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Boekresensies

The quest for a history acceptable to all South Africans

Fransjohan Pretorius (ed.), *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika: Van Voortye tot Vandag*

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In the twilight years of his career, a melancholy Professor F.A. van Jaarsveld often mused on whether a general history of South Africa by an Afrikaner historian would ever be acceptable to all South Africans. In *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse Verlede: Geskiedenis Ideologie en die Historiese Skuldvraagstuk* (1984), his controversial study on South African historiography, he concluded that such a book with South Africa's complex, fragmented and heterogeneous society was impossible:

'n Algemene geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika is moontlik, maar sal nooit vir al sy inwoners aanvaarbaar wees nie. Dit is deur die praktyk van die geskiedskrywing bewys (p 203).

He furthermore pessimistically concluded that in a volatile South Africa the lifespan of any general history was that of a mirage – of very short duration:

Geen algemene geskiedenis was vir lank standhoudend of bruikbaar nie. Snelle veranderinge wat telkens nuwe verwysingsraamwerke gebring het, het dit as onvolmaak en eensydig bewys (p 203).

But does Van Jaarsveld's pessimistic forecast on general histories still apply today? *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse Verlede* was written in the midst of intensifying violence as the apartheid state gradually fell apart, while his personal sense of failure as an historian fuelled van Jaarsveld's gloominess. Van Jaarsveld was controversial and polemical in his writings, seeing it as part of his duty as a public intellectual to defend, reprimand and guide the Afrikaner. *Van van Riebeeck tot Verwoerd: 'n Inleiding tot die Geskiedenis van die Republiek van Suid-Afrika* (1969), his own attempt to write the history of South Africa, was motivated by his desire to defend and justify the Afrikaner against what he saw as the anti-Afrikaner bias of books like *The Oxford History of South Africa* (1969). And yet, apart from *Van van Riebeeck tot Verwoerd* being unacceptable to most South Africans outside Afrikanerdom, it did not even satisfy all Afrikaners; some in *verligte* circles felt uncomfortable with his nationalistic use of the past. After the Soweto uprising of 1976 van Jaarsveld underwent a change of mind on Afrikaners and their history. He became convinced that Afrikanerdom was in a crisis as it had become archaic and stultified. If Afrikaners were to survive the future in a changing world, they had to break with the past. Van Jaarsveld encouraged renewal and change in Afrikaner historiography as he feared

that an increasingly parochial and bigoted history would make it difficult for Afrikaners to cope with the changes taking place in South Africa. For his efforts he was tarred and feathered as a traitor by thugs of the neo-fascist Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging in 1979.

Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika: Van Voortye tot Vandag, edited by Fransjohan Pretorius, the highly respected international expert on the South African War, challenges van Jaarsveld's forecast. The book is a product of Pretorius's concern about the state of South African historiography, especially the type of history taught in our schools. He is of the opinion that just as it was wrong in the apartheid era to exclude blacks and their history from school textbooks, it is unacceptable that since 1994 Afrikaner republicanism and President Paul Kruger can be ignored in school histories. The historical pendulum in the new South Africa has swung too far the other way. Pretorius, with the support of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie van Wetenskap en Kuns, set out to produce a balanced and inclusive general history for all South Africans, especially for high school pupils and their teachers. The hope is that in the process, such a book will encourage reconciliation.

Pretorius acknowledges that no historical work can be completely objective, but is adamant that the aim of *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* is to be as fair and objective as possible – to reflect that there are two sides to a story. The result, after six years of gestation, is a book with highly readable, wide ranging and detailed chapters dealing with prehistoric times; Dutch and British colonialism; Afrikaner nationalism; apartheid; slavery; economics; the mineral revolution; trade unionism; black resistance; church history; the environment; the identity of white English-speakers in South Africa; and the new South Africa after 1994. Although a significant number of chapters focus on the history of the Afrikaner, written by Afrikaner historians (of the sixteen main contributors only three are not Afrikaners), the book is not an apology, or justification of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid. David Scher, for example, does not pull his punches in the chapter dealing with the founding of the apartheid state. Reading the section on Sandra Laing, who despite the fact that both her parents were white was re-classified as a coloured because of her dark complexion and curly hair, leaves one without any doubt about the brutality of the apartheid state.

Ultimately *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* is a good example of the historian attempting to fulfil the challenging task to understand and explain the complexity and ambiguity of South Africa's turbulent past. And yet, it is doubtful whether the book will be acceptable to all South Africans. Here the desire to lay blame for events in the past, a central theme of discussion in *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlede*, is a crucial factor. The legacy of apartheid – initiated and implemented by Afrikaners to maintain their supremacy – will in the eyes of some critics reduce *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* to a sophisticated case for the defence of the Afrikaner. Despite the fundamental political changes since 1984, and Pretorius's best efforts, Van Jaarsveld's forecast still stands. Pretorius will, however, confound van Jaarsveld's conclusion that all South African general histories have the

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lifespan of a mirage. For many years to come, *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* will be an important resource for the hard pressed history teacher preparing for his or her class at high school.

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