

## Excellent account of a pioneering politician

### Heather Hughes, *The First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC*

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Published on the eve of the centenary of the founding of the African National Congress, this book has come at a most appropriate time. This is a biography of John Dube, the second son of early Christian converts, James Dube and Elizabeth Namazi Shangase, who had come to live on the famous mission station Inanda, founded in 1857 by Daniel Lindley of the American Zulu Mission (AZM). James Dube, who was originally from the Qadi chiefdom headed by his father, Chief Langalibalele, under King Shaka, was ordained pastor by Lindley in December 1870.

One of five brothers, John Langalibalele Dube was born on Inanda Mission on 11 February 1871. In 1881, following his early education on Inanda Mission, the young Dube entered the famous Adams College at the age of ten and quickly adapted to a life of punctuality, routine and regularity. The institution was for a long time one of the leading AZM education centres for young African men. It was at Adams College, at the time under the “forcefull influence” of the American missionary, William C. Wilcox, that Dube’s characteristics of “singlemindedness, persistence and dogged determination, which would underpin his emergence as a leader” (p 38) began to show.

On completion of his studies at Inanda, at the request of Dube’s mother, Wilcox took John with him to the United States in 1887 for further studies, thus following the example of earlier young African men from South Africa, notably John Nembula and Pixley Seme whom he probably saw as role models. From 1888, Dube studied Theology at Oberlin College for about two years. He then returned home in 1891 and worked briefly for the AZM as a preacher in Durban. He married Nokutela Mdimba in January 1894 and together they went

to the US “to equip themselves more effectively as missionaries to the heathen”. while based in Brooklyn under the Lewis Avenue Congregational Church. Dube graduated from the Union Missionary Training Institute in May 1898 and was ordained a pastor a year later. On his return home, he was appointed to head the Inanda Mission in mid-1899.

While in the US, Dube greatly admired and was influenced by Booker T. Washington whom he saw as a role model. That is why on 26 July 1901, he established his Ohlange Industrial School. Balancing his role as head of Ohlange with his new interest and involvement in politics, Dube became a founder member of the Natal Native Congress in Pietermaritzburg on 1 June 1900. In 1907, he resigned from the Inanda church and the AZM, in order to pursue “wider interests” as he was becoming more and more politically active. Hughes skillfully shows how, in the aftermath of the Bambatha rebellion of 1906, Dube exhibited political and moral courage by exposing the brutality of the rebellion specifically and attacked racial injustice against Africans in Natal.

Thus it was no surprise that in May 1909, when the various regional African political organisations in the country met in the Waaihoek Location of Bloemfontein and formed the South African Native Convention, John Dube was elected its vice-president under Walter Rubusana, the president. Three years later, on 8 January 1912, again in Bloemfontein, Dube was elected president of the slightly renamed South African Native National Congress (SANNC) by a large majority because he “was easily the best-known nationally, with almost matchless experience” (p 162). Apart from this busy new role, Dube also ran and managed the *Ilanga* newspaper until 1915. Within weeks of his election as SANNC president, Dube was leading his Congress executive to the Minister of Native Affairs in Cape Town to present a petition attacking the myriad of legal restrictions and racial prejudice against Africans. Over Barry Hertzog’s segregationist bills, Dube again led a deputation to the government, but to no avail.

Following the passing of the 1913 Land Act, Dube led yet another deputation, this time to London in May 1914, which again was

fruitless. On that trip, disillusioned by negative responses from the British government and other bodies in England, Dube made the error of returning home abruptly and alone, for reasons that were not plausible, leaving Walter Rubusana in charge of the delegation, who felt abandoned and disappointed. In the deputation, Saul Msane in particular never forgave Dube for this. Pixley Seme too did not take kindly to Dube's action. Consequently, when the SANNC executive returned home, they were split into two camps between Msane's followers and Dube's. Dube, nevertheless, continued to be politically very active. Thus in the late 1910s, for example, he continually and boldly campaigned against Durban's racially restrictive laws and the 1913 Land Act.

This was a time when African politicians were not yet making "radical" demands to the white authorities, such as "one person, one vote." Instead, Dube advocated racial harmony, "the need to move forward cautiously; the need to assert the dignity of African peoples" (p 208).

On a personal level, Dube and his wife, Nokutela, were unable to have children because of Nokutela's alleged infertility, which eventually resulted in the two going their separate ways. He went to live in Johannesburg, while she went to face a "lonely existence on a farm in the Transvaal" and eventually died of a kidney ailment in January 1917. Dube remarried in August 1920 at age 49 while his new wife, Angelina Khumalo, was 21. They had six children.

Dube's presidency came to an end in late June 1917, partly because of his opponents in the SANNC executive who never forgave him for earlier having left them "in the lurch" in England when he returned home alone. He was succeeded by Sefako Makgatho. But Dube remained on the SANNC executive and continued to be politically active. He was also active in the ethnic Inkatha organisation founded in December 1921. He died on 11 February 1946 at the age of 75 and was buried at Inanda "so that he could keep watch over Ohlange for ever" (p 255).

*First President* certainly gives a very comprehensive account of John Dube. But one is left wondering how much richer the account could have been if John Dube's personal/family archive had not "vanished" just after his death in 1946 (p xv). Perhaps we would have had a different and/or fuller understanding of him if Hughes had had access to that archive. Throughout the book, Hughes provides the reader with a context to each stage of Dube's life and experiences, which gives a comprehensive understanding. But at times the reader is left to guess what happened. When, for example, Dube was summoned to appear before the Permanent Under-Secretary for Native Affairs, Samuel Samuelson, in March 1903, we are not told what actually transpired in the meeting (p 102). When Dube and Wilcox began their voyage from South Africa to the US in 1887 (pp 45-46), the latter simply vanishes from the narrative and reappears only when Dube has completed his studies at Oberlin College (p 51).

The book also quite often lacks an analytical reflection and a critical distance from its subject. Dube's abrupt departure from England in which he "abandoned" his SANNC executive colleagues is a case in point. Hughes could have given the reader a more critical insight into that issue. Dube's differences with, and apparent "vindictiveness" towards, A.G. Champion is another example. Furthermore, there ought to have been at least one map in the book showing where the events and developments discussed occurred.

Overall, however, the book is an excellent account of John Langalibalele Dube's life that adds enormously to our understanding of not just the origins of the African National Congress but also its wider regional and national historical context.

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