent.

I have been taking my time with this book, savouring it while I can. The rhythms of the prose and the world it describes are so seductive, that I have often found myself reading "just a few more pages" at 3AM despite having to get up for work the next day. If you wish to have a sense of what life in rural South Africa was like over the past century, I can't think of a better book (or any other book for that matter). Kas was an exceptionally gifted farmer, a traditional herbalist and healer, and a patriarch who struggled against the almost impossible odds of being a black man in South Africa. As the insanity of apartheid took hold, he and his family were forced to move from place to place, his dreams of agricultural success and land ownership gradually eroding. Yet the book also portrays the rich, multicultural environment of the Transvaal, the varied relationships between Blacks, Boers, Englishmen, Jews and Asians; the shift from a paternalistic but, in many ways more egalitarian society to a racist police state. Kas is a complex man: wise, cruel, patient, tender, pragmatic, apolitical, opportunist, and honourable. The portrayals of his relationships with his ever expanding family are as complex and engaging as one could wish from a fine novel. Van Onselen makes no apologies for him: he simply gives us the man and, above all his humanity. Perhaps his greatest achievement with this book is in bridging the gap between the Western reader and an illiterate African farmer, in underlining our human commonalities rather than our differences. Despite occasional passages that are a tad purple, the author's prose is clear and flowing. He manages to make the ebb and flow of the seasons with their triumphs, tragedies, and ignominies absolutely gripping. I never thought that I could be enthralled by descriptions of the complexities of plowing and harvesting, or the purchase of agricultural equipment, but I was. No it's not too long as the reviewer in the New York Times claimed. In fact one often wishes that one could know more about this extraordinary yet very ordinary man.

The daily life of Kas Maine over 90 odd years on the high veldt of South Africa says more about the history of that part of the world than all the history books and newspaper articles and military actions that could ever be recounted. I felt as though I myself had lived those same 90 years, breathed the dust, lost my crops, driven my livestock from farm to farm trying to find sharecropping work, put up

and taken down my corrugated metal shack, been hounded by bureaucrats, maintained my dignity and kept my family together against incredible odds. Although the place names and indigenous family names were difficult and their abundance presumed some familiarity with South Africa, I learned to visualize rather than pronounce them, and they became like one of Kas's stony fields in the story and I liked the "rough footing." A unique experience in book form.

I was fascinated throughout. Sounds and looks "dry" when you see it on the shelf, but so full of juicy bits that make his life very real. You cheer for him when he manages to think his way around the obstacles that apartheid and his own nature put in his way and you are continually forced to confront the "What would I have done here?" question. Yes, it is long. But when you are through you want to know still more. What has happened to the rest of the family since the book was published? What was the effect of those years of scrutiny on their "real" lives? I stared at the pictures and studied the faces. I have been selectively pushing the book on all the thoughtful people I know. It wakes up your brain.

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