

Collegiality and Silence

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This brief work is billed as a “conversation” between two historians responding to an invitation by the current head of History at the University of Johannesburg, Grietjie Verhoef. They were both born in 1939, were schooled at Stellenbosch in the 1950s (although they hardly knew each other then) and were later colleagues at RAU in its early years. In her foreword, Verhoef maintains that they are distinguished historians and thinkers, and she expresses the hope that their conversation about the nature of history will inspire a similar sort of ongoing quest in the country’s intellectual circles.

The book takes an epistolary form with the two historians writing to one another about the influence of their childhood environment on their later perceptions, and about their mixed memories of Stellenbosch and the other institutions where they spent time. At first it works well, with each apparently jogging the other's memory and inviting franker confessions, especially about Stellenbosch, which once seemed to Kapp only to offer a "safe harbour" and intellectual home, but which was certainly to have its disappointments. Under Van Aswegen's prompting, the figure of Professor P.J. van der Merwe, fixated on the history of the trekboer on the Cape's northern frontier, appears as ever more foreboding in the letters of both men. It seems that Van der Merwe was unwilling to venture far out of the nineteenth century, and that he relentlessly harnessed his students to the Von Rankean approach, but the notion that students were somewhat like wild animals who had to be broken in was hardly unique to Stellenbosch University.

It is certainly enlightening, as Verhoef claims in the foreword, to be offered some insight about the relationship between the lives of communities in which these men were raised and their intellectual proclivities. If one is to grasp the Afrikaner approach to history (and this work demonstrates that there are important nuances within that catchall descriptor of "Afrikaner") then one needs first person accounts of what it felt like to be part of an Afrikaner community in the first part of the twentieth century. Van Aswegen recalls the rough Kimberley of his childhood, teeming with workers of every shade, professionals, businessmen and traders, while the overwhelming proportion of wealth remained in the hands of the English "and Jewish sector". He feels that he was unable to avoid the common socialisation, which entrenched feelings of white superiority, but that he was also used to being in proximity to people who were not white and whom he was expected to treat with a degree of respect.

Van Aswegen's mixed childhood experiences and the fresh air he seems to have been able to imbibe, despite some of its own constraints, at the University of the Orange Free State, gives his writing a self-reflective, even auto-critical air. He recalls the contact he enjoyed with the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the Institute for Commonwealth Studies and with individuals such as T.O. Ranger, Leonard Thompson, Shula Marks, Rick Elphick and even some of the Wits historians. He revels in some of the early memories of the South African Historical Society, while acknowledging the nasty edge to the highly charged debates that took place at its conferences, and the growing tensions that divided English and Afrikaans-speaking historians, although there

continued to be some cooperation through the *South African Historical Journal*. Van Aswegen's letters are sometimes slightly poignant with a sense of missed opportunity. He owns to continuing to prescribe C.F.J. Muller's *500 Years* on the flimsy pretext of language even after he was persuaded by the analysis offered in *The Oxford History of South Africa*, which appeared in the early 1970s. While he was able to shift to incorporating black history in his own research work, he explains that he found a definitive break with his old school hard to make. It was the loneliness he feared.

Kapp describes his childhood in Port Elizabeth as being "encircled by the power and the glory" of the English-speakers. He was, he maintains, indebted to the predominantly English culture around him in many ways, including the initial inspiration for his historical interests, but it also seems to have left him with a permanent defensiveness about Afrikaner "culture". He reiterates his gratitude to Frank von Ankersmit, Jörn Rüsen and H.B. Thom for intellectual enlightenment. It is however striking that, even when RAU was just across the road, Kapp brusquely asserts that there was "no contact" with the Wits historians. He seems nervous still about going too far "overboard" (as he thinks the latter did); is always on the lookout for the elusive middle point, or the "balanced" history. He calls for an unmediated dialogue with the past and for a view that is not impeded by political utopias or the mirages of the Rainbow Nation.

Kapp professes a faith in "balanced" history emerging out of a process of evolution that begins with a confrontation between two extreme versions, which is never exemplified in this correspondence. Despite his experiences as a school teacher under apartheid and a member of a TOD committee, and then in the first part of the 1990s in founding a history teachers' association and the journal *Gister en Vandag*, followed by involvement in saving school history from the integrationist approach of the new curriculum, Kapp goes on maintaining that there is some germ of history that is never sullied by politics or ideology. The long shadow of "PJ" evidently still falls over the pages of Kapp's letters. Is it really possible that he thinks the history prescribed in the apartheid years was innocent of political motive?

Kapp is impatient with what he perceives as the pressure prompted by bodies like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on those associated with the *ancien regime* to admit their guilt. He characterises guilt as a kind of red herring thrown in the path to "real" history. In a way that is reminiscent of Hermann Giliomee in his *The Afrikaner: A*

Biography of a People, Kapp offers the services of the Afrikaner as one who has experienced victory and defeat, oppression and leadership, to head up the mission to bring history back to itself. Comparative history, he argues, could, by looking back to eighteenth and nineteenth century precedents, tell us about contemporary farm murders, or the conditions under which law and order breaks down.

The wonderful maverick and volatile figure of Floors van Jaarsveld dances in and out of the letters of both of these historians, although Van Aswegen arrived at RAU just too late to encounter him there. Van Jaarsveld, Kapp recalls, gave them the freedom to do as they liked, and the full “intellectual life” that Kapp portrays retreating under the impact of rationalisation and managerialist ideology is briefly recalled with fitting nostalgia. However, tellingly, it is Van Aswegen who recognises the potentially revolutionary power of Van Jaarsveld, ironically best remembered by the general public for his dry history textbooks and for being tarred and feathered by the AWB for questioning the divinity of the Blood River episode. Van Aswegen maintains that if Van Jaarsveld had only been less mercurial and individualistic, he might have broken the “intellectual drought” that had settled over Afrikaner historians. It is a contention that Albert Grundlingh, who (with his brother Louis) is recalled by Van Aswegen as part of a strong group of his students, might like to address on the basis of his earlier work on Van Jaarsveld, which was perhaps the first glimpse many of us outside of the Afrikaner fold had of Van Jaarsveld the subversive.² Since Van Jaarsveld shirked his responsibility to the next generation of historians, Van Aswegen argues that Afrikaner historians continued to follow the information conveyed by archival documents in a rather superficial way, leaving their deeper interrogation to others.

While Van Aswegen however is able to confess his respect for the Wits men and to express regret openly for the opportunities not taken to turn the study of history in Afrikaans medium institutions around, Kapp seems to sink further and further into a maudlin defence of Afrikaner culture and empiricist history. Has he never been touched even by the famous lectures of E.H. Carr on the complicated relationship between the historian and “his” facts?

2. A. Grundlingh, “Politics, Principles and Problems of a Profession: Afrikaner Historians and their Discipline, c. 1920 – c. 1965”, *Perspectives in Education* 12, 1, 1990/1, pp 1-19.

Strangest of all is that the potentially sharp differences between the two correspondents are ignored. The first letters are filtered through the memories of a collegiality that is rare in universities today, and has probably become idealised over time, but then there is, as has been suggested above, an obvious divergence of opinion. Kapp's last letter is positively tedious because it preaches (now to a universal reader rather than to Henning van Aswegen) on the putative nature of history and the wrong headedness of the TRC. What happens at this point? There is no riposte from his correspondent, and no adjudication from a third party editor. After Kapp's last paragraph lecturing us on the responsibilities of the Afrikaner there is only silence.