

Returned to his rightful place

Peter Limb (ed.), *A.B. Xuma: Autobiography and Selected Works*

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Historians have been rather mixed in their attitudes to Alfred Bitini Xuma (1893–1962). He is widely credited with having refurbished the ANC's shambolic structures in the 1940s and having revised its constitution so that among other much-needed reforms, women were at last admitted to full membership. He is also credited with broadening the appeal and reach of Congress: witness the founding of the Youth League, whose young turks finally removed him from the presidency in 1949; or his role in taking the ANC into a broader Congress alliance, symbolised in the so-called Doctors' Pact. Yet he is also portrayed as an autocratic figure lacking the common touch and as a politically conservative in a radicalising era. He has even

been taken to task for his apparent arrogance in refusing to marry locally,⁸ his first wife was Liberian and his second, African American.

Peter Limb's edited selection of Xuma's writings adds richly to the growing corpus of scholarship (including Limb's other prodigious contributions⁹) on the ANC's first half-century. Appearing as it does as a documentary source-book in the Van Riebeeck Society series, it also helps to redress the still-vast imbalance between published minority white/settler writings and those of the indigenous majority. The documents come largely from the Xuma papers, rescued from a dank Soweto garage after his death and surviving several other mishaps until their deposit in the Cullen Library at Wits in the 1970s. Yet until the 1990s, Xuma, along with virtually all the earlier generations of ANC leaders, occupied a deeply ambiguous position in relation to the liberation struggle being waged from exile: they may have been foundational, but they had also signally failed to dent white minority rule. Perhaps it is partly because the settlement ushering in majority rule in 1994 was so flawed and compromised that such figures have warranted our fresh attention since.

The selection is divided into three sections: autobiographical writings; correspondence; and essays, speeches and other prose. Xuma emerges from the material in the autobiographical section, the slimmest of the three, as someone revealing little of himself beyond outwardly observable phenomena, a sense reinforced by his somewhat prosaic, what-happened-next account. Perhaps he harboured suspicions against this mode of writing/revelation: Xuma's own preface to his biography of Charlotte Maxeke begins, "Biographers, in whose society and group, thank God, I do not belong, are usually great enthusiasts about their subjects" (p 245).¹⁰

The key document in this first section was penned in 1954; it is a Limb reconstruction, based partly on a typescript from which some pages have disappeared, and partly on a series of articles that appeared in *Drum*, for which the typescript was possibly prepared in the first place. Here we learn of his childhood and early schooling in Manzana in the Transkei in the 1890s; his years at Clarkebury Institution and his ambition to study abroad; his departure for the United States aged 20, with two friends, and their admission to Tuskegee; undergraduate study at the University of Minnesota and medical studies at Northwestern University. If anything emerges as a preoccupation, it is the desperate shortage of money, necessitating having to work in vacations and between courses at mostly menial jobs.

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8. N. Erlank, "Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912–1950", *Feminist Studies*, 29, 3, 2003, pp 653–671, especially p 658.
 9. See in particular P. Limb, *The ANC's Early Years: Nation, Class and Place in South Africa Before 1940* (UNISA Press, Pretoria, 2010); and P. Limb (ed.), *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2012).
 10. Gish begins his biography of Xuma with this same quote. See S. Gish, *Alfred B. Xuma: African American South African* (Macmillan, London, 2000), p 1. Limb does also point out that (citing Erlmann) Xuma's biography of Maxeke shows little of the restraint that he reserves for his treatment of himself (p xxii).

When he finally returns to South Africa in late 1927 after two more years of study in Europe, he has been away for 14 years. What this means in terms of his relation to South African society or his acculturation in America, for example, is hard to determine. He tells us only that he chooses to base himself in Johannesburg and to concentrate on building a medical practice, refusing invitations to become involved in political and labour organisation. Then in 1931, aged 38, "I decided to get married" to Amanda Priscilla Mason, whom he had met in the USA (this last item we are told in a footnote, not by Xuma). Tragically she dies in 1934 of complications resulting from the birth of their second child. A year later, he is finally pitched into politics, prompted by resistance to Hertzog's Native Bills. He is involved in the formation of the All-African Convention, and he offers valuable insights into its dealings with government and other organisations, such as the Institute of Race Relations.

No sooner has he cut his political teeth, however, than he is off abroad again, for three years of further study. On his return he marries Madie Hall, whom he had met on his recent trip (again, Limb tells us this, not Xuma) and who travels from the USA to join him after a long-distance courtship. He notes only her roles as wife and mother in his narrative; it has been left to a more recent scholar to highlight Madie Hall Xuma's importance as an organiser of the ANC Women's League and later the YWCA.¹¹ Xuma's account of his revival of Congress as its new president is surprisingly brief and deals with two themes: his countrywide tour in 1941, reorganising branches, expelling those he considered had acted improperly and identifying promising individuals to take over; and his attitude to the Natives Representative Council and the part he plays in its adjournment in 1946.

The autobiography serves to frame the two other sections, which date very largely from the 1930s onwards. The correspondence section, organised chronologically, contains letters both by and to him. There are a few from his pre-political years and his years of disengagement through the 1950s, but most date from his incumbency as ANC president in the 1940s. They reveal both the bustle and messiness of political activity, and evoke a sense of immediacy of the issues with which he had to deal: fighting off punitive actions of the state; urging women to support the Women's League; campaigning for drought relief; updating friends on his doings; chiding wayward provincial ANC officials; persuading men of influence to support his draft policies; and all the while juggling his diary to accommodate the many demands being made on his time. He is clearly a fluent, conscientious and effective letter-writer.

The last section is by far the fattest, consisting of over half the volume. Limb has arranged the various sources here thematically, an approach which allows Xuma to emerge as a highly complex thinker and activist, as well as a sharp analyst. His health-related writings and

11. I. Berger, "An African American 'Mother of the Nation': Madie Hall Xuma in South Africa, 1940–1963", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27, 3, 2001, pp 547–566.

testimonies are well represented and reveal an absolute insistence on the rights of Africans to fully-qualified health care, in the face of state attempts to provide cheap alternatives. His contributions on indigenous beliefs show sympathetic understanding rather than strident judgement. He strips bare the hypocrisy and venality of various state policies towards Africans, including beer halls, education and taxation. In several of the documents, he not only demolishes a set of arguments but also advances what he (or Congress) sees as solutions: raising wages, or reducing bus fares, or eliminating separate taxation, as the case may be. Throughout, he is consistent in his demands for total racial equality in all walks of life. Also included is his biography of Charlotte Maxeke (1930) which has rightly become a classic, not only because of the significance of its subject but because Xuma had the prescience to produce it: it is virtually alone for the time as a biography of a black woman leader.

Finally there are documents that address explicitly political issues. The 1930s contributions are concerned with race relations, while those from the 1940s give a flavour of the deputations, addresses and commission evidence undertaken on behalf of the ANC. Rounding off the volume are a number of his writings and speeches against apartheid policy; by this time he had become alienated from Congress, however, as a result of his opposition to its more militant stance.

Limb's introductory notes are immensely valuable in situating this volume in historiographical context – the nature of documentary narrative, the challenges of biography, and current understandings of race and class in studies of African nationalism. His many annotations provide useful background and help to contextualise individual documents and points within documents. He is also mindful of the fact that a documentary collection depends as much on choice as to what to include and exclude as any work of history (or biography). He provides some justification for his choices, such as highlighting previously neglected aspects of Xuma's work or including items not otherwise available in South Africa. This is a theme that probably could have been further developed. For example, we are told on several occasions that material included is "representative" – which may well be the case, but it is hard to judge without further explanation. Again, Limb explains that in deference to privacy, personal documents have been excluded. While he offers no further rationale, this decision should prompt discussion. The assumption that "the private" is either a central explanatory dimension or an essential source of detail is now so deeply held among life-writers of various kinds that it is no longer open to question. Limb's position at least flags this matter up for consideration.

Above all, Limb makes a convincing case that Xuma is a figure significant enough to merit greater attention than he has received in the past for his very many contributions to public life, both inside and beyond the ANC. This volume will go a long way to facilitate that attention.

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