

The End of an Era?

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The significance of this book far outweighs its deceptively modest appearance. It is slim, published by an unknown publisher and probably in a very limited edition, and is not rigorously edited and produced. It contains the memoirs of two Afrikaner historians who, in the broader scope of South African historiography, may not be as well known as their English-speaking contemporaries, yet this collection of the memories, reflections, views, preferences and aversions of Henning van Aswegen and Pieter Kapp (in the form of correspondence) touches on several important historiographical issues. It relates to the emerging field of historical practice – autobiographical writing by historians. It sheds light on developments in Afrikaans historical writing during a period of political turbulence and profound historiographical innovation. Lastly, in a time of widespread pessimism about, even disillusionment with, the role of history in South African society and the state of academic History, this book is a refreshing reminder of the professional dedication of an earlier generation of Afrikaans historians.

Scholarly objectivity has been a recurring theme in South African, and especially Afrikaans, historical writing. The authorial voice and the use of first-person style have, therefore, been studiously eschewed. Nor was self-reflexivity in historical writing encouraged although, sometimes, political sentiments were allowed to filter through. This situation – and the belief that historians live mostly dull, inconspicuous lives – may account for the dearth of personal memoirs written by South African historians, but as these exchanges between Van Aswegen and Kapp show, the lives of historians are probably more interesting, if not exciting, than

they realise. Indeed, there has been a long tradition in Afrikaner historiography of making history as well as writing it, a tangled existence of being both craftsmen (almost never “craftswomen”) and actors. Several Afrikaner historians have even been more influential and significant as historical actors rather than historians.

When Van Aswegen and Kapp entered the historical profession, Afrikaans historical writing had been dominated by the “big three” – the revered but cantankerous P.J. van der Merwe (1912-1979); the dignified and reticent C.F.J. Muller (1916-1992); and the energetic but combative F.A. van Jaarsveld (1922-1995). All three of these individuals feature in the exchanges in this volume, eliciting diverse comments from the younger historians. Surprisingly, they are most critical of the acclaimed Van der Merwe, and particularly of the stultifying effect he had had on the History Department at the University of Stellenbosch. Kapp acknowledges Van Jaarsveld’s influence on his own growing interest in “theoretical history” and the teaching of history, while Van Aswegen is more critical of the influence of the older generation of Afrikaner historians, and especially of Van Jaarsveld’s legacy. He admitted that, initially, he was overwhelmed by Van Jaarsveld’s intellect and the scope of the latter’s knowledge, but feels that Van Jaarsveld tended to corner one, forcing you to listen to a long lecture and ignoring your point of view (p 35). Later he comments: “The one big tragedy with a historian of his stature is that he transferred very little of the theoretical work which he raised and for which he pleaded so profusely in his writings and addresses to any of his post-graduate students” (p 61). Kapp points out, however, that Van Jaarsveld did much to promote the history of urbanisation, and helped to forge links between Afrikaner historians and European, as well as American historians (p 43).

The 1970s and 1980s were politically and historiographically tumultuous times. The publication of the two volumes of *The Oxford History of South Africa*, followed by a series of highly original studies on the social and economic history of southern Africa, seems to have eclipsed Afrikaner historical writing, but, as this correspondence indicates, Afrikaner historians not only continued to practise their craft, they also established links with foreign historians. It has been suggested that the academic boycott and increasing academic isolation contributed to the impoverishment of Afrikaner historical writing. Neither Van Aswegen nor Kapp however was academically isolated at all. Van Aswegen, for example, met T.O. Ranger and R. Elphick in the United States, and R. Oliver in London. Kapp studied at the University of Reading and has more recently established links with prominent

historians such as G.J. Schutte, F. Ankersmit and J. Rüsen. Van Aswegen, especially, was familiar with trends in South African and African historiography, which influenced his writing on nineteenth-century southern Africa and on Africa, while Kapp stayed abreast of developments in the writing of theoretical history and world history.

From these exchanges, Van Aswegen emerges as the more “academic” historian, while Kapp appears to be more active in “making” Afrikaner history. Van Aswegen seems never to have given public speeches or to have participated in public debates. Kapp, on the other hand, is active as a public commentator and a polished speaker in both Afrikaans and English. In addition to his academic work on John Philip, he has regularly written pieces for Afrikaans magazines such as, for example, *Die Taalgenoot*, *Handhaaf*, and *Insig*. In this respect, his professional career resembles that of Van Jaarsveld, while Van Aswegen was probably more comfortable with the reserved, academic tradition represented by, particularly, Muller.

It is hard to believe that, two decades ago, Van Aswegen and Kapp, both born in 1939, were the “younger” members of the Afrikaner historical profession. The dominant figure transforming Afrikaner historical writing was (and still is) Hermann Giliomee (born in 1938), with Ben Liebenberg (born 1934) debunking Afrikaner historical myths in the background, and as this slim volume indicates, there has been much more to Afrikaner historical writing than only the rise of narrow Afrikaner nationalism. It is to be hoped that the exchanges between Van Aswegen and Kapp will encourage discussion of the place of Afrikaner historical writing in South Africa.