

JULIA WELLS

*We have done with pleading: The women's 1913 anti-pass campaign*

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This volume is the third in a 'topic series' of books produced jointly by the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop and Ravan Press, aimed specifically at a non-academic and non-specialist readership. The first two successful titles in the sequence of books, Robert Edgar's *Because they chose the plan of God* and Paul la Hausse's *Brewers, beerhalls and boycotts*, were both published in 1988, and there has thus been a three-year delay before the appearance of *We have done with pleading*. Perhaps, however, the wait has not been entirely fruitless, for Julia Wells's contribution to the series is the most impressive yet.

While this book may not be directed primarily towards them, professional historians ought not to overlook it, for the events which are described and analysed so clearly are not particularly well-known, even to specialists. The campaign by women in the Orange Free State in 1913 to have the laws obliging them to carry passes repealed merits only passing reference in even the best general histories of the country, while it has enjoyed little more attention from major studies of resistance. The determined and independent initiatives of the protesters, as well as the significant support which they gained for their cause during 1913 and 1914, were clearly of considerably historical interest and importance. They are now at last studied in their own right.

The main focus of resistance to the pass laws came from women in the Waaihoek location outside Bloemfontein. The campaign took various forms: petitioning all possible levels of authority from the King of England to the mayor and city council of Bloemfontein, lobbying members of Parliament, protesting in the press, tearing up of passes, and facing arrest, considerable police harassment and ill-treatment in prisons. It spread during 1913 to other towns in the Orange Free State, the only province of the fledgling Union which insisted that women carry passes. Jagersfontein and Winburg were two other centres where confrontation between authorities and protesters occurred.

The events of May 1913 to June 1914 - when draft legislation was tabled to enable the governor-general to amend the pass laws, but which never proceeded further because of the outbreak of war - are narrated with great clarity. Even though few characters are able to emerge from the disparate and largely unsympathetic sources, we are offered numerous glimpses of the experience of the women and their commitment to their task. Both the protesters, who often wore blue rosettes, and contemporary newspapers, such as *The Bloemfontein Post*, which described one of the leaders, a Mrs Molisapoli, as 'a stout native Mrs Pankhurst, wearing a flag wrapped round her voluminous shoulders' (p. 20), made connections between the local cause and that of the British suffragettes. The extensive use of contemporary documents - photographs, letters, copies of petitions, newspaper commentaries, personal observations - complement and supplement the text, enriching the experience of the reader. The events are competently contextualised, both in terms of the origins of the specific grievances of the women themselves as well as in the considerable social turmoil of the years which immediately followed Union.

One of the remarkable features of this period of protest was the initiative of women themselves. Despite the handicap of both their race and gender, the women of Waaihoek and elsewhere displayed great self-reliance. Frequently patronised by the press, disparaged on occasion by both black and white men, and even censured by the newspaper of the African Political Organisation for their independent actions, the women remained undeterred in their efforts to have the law changed through peaceful but strong protest. Their cause also cut through class divisions (the pass laws affected all women, whereas educated men were exempt), and seamstresses, teachers, and wives of businessmen joined domestic workers and laundry washers to have the laws altered.

Two blemishes require comment. Mahatma Gandhi has his name consistently mis-spelt as 'Ghandi' (pp. 3, 5, 31), an inexcusable lapse. And my copy of the book had pages 19 and 20 duplicated.

Julia Wells is to be congratulated on a fine publication which succeeds in drawing the attention of both 'professional' and 'amateur' to a set of important events. With this book, the History Workshop continues to accomplish its task of disseminating recent specialised research more widely, and it is to be hoped that we do not have to wait another three years before the next volume appears in print.