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the "new" south african history

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It is a cliché by now to point out that the **Oxford History of South Africa,** Volume 1 (1969) arrives at the mystic date of 1652, on the shores of Table Bay, in the presence of Dutch colonisers, only at page 187 and Chapter 5. As L M Thompson, one of the editors, has pointed out, this is a reflection of the new perspective in South African history — a perspective that takes cognisance for the first time of an important dimension of the social structure of the area, namely, that it is, and was, populated by Blacks as well as Whites. This, as strange as it may seem, is not something that has always been obvious in the works of White historians, obsessed as they have usually been with the "settler history" of the area and the conflicts between the "White races".

The **Oxford History,** though it is concerned to eliminate the previous bias, is still the history of Blacks written by Whites (many of them exiles). But the significance of this new movement, which gained momentum with the publication of John Omer-Cooper's **The Zulu Aftermath** (1966), is that at last we have broken away from the idea that "South African history is the history of White settlement in the sub-continent, with a little more than a cursory glance at the role of the Black man except when his activities impinge on the consciousness or material welfare of his White rulers".

However, the **Oxford History of South Africa,** like all historical works, is only a milestone, and to many a rather disappointing milestone, considering its potential. It was already being superceded in many ways by the time it came to press (1969-71) and the relatively few years since then have seen the vigorous growth of Southern African studies into a variety of new domains. As a result much of the work has dated rather rapidly. Yet it is an invaluable contribution to the liberal school of South African historical scholarship and is in many ways the high-point of that tradition.

History has its own history (historiography), the milestones of its progress being discernible, in the main, by the changing ideological affiliations and attitudes of those who set the pace of scholarship in the subject. That is not to say that all history is biased — there are after all standards of good and bad scholarship — but it is to say that the impetus behind historians and the emphases they give to their works reflect the way in which they see the world. "Historians with a sensitivity to the present frequently project their concerns into the past".

There has been a reaction to the themes and emphases of the **Oxford History** in much the same way as the **History** itself was a reaction to and an outgrowth of its predecessors. A look at some of the major themes and schools of South African history will help to illuminate the position at the present day.

Under British rule in the Cape during the nineteenth century, history, as taught in schools, was a facsimile of that taught in schools in England, with a focus on English history and the heroes and myths of the British Empire. Not unlike school history taught anywhere else at the time, it was intensely jingoistic and gave scant regard to the need for critical analysis. Equally, as in colonial Africa until fairly recent years, the subject matter (e.g. the Wars of the Roses; Cavaliers vs Roundheads) was totally removed from the experience of a vast number of those who studied it, the purpose being to gain a certificate of matriculation or some similar qualification. Not surprisingly then, towards the end of the century considerable criticism of this state of affairs arose, particularly amongst Cape Afrikaners, and steps were taken to remedy the situation (cf. Africa after 1945). Ds. S J du Toit of the **Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners** wrote **Die Geskiedenis van Ons Land in die Taal van Ons Volk** (1877) as a corrective to "English" history.

It was no less polemical. It sought to develop a distinctive hero history to counterbalance the English version — for example, the "brave defenders" of Schlagters Nek were singled out for special treatment because of their valiant stand against "English tyranny"; the frontier farmers and the trekkers in their turn were shown to be the heroes of a desperate battle against the "hostile barbarians" beyond the frontier who were "bent on destroying them as a people"; the missionaries were the "bad" men who tried to undermine the "natural" relations between the black and white races. A series of myths grew up which have indeed been promulgated and perpetuated by a particular school of writers to the present day. The main themes that have been of concern here have been the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, the romanticisation of the Great Trek, the Eerstevryheidsoorlog and the Anglo-Boer War, the rise of the Nationalist Party, and the evolution of racial segregation and the policy of apartheid. Peripheral treatment is given to other groups in Southern Africa, either White or Black; there is a gross neglect of internal divisions amongst Afrikaners — on political, social and economic levels — and a myopic concentration on "political", i.e., party political events.

Writers in this tradition have included J C Smuts, **A Century of Wrong** (1899); Gustav Preller, **Dagboek van Louis Trichardt** (1917) and **Piet Retief** (1920); C M van den Heever, **Hertzog** (1946); D W Krüger, **The Age of the Generals** (1958) and **Paul Kruger** (1961); and F A van Jaarsveld, **The Afrikaners' Interpretation of South African History** (1964) and **The Awakening of Afrikaner Nationalism** (1961) (the last being more critical than most). Even as late as 1969, Prof. C F J Muller's **500 Years** dealt with the history of the Black man in Southern Africa in a pseudo-anthropological 20-page appendix; elsewhere, as Shula Marks points out, Africans only appear in the text "on such occasions when they are 'restless'; 'impudent'; 'fractious'; 'truculent' or otherwise 'causing difficulties'."

As long as these are avowedly polemical writings, one cannot object to this cavalier treatment of the complexities of the past, but to call it history is to miss the point of the central concern of the discipline, which is to critically evaluate the **whole** of the past. This approach can be justified and understood in the context of 1877; it cannot in 1975, for history is surely not just the history of the (temporarily) successful — and this is a lesson that still needs to be learned by many of those who teach and write history in South Africa.

G M Theal **(History of South Africa,** 11 volumes, 1888-1919) and G E Cory **(The Rise of South Africa,** 5 volumes, 1910-1930) are the first names that we associate with any serious attempt to write South African history. Theal has been called the "frontiersman's historian" but he did not ignore the "other side" of the frontier to the same degree that other writers were to do in later years. In essence both of these English-speaking South African historians were anti-imperialist and concerned with the inter-White controversies of the early twentieth century.

The new school of "liberal" historians began to emerge in the 'twenties and 'thirties. E A Walker was one of the first to write a really comprehensive **History of Southern Africa** (1928) which, despite its lack of criticism of the Imperial government, did signify an important benchmark in the evolution of historical scholarship in South Africa and is still one of the most reliable basic texts. The titles of his other publications give an insight into Walker's essentially Cape liberal sympathies — **Lord de Villiers and his Times** (1952) and **W P Schreiner: a South African** (1937).

The focus that now emerges amongst "liberal" historians is an examination not only of the differences and interaction between the white groups (although this is still important) but a deep concern with the historical dimension of race relations—something which arose, again, out of the contemporary world in which they lived. An entire "school" began to publish material at this time which really marked the beginning of the modern era in South African historiography, setting the themes and providing the platform for many of our present-day debates. A re-examination of inter-

White history was to be seen against the backdrop of historical relations between black and white. The frontier came in for detailed consideration — in Walker's **The Frontier Tradition in South Africa** (1930) and **The Great Trek** (1934); J S Marais's **Maynier and the First Boer Republics** (1944); and MacMillan's **Bantu, Boer and Briton** (1929). This naturally led on to an examination of marginal groups with MacMillan's **Cape Coloured Question** (1927) and Marais's **The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937** (1939) breaking important new ground. MacMillan was particularly interested in the role of the philanthropic missionary, Dr John Philip, in race relations on the eastern frontier. The interaction between the British Government's policies and the development of indigenous political traditions was also examined in detail in, e.g., **The Imperial Factor in South Africa** by C W de Keiwiet (1937) and T R H Davenport, **The Afrikaner Bond** (1966). Embryonic attempts were also made at a more interdisciplinary approach to the study of South African history, the most important of these being C W de Kiewit's **A History of South Africa: Social and Economic** (1941) and Leo Marquard's **Peoples and Policies in South Africa** (1960). A particularly significant innovation was an attempt to link race relations more firmly to economics — in Sheila van der Horst's **Native Labour in South Africa** (1941).

As a reaction to these "liberal" interpretations of South African history came a two-pronged polemical attack. Firstly, the rise of African nationalism linked to general political trends in Africa in the 1950s and to the massacre at Sharpeville (1960) gave birth to the first attempts by Black intellectuals to write the history of their people — a history that was very largely a protest against white minority rule. The **genre** of Nkrumah's **I Speak for Freedom** (1961) and Kenyatta's **Facing Mount Kenya** (1953) was echoed in South Africa by Albert Luthuli's **Let My People Go** (1962) and Nelson Mandela's **No Easy Walk to Freedom** (1965), while the Pondoland revolt of 1960 was documented by Govan Mbeki in **The Peasants' Revolt in South Africa** (1964). Secondly, Marxists undertook the task of documenting the "struggle for racial freedom in South Africa". Edward Roux's **Time Longer than Rope** (1948) was a pace-setter in this area. This was followed by Brian Bunting's **The Rise of the South African Reich** (1964) and H J and R E Simon's **Class and Colour in South Africa: 1850-1950** (1969). The focus here was on the development of capitalism, the rise of trade unions and the "class struggle".

By the mid-sixties, then, a number of forces were operating on the writers of South African history. The polarisation of forces in colonial Africa had its effects on the domestic scene and triggered an intense reappraisal of old myths and uncritically-held views. New schools of history were growing up in Africa north of the Limpopo (even at the newly founded University College of Rhodesia) which sought to re-examine the pre-colonial as well as the colonial period and in particular to focus on the effects of the latter on African political, social and economic structures. As a result interdisciplinary studies came into vogue to attempt to synchronise the findings of archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, educationalists, linguists, economists — and historians. Indeed the historian's task came to be the vital one of trying to weld the vast array of new research into a meaningful whole. The 'sixties gave rise to the concept of the **Oxford History** with its emphasis on **"interaction** between peoples of diverse origins, languages, technologies, social systems, meeting on South Africa soil". However, it tended to play down conflict between those groups and the independence of those groups at particular times. (Criticism of the neglect of the African side of South African history in the colonial period was largely met by a supplementary volume on **African Societies in Southern Africa** edited by L M Thompson, 1969) Chapters by Monica Wilson on the "Growth of Peasant Communities" (**OHSA,** Vol. 11, Ch. 2), Francis Wilson on "Farming 1866-1966" (**OHSA,** Vol. II, Ch. 3), and David Welsh on "The Growth of Towns" (**OHSA,** Vol. II, Ch. 4) broke new ground and were well

received by a range of reviewers. Other chapters were criticised, some harshly, for being out of touch with current thinking and research. The fact that non-historians were writing history meant that the work at times lacked a tight chronology and that social, political and economic themes were not always sufficiently well integrated. The fact that the contributors were spread throughout the world obviously also contributed to the lack of unity. Perhaps the lack of real economic analysis in these volumes is the greatest single flaw. There is a lack of critical analysis of the growth of industrialisation and the structure of capitalism, the "dual economy" model is uncritically used by most writers, there is no systematic examination of the relations between the "developed" (industrial) economy and the "underdeveloped" (reserve) economy, to mention but a few gaps — and this despite the fact that the importance of the economic factor is acknowledged (**OHSA,** Vol. I, p. vii).

That one can make these criticisms so soon after the publication of the **Oxford History** is to some degree a comment on the rapidity of the growth of studies in this area in the last five years, rather than being entirely the fault of the contributors.

One of the marked features of the era of the 'sixties was that many South African historians left their country of origin and went to live in North America and Britain to escape the new regime that was emerging under Nationalist rule, and South Africa thus lost many of its best scholars. Nevertheless, though scholarship in South Africa suffered a severe blow from which it has never really recovered, this change did not put an end to research. Indeed, Southern Africa studies flourished. In Britain the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University became important centres, with others at Oxford and York. In the USA the main centres were the University of California at Los Angeles and Northwestern University. Journals such as **The Journal of African History, The Journal of Modern African Studies** and **African Affairs** provided an international forum for debate.

The focus of research has moved away from the "liberal" concern with "race relations" and the optimistic assumptions that in the long run economic growth and industrialisation would tend towards the evolution of a more "just" and "equitable" society. The standpoint of this new generation of scholars has been to re-evaluate the structural characteristics of the Southern African political economy and to ask whether "the dynamics of modernisation" will in fact tend to dissolve racial oligarchy (Trapido, Legassick, F Johnstone, H Adam). They have also asked whether it is not more fruitful to see South African history in terms of class conflict than in terms of the traditional racial dichotomy. Legassick has asked whether the policy of "separate development" and the "outward" foreign policy in Africa should not be seen in terms of the "development/underdevelopment" model — in short, in terms of the economic control of the developed economy over the underdeveloped "periphery" (even if that "periphery" happens to be politically independent as in the case of Malawi, Lesotho, etc.) Underlying all these arguments is the basic assumption that all of Southern Africa is involved in **one** economy and that any analysis of the problems of the area thus has to be seen in the total context.

Such questions have led historians not only towards a re-appraisal of contemporary history but to a re-examination of the dynamics of contact and conflict between pre-colonial modes of production in the "tribal" economies and the growth of capitalism, and to the nature of the African response to the market economy, both in terms of cash-crop production (see C Bundy on the rise of an African peasantry in the Eastern Province in the late nineteenth century, and G Arrighi on Rhodesia and in terms of the labour market, see H Wolpe, Legassick, etc.). New questions have also been asked about the economy and political relationships between black and white in pre-industrial South Africa, and stereotypes of conflict models just do not hold water. Others have looked at the

changing patterns of land and labour policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when land speculation and the development of White farming and of the mining industry in Kimberley and the Witwatersrand brought tremendous structural changes in South Africa. In the later period it has led to a detailed examination of the history of labour relations and labour-repressive legislation as well as the evolution of mass movements amongst Blacks (ICU, ANC, PAC, etc.). More recently there has been a detailed investigation of the role of the state in promoting capitalist development and subduing labour unrest (black and white) on behalf of employers.

Clearly the nature of the debate has changed rather radically. Although there is a good deal of dissension amongst the "revisionists", they are in general agreed that the evolution of present political and economic trends in South Africa will not bring an end to present policies — which they are unanimous in condemning. Far from undermining economic growth, as the liberals suggested, the revisionists argue that apartheid is built for the specific purpose of perpetuating and indeed promoting the **status quo.** Therefore, it is an inbuilt assumption in most of their arguments that revolution is the only possible way of bringing about the more equitable distribution of the "goods and burdens" of the society.

There is not space in an article of this nature to enter into detailed consideration of these debates but it is hoped that enough has been said to direct the reader towards further reading in an area that offers what must surely be amongst the most vigorous and exciting academic fare to be had. In addition, and perhaps more important, it has immediate relevance to the way in which we see the world in which we live and to decisions we make about how to act in/on that world.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

1. For the papers by Legassick and Trapido, see collected seminar papers on **The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries** (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, Vol. 1-5).
2. See **African Affairs** for the articles by F R Johnstone (April 1970) and C Bundy (October 1972). See also the articles in **Concept** by R Hunt-Davis (October 1973) and D Yudelman (January 1975).
3. H Adam, **Modernising Racial Domination,** 1971.
4. See the following journals for various articles on South Africa: **The Journal of African History, The Journal of Modern African Studies, Economy and Society.**