

André Odendaal, *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa*

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To typify these early generations as a hopelessly compromised, dependent bourgeoisie, or a class of black Englishmen who were somehow not real Africans, is to miss completely the nuance and drama of their lives and the major contribution they made in shaping modern South Africa (p 479).

André Odendaal writes this in his major new study of the founders of the African National Congress (ANC).

In 2012, the Congress (ANC) celebrated its centenary. The roots of the ANC, however, predate the year 1912. The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 was merely the catalyst that united representatives of various African political bodies which had already for a long time shared common goals. The story of the “struggle” in the run-up to the formation of the ANC is what forms the basis of this work. It has for long been one of the more neglected aspects of the history of black resistance in South Africa, and in more ways than one, *The Founders* is a work that fills a pressing need.

As a work detailing the run-up to the formation of the ANC, which is ostensibly a national organisation in South Africa, a large part of this history is told from the perspective of the Cape Colony. Apart from it being the only colony before the formation of the Union to grant voting rights to black citizens, it was also here that great numbers of the educated elite that were to shape the leadership of the ANC during the early twentieth century received their education. Odendaal later concludes that because the Eastern Cape no longer retains its almost monopoly-like share in the education of ANC leaders in the more recent past, the province’s influence has dwindled in post-apartheid South Africa.

The Founders chronicles in great detail the struggle of Africans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Amongst the discriminatory legislation of the nineteenth-century Cape Colony, the Glen Grey Act, passed by Cecil John Rhodes’ government in 1894 stands out as an important forerunner of what would later prevail in South Africa. The act was passed with the aim of forcing Africans off the land to fill the need for cheap

labour – laying the foundation for a system that was to become entrenched in twentieth-century South Africa.

Despite the strong focus on the Cape Colony, the “national” foundations of what would later become the ANC is also carefully explored. There is also a whole chapter dedicated to the politics of the British protectorates. The Free State Republic, often referred to as a “model” republic, is sketched in grim terms as a place of near slavery and a fertile ground for hostility – perhaps best captured in a quote from *The Friend* newspaper in 1884: “The native is a child, a minor to our law, so that they have to rest satisfied with the laws made for him by the white man” (p 167).

Apart from the role of education which is greatly stressed in this study, it is also the historical role of Christianity that deserves special attention. Apart from numerous leaders within the various churches also playing a political role, finding inspiration and even quoting passages from scripture, for example Psalms 68:31 (p 193), the church also served as a stepping stone for greater collective activism. It is a well known fact that through the process of colonisation, African societies became fragmented. On this note, Odendaal is able to conclude that “through the churches, long-articulated African ideas and notions of African unity were given organisational content and became more visible in the politics of the educated activists” (p 199).

In researching this volume, the author was able to gain rich insights from important newspapers of the time. This is fitting, because not only do these provide an important window into the events of the past, but the newspapers in themselves also played a mammoth role in the struggle for democracy. In the run-up to the formation of the Union of South Africa, politically hostile groups often clashed along organisational lines and newspapers served as their mouthpieces. The Union of Native Vigilance Associations and the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) were both very influential yet they found themselves often at odds. Again, highlighting the role that churches played in politics, the SANNC supported the separatist church movements while the Union did not.

Another exceptional feature of this work is the space it allocates to the role of sport in the shaping of the early ANC – as one would expect from an author who has also done sterling work on the history of cricket in the Cape Colony. This is a welcome feature, for although the role of sport in the unification of people is well known and recognised, apart from the 1995 Rugby World Cup, sport is sometimes neglected as part of serious studies on the history of South Africa, especially as an integrated part of a larger history. Most fascinating is the central role that the city of Kimberley played in South African sport during this period, as detailed by Odendaal.

It is fitting that there is also a chapter dedicated to the role of women. Odendaal notes in this chapter that South African historiography often ignores the discrimination endured by many generations of women. The fact that women have been overlooked in this way provides great opportunities to future historians. We are, however, still too slow in waking up to the great

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contributions women made, not only in the founding and development of organisations like the ANC, but in South African history in general.

The Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) was in many ways the final nail in the coffin for African franchise. The Cape parliamentary process, in which Western- style educated Africans for so long played their part, was never to be extended to the rest of South Africa – as educated Africans had for long hoped it would. Moreover, during the course of the twentieth century, black South Africans in the Cape would also eventually lose their franchise.

In many ways, *The Founders* is a work which causes discomfort to the modern South African because it demonstrates how future developments had their roots in the period of the turn of the twentieth century. Commenting on the looming formation of the Union of South Africa, A.K. Soga observed in 1907 that “... this will be a glorious country for corporation pythons and political puff-adders, forced labour and commercial despotism, but no fit place for freemen to live in” (p 335). It cannot be disputed that South Africa is a country that was born out of ruthless capitalist ambitions. More than a century later, we are still wrestling with this legacy. Yet it is from these disturbing foundations that new identities and bonds were forged. It is fitting that we have a magisterial work such as this one, as we reflect not only on the dividing role of the 1913 Land Act, but also the one hundred years of a movement committed to greater non-racial unity.

Barend van der Merwe
Free State Provincial Archives
Bloemfontein