

OLD AND NEW TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

I. In this lecture it is my intention to recall the activities of our historians during the 19th and 20th centuries and trace the avenues of interpretation that they followed. As the framework of my approach I have taken into account those factors which have determined the historical interpretation — human relations, *weltanschauung* and the changed circumstances of the times. In the first place I shall refer to the pre-scientific period that extended to about 1918, then to the period of scientific writing of history until about 1948 and, finally, to the impact which the Second World War had on our historical writing.

II. The first trend to which I refer is *the colonial standpoint* put forward by writers such as A. Wilmot, J. C. Chase,¹ W. Holden,² E. B. Watermeyer,³ H. Cloete⁴ and J. Noble.⁵ They saw the British colonies as extensions of the mother country but nevertheless pivoted their writings on the white colonists; the Company's rule, the Republics beyond the colonial borders, Non-Europeans and missionaries were portrayed in an unfavourable light. George McCall Theal⁶ took a broader view that embraced republicans as well as colonists; he defended the former and showed a critical attitude towards remote Imperial control from London. Sir George Cory⁷ underscored the role of the British settlers of the Eastern Province.

III. The second trend is that of interpretations from the *Imperial point of view*.⁵ It had British expansion in the last quarter of the 19th century as its central theme and rested on an ideological basis, the concepts of civilisation, progress and humanitarianism, that had to be conveyed to the ends of the earth. Since the Boer

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1. A. Wilmot and J. C. Chase, *History of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town, 1869).
 2. *History of the Colony of Natal* (London, 1855).
 3. *Three Lectures on the Cape of Good Hope under the Government of the Dutch East India Company* (Cape Town, 1857).
 4. *Five Lectures on the Emigration of the Dutch Farmers* (1856).
 5. *South Africa Past and Present* (London, 1877).
 6. *History of South Africa* (10 volumes, London, 1919-1927). Most of these volumes were first published during the last quarter of the 19th century.
 7. *The Rise of South Africa* (5 volumes, 1910-1930).
 8. A. Wilmot, *The Story of the Expansion of Southern Africa 1894; History of our Own Times* (3 volumes, 1897-1899); *History of South Africa* (1901). See also bibliography in Afrikaans text.

republics and the Bantu tribes barred the way to expansion, they stood condemned, often in immoderate language, and their subjugation was advocated. The writers of this period censured Theal¹ because he was critical of the Imperial government and sympathetically disposed towards the Boers. At the time of the Anglo-Boer War they were bitterly anti-Transvaal and anti-Afrikaner in sentiment but when a union of South Africa came about, with its idea of unity between the white races, there was a toning down of the note of acerbity and British historians viewed the constitutional achievement with considerable self-satisfaction.²

IV. The third trend to be considered is the interpretation from the *Republican* angle. It put the Boers at the centre of the stage and had for its substance the Great Trek and both of the Transvaal wars of liberation; it concentrated on oppression and persecution at the hands of the British government and the struggle of the Republics for their freedom. South Africa was seen, not as an extension of a fatherland, but as a focal-point in its own right. This was the first step towards an interpretation in the sense of a "fatherland history".³ The basis of this historical writing was nationalistic and, in addition to the characteristics already mentioned, it also employed the legend or myth. It was couched in an anti-British and anti-Non-European vein; put grievances to the forefront, defended the Republics against attacks, justified their existence and laid the blame for friction at the doors of the British.⁴

V. It was only after the First World War that *scientific* application to *historical writing in Afrikaans* became general; it was bound up with improved archival facilities and wider opportunities for publication. The foundations were laid by European historians and young South Africans who had been trained abroad.

Scientific historical writing in Afrikaans did not involve any rupture in continuity with the pre-scientific era. History continued to be written from the Afrikaner standpoint, often in themes that were specifically Afrikaner in character and dealt especially with the 19th century. The explanation is that the expansion of the Boers to the North was seen as a great national epic in which the

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1. E.g. J. Cappon, *Britain's Title in South Africa* and E. B. Iwan-Müller, *Lord Milner and South Africa* (1902).
 2. E.g. F. R. Cana, *South Africa from the Great Trek to the Union* (London, 1909).
 3. E.g. S. J. du Toit, *Die Geskiedenis van ons Land in die Taal van ons Volk* (1877).
 4. E.g. G. S. Preller, *Piet Retief*; J. H. Malan, *Boer en Barbaar* (1913); J. A. Smith, *Boer en Brit: Van Slagtersnek tot Jopie Fourie* (1917); W. J. Leyds, *De Eerste Annexatie van de Transvaal* (1906).

Afrikaner recognised all his being, his ideals and his state institutions — in brief, all those factors in which his nationalism was rooted. His historical writing had to serve the purpose of preserving his identity.

In the over-emphasis by the Afrikaner of political history, other avenues or themes such as the colonial background of the 17th and 18th centuries, ideological history and the rôle of the Non-Europeans, were neglected. The output was mainly analytical and lacked synthesis. The stress fell on the Boer-British juxtaposition. It was a provincial vision since perspective on the international plane was lacking. Nevertheless, objective works of a high quality were published that enlarged our field of knowledge.¹

VI. The scientific approach to history in *English* was also initiated after the First World War. There was a distaste for the purely local Afrikaans or local English versions and a desire to break loose from the Boer-British antithesis. A *liberal* school of historians emerged under the leadership of W. M. Macmillan,² and it included C. W. de Kiewiet³ and J. S. Marais.⁴ With the Non-European problem as the paramount issue, they re-evaluated the past from a sociological — economic angle and produced an image that differed radically from the traditional Afrikaner presentation. Race relations, in which the Bantu viewpoint was emphasised, were at the core of this new interpretation and it embodied a polemic with those historians who approached the past purely from the white man's point of view. These writers gave prominence to alienation of the Bantu's *land* and his employment as a *labour* force under legislation which relegated him to the rôle of a dispossessed and voteless proletariat in the towns. The heroic interpretation of the Great Trek and of the Republics was blunted in the process. Dr. Philip and Maynier were restored to positions of "honour". De Kiewiet moreover took the lead in associating our history with the external developments that had influenced it and, in this way, deepened our understanding of the past. The English-speaking writers also put synthesis into more effective use and published substantial works that had the qualities of structure and unity.⁵ They also pioneered the field of colonial and pre-history and produced the first histories of Bantu tribes.

1. See bibliography in Afrikaans text and notes.

2. *The Cape Colour Question* (1927); *Bantu, Boer and Briton* (1929).

3. *British Colonial Policy and the South African Republics* (1929); *The Imperial Factor in South Africa* (1937).

4. *Maynier and the First Boer Republic* (1944); *The Cape Coloured People* (1939).

5. C. W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa Social and Economic* (1941); E. A. Walker, *A History of South Africa* (1928).

VII. The external and internal transformation that followed the Second World War had a profound influence on our historiography.

- (1) On the part of the *English-speaking* there was dissatisfaction at the turn of events; they became aware that they had become a powerless minority that had been divested of its British symbols. There was also disappointment at the failure of the British liberal concept and of the Empire in South Africa, and resentment at the triumph of Afrikaner nationalism. The Afrikaner was subjected to historical investigation in this spirit and presented to the outside world in a more or less negative fashion;¹ sombre prophecies were ventured concerning the future and once again our history was re-interpreted from a critical standpoint.

To shed light on the current situation questions were asked such as: "Where did we take the wrong turning?"² Historical re-examination seemed to show why Afrikaner nationalism had succeeded and the British liberal idea in relation to the Non-Europeans had failed; criticism was brought to bear on Imperial policy in the 19th century. The English-speaking also displayed a sensitivity towards the traditional presentation of the Boer-British antithesis by Afrikaans writers. The rôle of the "forgotten" British was brought to the forefront and the Afrikaner presentation of history was criticised.³ Even school text-books were placed under the lens of the magnifying glass.

- (2) Historical writing in *Afrikaans* bore the impress of the great world changes which had undermined traditional certainties and forced the Afrikaner to abandon self-centredness. The close of the colonial era and the commencement of a global epoch in which the Non-European peoples rebelled against their former masters, achieved their freedom, and sat as equals of the whites in the council chambers of the world, as well as the coupling of the colour question to international politics, impelled some Afrikaans historians to launch a campaign against isolation; they pointed to the applicability of world politics to local developments in such a way as to broaden

1. E.g. Sheila Patterson, *The Last Trek: A Study of the Boer People and the Afrikaner Nation* (London, 1957).
2. A. M. Keppel-Jones in *Race Relations Journal*, Vol. XXVI, Jan.-March, 1959, p. 18-30; C. W. de Kiewiet, *The Anatomy of South African Misery* (London, 1956), etc.
3. John Bond, *They were South Africans* (Cape Town, 1956); A. C. Martin, *The Concentration Camps* (Cape Town, 1957).

horizons.¹ Furthermore the colour problem forced them to turn to an investigation of its origin and inception. The frame of approach was criticism from a standpoint that accepted apartheid or separate development as the utopia; the implication was that the founding fathers since Van Riebeeck's time had erred in making use of Non-European labour, in admitting too few white immigrants and thus contributing to the current state of affairs — a situation which would have to be overcome through "sacrifices".²

- (3) For the first time historical writing is encountered that reflects the Bantu point of view.³ It arose from the quickening of a political consciousness in the established and educated urban Non-Europeans. It was intended to arouse the Non-European to an awareness of his position of inferiority, to further his liberation and to expose and correct the "distortions" and "falsifications" in the historical writings of the white men. It centred on the black man and interpreted the past in terms of a struggle against domination and oppression. It sought an explanation of the position in which the Bantu found themselves and discerned it in the era of colonialism.

An embittered and aggrieved tone characterised this writing; it was anti-everything and neither Boer, Briton, missionary nor liberal found favour. The essence was the invasion and systematic conquest of the country in "anti-Xhosa", "anti-Zulu" and "anti-Sotho" wars that led to the subjection of the black races and the alienation of their land. Legislation compelled them to move to the towns where they were converted into a cheap labour force. New terms or definitions were sought for the traditional historical concepts of the white man, such as the Great Trek, an occurrence which, as in the case of the Anglo-Boer War and the Boer-British struggle, left them completely disinterested. They elevated Dingaan, Chaka and Moshesh to the stature of heroes and revealed their detestation of a "traitor" such as Gaika and of the missionaries who acted as instruments of British control.

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1. E. G. D. Scholtz, *Die Oorsake van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (2 volumes, Johannesburg, 1948-50); and *Suid-Afrika en die Wêreldpolitiek* (Johannesburg, 1954).
 2. G. D. Scholtz, *Het die Afrikaanse Volk 'n Toekoms?* (Johannesburg, 1954); *Die Gevaar uit die Ooste* (Johannesburg, 1957).
 3. Nosipho Majeke, *The Rôle of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Johannesburg, 1952); "Mnguni", *A History of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1952).

VIII. Now that the constitutional struggle has been won by the Afrikaner and the Non-European question has gained increasing momentum, attention is likely to be diverted from the Boer-British quarrel and concentrated on relationships with the Non-Europeans. A more universal or catholic vision of South African history can be anticipated in future.

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