

The Bloemfontein Connection

At van Wyk

Pretoria

This book is presented as correspondence between the authors about their experiences of change and renewal in the conception of history since their student days at Stellenbosch. It is a novel idea, but except for the opening and closing lines, there is little to suggest that these are private letters – they are personal essays on the topic, all eight of them.

When the authors enrolled at the University of Stellenbosch (US) in the late 1950s, the Department of History was under P.J. van der Merwe, whom they remember as an impervious tutor who suffered no questions from students. There was no exchange of opinions, with the lecturers isolated in their offices, cold and impersonal in their Afrikaner-centered beliefs and attitudes. They soon had their complacency broken by a new young colleague, St. Elmo Pretorius, from the University of the Orange Free State (UOFS). A seeker of the truth, he, according to Van Aswegen, was not satisfied with one view of things and a single interpretation, and challenged them to hunt wider for questions and answers. This was perhaps one of the first small steps towards broadening the Afrikaner's historical horizon.

Both authors agree that Stellenbosch, the “Mecca of Afrikanerdom” in those days, was not the ideal breeding-ground for historians, and Van Aswegen left his temporary post at the US and accepted a lectureship at the UOFS in 1964. Kapp, who first became a school teacher, joined the University of Port Elizabeth as lecturer in 1967. Before Van Aswegen took up his new job, he was warned by a senior colleague that “desert years” were awaiting him in Bloemfontein, but looking back, he says his ten years in Bloemfontein were the most constructive and formative of his career. What was considered by his former US colleagues as a backward university, turned out to house a well-oiled Department of History. The open-minded and warm-hearted J.J. (Obie) Oberholster was leading men of the caliber of

M.C.E. van Schoor, Johan Moll and Arrie van Rensburg, together a strong team. C.J. Uys (Charlie) had resigned as Head of the Department the year before Van Aswegen turned up, but he pictured Uys correctly as a sharp-witted historian whose *In the era of Shepstone* was a standard work of its time. He refers to Uys' published articles in which he often criticised Afrikaner heroes and puts him at the head of a small group of Afrikaner historians who in time would question the nationalistic trends in their history.

I can vouch for his views of Obie and Charlie who were both my tutors in the early fifties. When later I returned to the academic world after 15 years in journalism, Obie was my obvious choice as guide through MA and D.Phil and became a family friend who, on visits to Pretoria, would naughtily feed tit-bits to our toy Pomeranian under the table and crack jokes with the boys then in high school and at varsity. Charlie Uys fell in the folds of my history teacher at Koffiefontein Hoër, Doctor D.C. McGill (Dok), and both kept you on pins and needles with the facts they confronted you with, their criticisms of the (South African) past and the questions they fired at you. In the Honours class Charlie had an annual essay competition on Louis Botha (not a folk hero at the time) and without substantial primary research you had no hope of qualifying. They were by no means Broederbond material.

This digression was necessary to highlight the fact that at "backward" little places far removed from Stellenbosch, history was served in the best tradition of the trade, with the masters of those times well-remembered and honoured. One feels sorry for the authors of this book for their historically lean student days.

The various university departments of History laboured along on their own with little contact with one another, or between Afrikaans and English historians. A need arose to bring them under one roof, for the South African Historical Association with its mouthpiece *Historia* had no impact on the practice of history academically. This led to the birth of the South African Historical Society in 1965 and its *Journal* shortly afterwards. Van Aswegen sees this as a first step in breaking down the artificial barriers between Afrikaans and English historians, but also as highlighting their differing approaches. With hindsight, it also marks the beginning of a debate between the so-called Liberals and Neo-Marxists and a total rejection of the Afrikaner-centrist view of history for him. In his opinion the publication in 1971 of *The Oxford History of South Africa* by Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, well-received in English circles but heavily criticised by Afrikaners, was a watershed event.

The Oxford History never had an impact on Afrikaans universities and some of the reasons, according to Van Aswegen, were the publication since 1967/1968 of books by G.D. Scholtz and C.F.J. Muller. By 1971, Scholtz had published the second of his eight-volume *Die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner* ("The political thought of the Afrikaner"), whereas the fourth print of Muller's *500 Years South African History* was under preparation. These books helped to strengthen the Afrikaners' beliefs in their interpretation of history. They were riding the crest of the wave, with their books being published and widely read at universities, and their negative reactions to *The Oxford History* revealed the strength of their beliefs. Today all three publications are dated.

Whilst Kapp and Moll pioneered the teaching of contemporary European history at Afrikaans universities, Van Aswegen introduced an honours course in African history at the UOFS and, says he, it gradually dawned on them that Africans had their own history as masters of their own destiny. This was a mere 35 years odd ago, for Afrikaner historians were slow in breaking with their Euro-centric conception of history.

In the early 1970s, Kapp and Van Aswegen joined forces at the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), where F.A. (Floors) van Jaarsveld was in charge, supported by Ernst Stals and Johan de Villiers. Both remember Van Jaarsveld for his intellect, erudition and knowledge, but also for his "phases" of burning Afrikaner idealism followed by dark pessimism and criticism. The resulting lack of stability was, according to Kapp, a blessing in disguise as it forced him and fellow juniors to find their own trails.

After the publication in the 1970s of Elphick and Giliomee's *The Shaping of South African Society 1652-1820* and Elphick's book on the Khoi, as well as his visit to RAU, a workshop was organised to find out more about the race/class debate between liberal and neo-Marxist or radical historians. This debate was dominating the scene from the 1970s to the 1990s and, says Van Aswegen, it was only at its height that several local historians first realised the real character and scope of South African history. The seniors of the time, Van Jaarsveld, Muller and Van Schoor, failed to build an intellectual base and their successors struggled on amidst the poverty of Afrikaans historiography until a younger generation gave birth to new ideas.

Van Aswegen regards RAU under the leadership of Gerrit Viljoen as one of the most dynamic universities of the 1970s. New historical vistas were explored with the introduction of a structured MA in

contemporary European history, together with the inauguration of a project for the study of the history of Nedbank and the establishment of an institute for American studies. With the resulting changes in curricula and a stronger focus on more relevant South African themes like race relations, urbanisation and labour matters, “we were rapidly leaving the ‘old roads’ in creating a new identity for the department” [my translation]. He has a high regard for the pioneers of a new, more critical view of South African history, men like Ernst Stals, Chris van Onselen, Hermann Giliomee, Rodney Davenport and Burrige Spies. They and others contributed towards enriching and extending the quality and the scope of South African history. Looking at his own historical past, he gets the feeling that he has been moving by ox-wagon into cyber time, and that somewhere along the road his wagon had been fitted with rubber wheels and other modern appliances. He knows that his wagon has had defects causing it to limp into cyber time, but what counts for him is that he was part of an exciting historical journey. “That is my small reward as historian”.

Reaching the end of Van Aswegen’s account, one shares his feeling of well-being, almost of complacency – he has completed his journey in good shape and can reminisce with ease. The opposite, sadly, is the case with Kapp, who in the end was removed from his post and feels done in. Much of this evolved around three questions: What is research? Should written history be regarded as literature? Is it academically wise to have one’s publications subsidised by the state? Each one reading this knows that there is no single answer to any of these questions.

Kapp is an erudite historian for whom a vision and knowledge of macro history is more important than micro history. The History curriculum, he believes, should be macro-focused, with research efforts on micro level adding up to understanding the broader picture.

For Kapp teaching comes first, with research the indispensable fountain-head for replenishing the historian’s knowledge and expertise. Is research however confined to registered projects and end-reports (theses), or does it also cover the pursuit of erudition to enrich and expand one’s field of study? He favours the latter, for he sees the good tutor as a true student of his discipline with as motto: “I live to work, I do not merely work to live”. He firmly believes that it is the task of the historian also to interpret the past in order to get to a proper understanding of what has happened. He rejects what he refers to as the “cynical belief” that interpretation is nothing but personal judgment. He

further stresses that the historian should make full and proper use of language in his verbal painting of the past, for without literary merit written history cannot excel. He is sceptical about the value of state subsidies for articles published in approved journals, for it can result in manipulation of material for maximum use in various journals and can turn universities into verbal production lines.

At Stellenbosch the powers that be were not in agreement with all his views and on what he called “Black Friday”, 16 May 1997, he was finally told by the Dean of the Faculty that his macro focus and therefore that of the Department was wrong and unacceptable. That was the beginning of the end for him and in 1999 he was “rationalised” out of the Department. He says he has fully documented the drama of his replacement together with the whole process of rationalisation and that this document will be made available after his death. Since his “rejection” (*verwerping*) or “exclusion” (*uitskakeling*), as he refers to what has happened to him, he has continued to devote himself to history. One of his studies is a book entitled *Die Skuldvraagstuk in die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis* (“The question of guilt in South African history”). This is highly relevant for current South Africa and the world at large, in the present search for guilty parties and the exacting of fines from the past. One should not regard this as unnatural, says Kapp, for each society, group, culture or civilisation should first explore and tell its own story. Thereafter a return is possible to the question: Who are we? How did we get to where we are now? This will bring perspective and answers, says Kapp, for history is not the might of the conqueror or the ruler – history lies in the hearts of a people.

The book lacks proper linguistic editing.

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