

A significant new work on the intellectual history of South Africa

Corinne Sandwith, *World of Letters: Reading Communities and Cultural Debates in Early Apartheid South Africa*

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Internationally, much scholarship has been undertaken in recent years on the producers and material makers of periodicals and little magazines. In South Africa, only a start has been made in this field. That is why this new book by Corinne Sandwith, emerging to fill the gap in our knowledge and understanding, should be hailed as a significant new work of intellectual history in South Africa. As so little has been studied in detail, Sandwith repeatedly characterises her work as a project of historical “recovery” or “retrieval”. In examining the literary and cultural debates in a range of South African publications including the *SA Opinion*, *Trek*, and *The Voice* she aims to reveal “the existence of a vigorous, non academic and, above all, public discussion of literature and culture in pre and early apartheid South Africa” (p 3). Importantly, her aim is not limited to cultural debates, but to the constant articulation of political debates through the medium of the cultural, or “the way that cultural discourse doubles as a form of political

expression" (p 175). This is an investigation of literary magazines as a form of social history, which draws in the role of writers and readers, as well as editors and printers, and the wider social context. Sandwith sees this context as one of both vigorous debate and a shrinking public sphere; an era when political discussion was becoming more constrained and circumscribed. And, as she points out, while the story of censorship during the apartheid era is familiar, the "threat to free public discussion in South Africa in the 1940s came not only from the state, but also from big business" (p 81).

Thus, while describing the debates between contending cultural positions, Sandwith deftly traces the developing and often contradictory political positions that also emerged in these magazines. In the pages of *SA Opinion* and *Trek*, contesting notions of the social function of literature were fiercely debated. In contrast, *The Voice* was a black run publication espousing a much more combative brand of African nationalism (p 222). Throughout, the study describes the roles played by and the opinions emanating from key intellectuals, like Herman Charles Bosman, Jacques Malan and Es'kia Mphahlele whose "postcolonial appropriations of revered English texts" and political arguments articulated in the language and idiom of Western classics enlivened the pages of *The Voice* (pp 228 233).

The close reading of these magazines is supplemented by more detailed case studies of the writings of individuals, and in particular Jack Cope and Dora Taylor. Cope's role as a radical and an "independent revolutionary" is emphasised, rather than his more familiar role as editor of *Contrast* and as an author (p 198). And Taylor is seen as particularly important because hers was the "first sustained attempt in South Africa to apply a Marxist perspective to the analysis of literary cultural texts" (p 86). Sandwith goes on to emphasise that, "While Taylor's place as a radical historian has been partially accepted, her significance as a literary critic has yet to be recognised" (p 98). Taylor's techniques were based on Marxist historiography, but also a kind of sociology of literature, acknowledging the material basis and social contexts of literature: "An imaginative piece of writing is not created out of a vacuum" (p 100). The case study is given added depth through an examination of Taylor's political and intellectual antecedents, and especially her indebtedness to Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*. But Taylor is only one example of such a Marxist scholar, and indeed a recurring theme in *World of Letters* is "the ways in which Soviet cultural discourses were reiterated, appropriated and reformulated in the new aesthetico political contexts of late segregation and early apartheid South Africa" (p 175). It is striking to what extent the non academic left wing discourse described is similar to that which emerged, as if for the first time, around thirty years later in History and Literature departments in South Africa.

The choice of Dora Taylor as a case study is also noteworthy, because Sandwith makes a particular point of highlighting the role of women in this history. She remarks approvingly on "the confidence with which women (as writers and speakers) took up public discourse in a context overwhelmingly dominated by men" (p 167), contrasting this with more patriarchal editorial situations at the same time. This is a relatively small aspect of the study, but an interesting one.

Sandwith's study owes a clear debt to the methods and interests of Book History, and this may be seen most clearly in her examination of the magazines and their audiences as the site for a particular reading community. Her intention is to illuminate the "lesser known practices of reading, interpretation and cultural critique" (p 3) as well as the "movement of texts and ideas" (p 4) or what is also referred to as the "travelling text" (p 175). This is particularly well done in her examination of the publications linked to the Non European Unity Movement *The Torch*, *The Educational Journal* and so on and groups like the New Era Fellowship and Left Book Club, which describes the growth and beliefs of a group of people (largely a black and coloured intelligentsia) through their writings in these journals. "Key to this radical cultural project," she argues, "was the reading and discussion of literature" (p 158), or in other words a politicised reading strategy which has also been examined in other contexts by scholars like Archie Dick and Ashwin Desai. Rejecting the "fiction of the ideologically neutral text" (p 165), Sandwith shows how, "in this particular community of reading, literary texts become a site for vigorous, public political argumentation and critique, in marked contrast to the solitary reading practices of the academic mainstream" (p 161). The book is more closely related to studies of reading practice than the more material aspects of Book History, like paper, print and publisher (In this regard, one might mention that the book has been beautifully produced by UKZN Press, well packaged and well edited.)

A question that emerged during my reading was to what extent Sandwith shares the ideologies of her subjects. Surely she does what she claims the writers she examines do she offers "an analysis of the role of culture in the implementation of late colonialism and early apartheid" and draws attention to "the ideological function and material situatedness of various forms of intellectual production and the race and class exclusions upon which they are based" (p 166). But she goes beyond their limited viewpoints to the degree that she manages to maintain a highly nuanced and complex account, combining appreciation and scepticism (as Dora Taylor does with Roy Campbell's poetry). This is achieved by retaining a keen awareness of the potential tensions and contradictions of the positions (described in various places as "an unstable amalgam", for instance of liberal, Leavisite and Stalinist positions, "all of which find common cause in the uses of literary cultural texts as a means of effecting social change" (p 197).

This work has clear significance for South African literary history, but its broader aims mean that it is also of relevance to social and intellectual historians. Because of its insistence on both cultural and political aspects, and especially the impossibility of divorcing the two, the book will be of interest to both historians and literary scholars, and to those working in the broad field of the history of the book. This hybrid nature is reflected in the extensive bibliography and meticulous footnotes to the work, drawing on a wide disciplinary variety of sources.

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