

amant and a scientific curiosity in England, where there was great interest in the so-called "Hottentot tribe", who, scientists believed, had unique, large buttocks and strangely elongated labia.

Billed as the Hottentot Venus, Baartman made her first public appearance in Piccadilly in London in September 1810.

Dressed in a figure-hugging body stocking, beadwork and feathers, she danced, sang and played African and European folk songs on her ramkietjie.

Almost immediately, Baartman became one of the city's most talked-about celebrities. But abolitionists, believing she was being forced to perform against her will, brought a lawsuit on her behalf. Their case collapsed, however, when she said she preferred remaining in England, where she was earning a salary.

In 1814 she was taken to France, where her fame had preceded her. She was used as a model by staff painters at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, and their paintings and drawings became sought after by collectors.

Baartman died in 1815, at the age of 26. Within 48 hours, her body was dissected, her bones boiled, and her brain and genitals bottled. Plaster casts were taken of

saw, says Holmes. She admits to envying her "bootylicious sister". Earlier literature on Baartman focused on diverse issues such as human rights and scientific racism, but Holmes was committed to "writing her story for the first time rather than rewriting history".

It should have been difficult to write a biography and give a voice to a person who never said much nor kept a diary. "The research and writing processes were made easier by the fact that there were so many available records," Holmes says. "Europeans used to keep diaries and journals."

But Holmes believed that the story could not be written until Baartman's remains were brought back home. She began writing her book in 2002, the year Baartman was reburied in SA — 187 years after her death.

The Hottentot Venus recounts the struggles women faced in the early 1800s; gender-based violence and unequal power relations. Holmes writes that "men dominated her (Baartman's) life because they held her in grip of their economic and social power". She believes this is still the case today: "Unfortunately women's exploitation will not end unless we realise that gender equality and



"She rebelled as far as she could. She was also not exhibited naked as we were made to believe. Saartjie was the first ever international icon to come out of SA"

has a taste for Brandy and would have liked to "sit in a bar and chat with her" about the few missing links in her story. "I would ask her what her child died of and why she was baptised in Manchester. Was she pregnant or was she hoping to get married?"

Now that Baartman's remains are back home and buried, it is easy to assume that she eventually found her well-deserved rest. "I think as an international symbol, she is not going to be left alone. I haven't left her alone either," says Holmes. She is concerned that, even though she admits it might be necessary, the iron bars erected around her grave make it look as though she is "caged".

The Hottentot Venus is not an easy book to read because it is filled with pain. But Baartman's story is as relevant today as it was two centuries ago. It is a tragic story of someone who died at a young age. She was a talented artist who played ramkietjie, an indigenous Khoi musical instrument. She could also sing in her own language and dance.

Unfortunately, her potential as an artist remained only a potential until her early death.

"If her circumstances were different she would not have died that early," Holmes believes.

people, by virtue of their skin colour and continent of origin, were inferior to other groups.

The book is somewhat graphic, detailed and sympathetic.

Holmes concedes: "If you ask me if I like Saartjie, I'd say, yes, I love her. I practically lived with her for five years while I was writing this book."

Holmes would like Baartman to be remembered for the "diva" that she was. "Maybe somebody could come up with a Saartjie movie and resurrect Brenda Fassie to play the lead role," she says wistfully. She also wishes that the European authorities would erect Baartman's statue in Piccadilly Square or somewhere in Paris.

When reading this book, I kept thinking of female dancers on hip-hop videos and scores of disempowered women across the globe. Though the book deals with events that happened in the 1800s, it resonates with issues today. Reading The Hottentot Venus made me realise how little things have changed for women in the past 200 years. "So much has changed, yet it is so little," Holmes says.

This book is written in non-academic English, making it an easy read. However, you may need a heart of stone to finish it.

of the apartheid system is detailed through the eyes of those who lived through it.

How bizarre laws affected the everyday lives of ordinary people and how it became increasingly difficult to provide for families, and Luthuli's struggles as a leader to aid his people, are themes that run through his autobiography.

Let My People Go, which was once banned, is a humble, unassuming and descriptive tale that should be included in any history class. It's not only a trip back through history, but also an insight into Luthuli's thoughts and aspirations for his people.

What is sad, however, is that I'm not convinced that SA today lives up to this great man's vision of a free country. And, while the book includes appendices such as the Freedom Charter, it seems incomplete. Granted, it is an autobiography, but it would have been a better read had it included other aspects of his life written perhaps by those who knew him best.

Despite that, Luthuli's autobiography provides a valuable insight into a period of history that may have been lost altogether, and it wins hands down against any biography I have read.

NICOLA MAWSON

Warts-and-all view of a Swazi anti-apartheid base

NUMBER 43 TRELAWNEY PARK - KWAMAGOGO

Elias Masilela
David Philip

HISTORIES of the anti-apartheid struggle are written from individual perspectives. Sometimes, they gloss and glorify the role of the writer; at other times, they record meticulously assembled facts that are left to speak for themselves.

The contribution of Elias Masilela is the more potent because it's in the latter category. In keeping with the nature and training of the man — quietly spoken, a disciplined economist who shies from the limelight — Number 43 Trelawney Park — KwaMagogo trumpets no personalities and screams no judgments.

Rather, it is the story of people who lived in and passed through a house in Swaziland during the fraught decades from 1964.

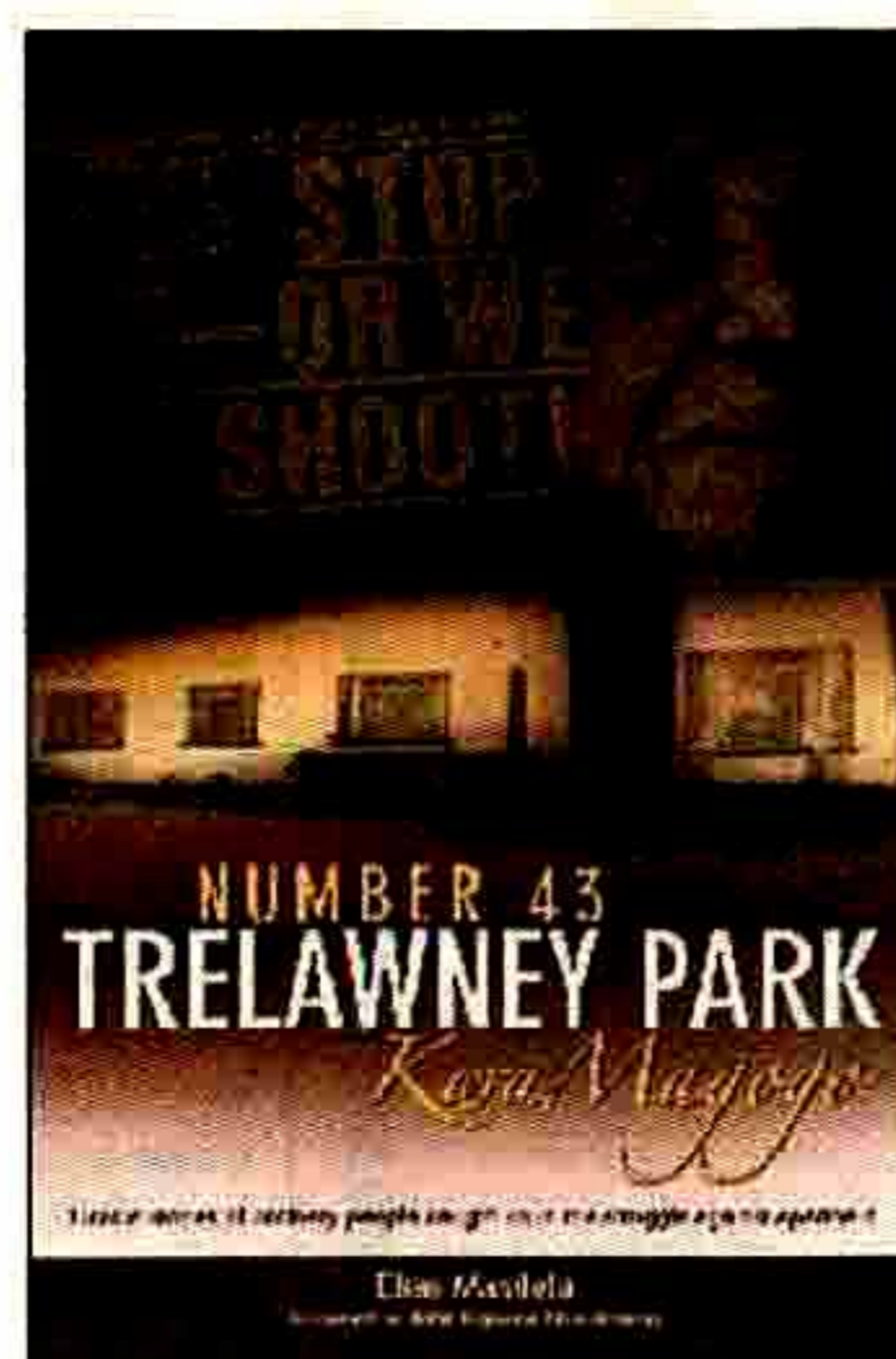
It is the story of their complexities, not always understood, and of their commitment, not always without betrayal.

On the face of it, these were ordinary people. Except for their courage as African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) operatives. Few have risen to prominence in post-1994 SA, and few have gained the recognition they deserve.

But in the totality of these people, the suburban homestead in Trelawney Park is no less significant an icon of underground activity than the famed Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia. Perhaps more so, because Number 43 was not so much a safe house (relatively speaking) for the leadership to plan and organise, as it was a base for guerrillas to launch sabotage sorties with hell-raising frequency.

At the same time, Number 43 was a gathering point for political discussion and strategic debate. It invigorated the soul of the ANC. The egalitarianism, the consensus building, the culture of sharing and selflessness, are evident in the spirit that Masilela portrays.

In this sense, the book is not only a history. It is also a description of the characteristics that



defined the politics in exile, shaping the movement that later swept to power.

Masilela was ideally positioned to have written the book. His parents found refuge for their family in Swaziland. This put the Soweto-born Elias at the coal face of "numerous defining moments ... as I observed them through the eyes of a young boy growing in an environment full of tumult".

Schooled at Salesian in Manzini and trained at the universities of Swaziland and Addis Ababa as an economist, he returned to SA where he served as a deputy director-general in the national treasury. Today, he's a senior Sanlam executive and chairs the SA Savings Institute.

It's a far cry from the intrigue of Number 43 and personalities such as commissar Welile "Satane" Nhlapo, who explained the targeting of economic installations such as Sasol, and Glory "September" Sedibe, who turned from being a trusted comrade to an undercover agent of the South African security police.

Masilela's account bristles with interviews and recollections from the mouths of those most intimately involved in the Swaziland-based operations.

They bring to life the tensions of their lives. By opening the curtain, their philosophies of struggle and their pain in pursuing it are exposed to full view.

That danger lurked at every turn means the book reads partly as a thriller, and partly as a study in heroism that even those on the opposing side of the political divide cannot deny.

What it achieves overall is an insight into the ANC on the ground and, importantly, a warts-and-all look at the place Swaziland holds in the anti-apartheid legacy.

What was the approach of the Swazi authorities, caught between African states' support for the ANC and the war being waged against it by the tiny kingdom's mighty neighbour? Come to your own conclusion, given the ambiguity of events that unfold.

Why was a Eugene de Kock or a Dirk Coetzee not dispatched to

obliterate Number 43? Work out for yourself whether the chilling explanation is credible. "This is a complex jigsaw puzzle for the reader to complete," says Masilela.

These days, listening to the suited Masilela talk in typically institutional terms on such matters as the retirement fund reform that he's been instrumental in guiding, and to hear him applauded by members of an audience who once might have preferred to see him behind bars, a mental stretch is needed to accept that this is the same Masilela who once ferried cadres across the Swaziland border and assisted with reconnaissance materials for an attack on Voortrekkerhoogte.

The reconciliation of these apparent contradictions symbolises the extent to which SA, not Masilela, has changed. The country is the better for the understated contribution of people like him. To appreciate the extent of that change, his gripping record of perspectives from Swaziland offers a foundation.

ALLAN GREENBLO