

## Book feature

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### Boekbeskouing

Henning van Aswegen en Pieter Kapp, *Verandering & Vernuwing in die Geskiedenisbeskouing – 'n Gesprek oor die Ervaringe van Twee Tydgenote*

Kleio Publishers, Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Vanderbijlpark, 2006

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### A Fascinating Memorial to the Rand Afrikaans University Watershed in Afrikaans Historiography

*Jeff Peires*

King William's Town

This book takes the unusual but highly effective form of a correspondence between two prominent Afrikaner historians of a passing generation, Henning Van Aswegen and Pieter Kapp. The correspondence was not spontaneous, but artfully engineered by Grietjie Verhoef, a product of their glory days at the former Rand Afrikaans University (RAU – now the University of Johannesburg) between 1974 and 1985. It demonstrates not only how far Afrikaans-language history has come since the time of P.J. van der Merwe at Stellenbosch (1938-1977), but the problems it now faces in the new South Africa. The subtle distinctions and tensions within the *verligte* camp are nicely highlighted by the contrast between Van Aswegen, a sincere liberal whose academic career was blocked by the Bloemfontein establishment before he escaped to RAU, and Kapp, a political insider, whose deft ability to interface with the tricky outside world eventually secured him the crown of the Chair of History at Stellenbosch itself.

Such at least is my reading of a work whose silences are much more eloquent than its text. Even the text has its own rewards though.

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1 For R100 (postage included) the book can be ordered from Grietjie Verhoef at the Department of Historical Studies, University of Johannesburg, P.O. Box 524, Aucklandpark, 2006.

Van Aswegen minces no words in his descriptions of Van der Merwe's suffocating regime, for example "the notorious third-year seminars of Prof PJ Van der Merwe were more designed to show off his knowledge and to break the spirit of the students than to engage in meaningful academic discussion," and "Professor PJ Van der Merwe was not a theoretician. He wrestled with questions like whether the Voortrekkers turned left or right at a particular hill." Kapp is more circumspect, but he too concurs in the picture of a Stellenbosch where vested interests and hierarchies held sway, students had no access to lecturers, nobody read – not even textbooks – and aspirant post-graduates were called in by their supervisors and handed research topics of which they had neither knowledge nor interest.

Van Aswegen and Kapp eventually escaped to RAU, then under the dynamic rectorship of Gerrit Viljoen, later one of F.W. de Klerk's leading cabinet ministers. The RAU management was also Broederbond, but they were a Broederbond dedicated to establishing Afrikaner hegemony over a great city of overwhelming English and capitalist orientation. The concerns of traditional Afrikaner historiography had no purchase here. For the Afrikaner to survive, in historical as in all other fields of human endeavour, he had to conform to global norms and values and devise an outlook and a vision which the entire world could accept. The RAU team adopted an inter-departmental approach and a semester system. Diversity of opinion was encouraged and vigorous debates ensued. They discovered social history and embarked on ambitious projects like *Die Afrikaner in die Goudstad*. They travelled overseas and recruited well-disposed, but reputable *Annalists* in hopes of outflanking the arrogant Anglos. Van Aswegen pioneered courses on African history, while Kapp concentrated on International Relations. He also became Dean of Students, member of the Senate Executive, and project manager of the Study of Revolution and Revolutionary Activities. In 1985, he accepted a call to Stellenbosch.

Van Aswegen remained behind at RAU and eventually inherited the Chair of History. He became more and more comfortable with the English liberals, and did not mourn the decline of the radicals although, like a true liberal, he agrees that he has learnt a lot from them. After 1994, he struggled to accommodate the needs of the increasing number of black students, but did his best. "It was clear that the historical gap between the different groups was great and likely to remain so. Our lecturers worked hard to give the people a thorough training, and I think they succeeded quite well. They also succeeded in building good relationships with all the students, and continuing with their work in a

peaceful atmosphere.” Van Aswegen wonders whether he is still driving an ox-wagon, even if he has equipped it with rubber wheels and other updated accessories. “What is however important,” he modestly concludes, “is that the subject developed in exciting (and sometimes seriously contested) ways and I was part of it. That is my small reward as a historian.”

Kapp, on the other hand, was caught thoroughly short after 1994. He writes of “Black Friday” in 1997 when the Rector of Stellenbosch told him that he was giving an inappropriate focus to the History Department. Diplomatic in print, Kapp blamed “rationalisation” and in 1999 he was rationalised right out of his job. Intellectually however he finds himself on surer ground. Finally, after years of running around with the Cold War and the *Annalistses*, Pieter Kapp has found an aspect of the South African past which he, as Afrikaner, feels comfortable in confronting, namely the question of Afrikaner guilt for apartheid. History is written by winners, and he is not surprised or disappointed that black historians impute blame to the Afrikaners. This is an inevitable part of an immature historiography and, in expressing their own national aspirations, black historians are in a way restoring to the Afrikaners the right to an unashamed national history of their own. In a striking passage Kapp writes:

The past is in reality an ordered chaos. The pattern which best expresses it is that of a disorderly collection of elliptical trajectories which intersect with each other over and over again. Each one has an anchor point, a central nucleus which guarantees its elliptical identity. But its relationship with the other trajectories is one of continuous readjustment. The pattern can be described but never finalised. It is a dynamic pattern which cannot be pinned down into a single image or narrative. Each of these ellipses must be known and understood in its own right before its unplanned interactions with the other ellipses are described and understood. Everybody in South Africa has a right to their own history. The question is how it finds its way among the other elliptical trajectories (pp 113-114).

It is tempting to laugh, but sobering to reflect that Kapp’s interpretation of history would seem to hold out more hope to Afrikaner intellectuals than Van Aswegen’s liberal experience. Time will tell, but in the meanwhile we should thank Grietjie Verhoef for having facilitated this fascinating memorial to the RAU watershed in Afrikaans historiography.