

DR. THEAL OOR SY EIE WERK

Na aanleiding van die korrespondensie wat 'n tyd lank in *Historia* gevoer is tussen dr. A. J. Böeseke en mej. Merle Babrow oor die betroubaarheid van dr. Theal as geskiedskrywer, word aan die einde van hierdie kort hydrae 'n brief van dr. Theal gepubliseer waarin hy self geantwoord het op 'n aanval wat op hom as geskiedskrywer gemaak is.

Aanleiding tot die brief van dr. Theal was 'n redaksionele artikel wat op 7 Junie 1901 in die Londense *The Daily Telegraph* verskyn het waarin die redakteur twee nuwe werke oor die geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika onder die aandag van sy lesers probeer bring het en dit ook baie hoog angeprys het. Van dieselfde geleentheid het die redakteur van die koerant gebruik gemaak om dr. Theal aan uiters ongunstige kritiek te onderwerp. Die betrokke deel van die artikel vir sover dit op dr. Theal betrekking het, lui soos volg:

Fresh Light on South Africa

Amid the mass of books evoked by the war in South Africa, two of very exceptional merit have been published quite recently. One, the work of Mr. Cappon, Professor of English in Queen's University, Kingston, Canada, issued by Messrs. Macmillan, is indispensable to the historian; the other, published by Mr. Heinemann, and written by Mr. W. Bleloch, is at least as invaluable to the statesman. Both however, have irresistible claims upon the attention of all who are concerned for the justice of our cause in this war, and are anxious for the development of the country which has now come under our sway. The object of Mr. Cappon's book "Britain's Title in South Africa", which carries the story of our relations with the sub-continent up to the days of the Great Trek, is to counteract the mischievous and misleading impressions which are left by a study of Dr. Theal's history. It has been a positive misfortune for a just appreciation of England's position in South Africa that writers hitherto have had to depend for their historical knowledge almost exclusively on Dr. Theal. Even so distinguished a historian as Mr. Bryce has taken not only Dr. Theal's facts, but his inferences, for granted. Mr. Lucas, who may be described as the semi-official historian of the Colonial Office, has followed Dr. Theal with equal fidelity. Some two years ago, however, the "Quarterly Review" called attention to the very flagrant bias of Dr. Theal, and to the extra-ordinary distortion to be found in his works of some of the vital facts in South African history. It has been reserved for Mr. Cappon to correct a few of the more glaring imperfections of Dr. Theal's work. Dr. Theal is, we believe, a native of Nova Scotia, and, by a curious coincidence, the writer who has undertaken the task of exposing the more erroneous of his judgments is a professor in a Canadian University. He tells us in his preface how he came to undertake the valuable task which he has set himself:

"It happened that Dr. Theal had been good enough to send to the library of the University on whose staff I have the honour to be, a set of the records of Cape Colony, as far as they have yet been published,

consisting of a mass of original documents, letters private and official, reports, investigations, census returns, and such like, from which, with the help of other contemporary evidence such as may be had in the literature of that time, one may be able to form an independent judgment on the early period at least of British rule in South Africa. After a study of those materials I am convinced that Dr. Theal is by no means the safest of guides in this part of the Empire's history; it even seems to me that he has laboured to darken the British side of it; he has passed lightly or in silence over the characteristic merits of British rule, especially when tried by the standards of the times of which he is speaking; he has misunderstood or misrepresented its highest traditions, he has unfairly emphasised its defects, and made as little as possible even of the economic and industrial advantages which it undoubtedly conferred on South Africa. And he has done this for the sake of setting the history of a special class of Boers in the best light, and of building up traditions of Boer history which are certainly at variance both with these records and a commonsense analysis of the facts."

Mr. Cappon makes the astounding revelation which Dr. Theal withheld from us English readers, but which he disclosed in the preface to a Dutch translation of his shorter history, that his "collaborator in these historical researches for a number of years had been Mr. F. W. Reitz", the present Secretary of the Transvaal, then President of the Orange Free State. Anybody who has read the extra-ordinary mosaic of fact and fiction which was issued by Mr. Reitz at the beginning of the war under the title of "A Century of Wrong", will fully understand how dangerous a colleague he was in such a work as that of writing the history of South Africa. Perhaps one of the most remarkable feats of historical sleight of hand was performed by Dr. Theal when he brought his history, published in the "Story of the Nations" series, up to quite recent date and managed to omit even the name of Sir Bartle Frere from his pages. The omission is the more extraordinary because there is on record in the Blue-books an address, signed by George M. Theal, on behalf of himself and others, to Sir Bartle Frere, in which it is set forth that the only hope for South Africa lies in the successful prosecution of the policy with which that great statesman was identified. Mr. Cappon's book is not only valuable for the effective manner in which he has discharged the special duties he undertook, but it is written so brightly and attractively as to render it very pleasant reading for all classes of the community."

Sonder om die meriete van *The Daily Telegraph* se redaksionele artikel baie noukeurig te ontleed, kan slegs in die verbygaan daarop gewys word dat W. Bleloch se *The New South Africa; its Value and Development* deur niemand in 'n ernstige lig beskou word nie en dat dit vandag, meer as sestig jaar na die verskyning daarvan, deur min as 'n werk van enige historiese waarde beskou sal word. Met „Mr. Cappon, Professor of English in Queen's University, Kingston, Canada”, is dit self nog erger gesteld. Van sy werk *Britain's Title in South Africa*, dra weinig historici kennis. Dit is dus enigszins eienaardig, dat die redakteur van *The Daily Telegraph*

hom van 'n Kanadese professor in Engels moes bedien om Theal, "a native of Nova Scotia" maar iemand wat 'n diepgaande dokumentêre studie van Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis gemaak het, terug te wys. Ook sy onbekookte aanval op *A Century of Wrong*, wek nie veel vertrouwe in die bevoegdheid van *The Daily Telegraph* om 'n oordeel oor 'n geskiedwerk uit te spreek nie.

Op bogenoemde aanval van *The Daily Telegraph*, het Theal op dieselfde dag met onderstaande brief geantwoord. Theal se antwoord het op 11 Junie 1901 in *The Daily Telegraph* verskyn.

"Sir — It is not my custom to reply to criticisms upon my work, and, indeed, I have not time even to read them unless they are specially brought to my notice, as was yours in "The Daily Telegraph" of this morning. I make an exception in this case, because I feel that if a fifth part of the charges brought by you against me could be substantiated, I should be utterly unworthy to hold the situation I fill under the Cape Government, and the sooner my books were burned the better. As far as human power goes those volumes were written as if the events related had occurred between two nations of the distant past, with neither of which my remotest ancestors could have had any connection. The simple truth was what I desired to tell, altogether regardless of nationality or party, for I am convinced that when a historian makes eulogy of his country his first and only object his work can have little value. My literary association with Mr. Reitz, whom I know to be a man of the highest honour, and who most certainly, in those days, was not an enemy of England, was in no way such as you describe.

Night and day I am now busy, as I have been for years, collecting, copying, and, when necessary, translating records of South Africa, proof reading, and revising printed sheets to make them exact counterparts of the originals. Every paper of the slightest importance to be found in the Public Record Office, London, the British Museum, and various libraries and archive departments on the Continent is being published for the Cape Government. Fifteen volumes of over 500 pages each have already been issued from the press. I do not look for, much less desire, favourable comments from men holding extreme opinions on either side, concerning what is transpiring in South Africa; but I ask whether you regard it as just to accuse one who is zealously doing such work of gross and reckless partiality?

One more question I wish to ask. Which judge is most likely to be correct? He who closes and decides a case after the evidence of a single witness has been given, or he who patiently hears the witnesses on both sides before arriving at a conclusion? From the tenor of your criticism I am inclined to believe you would favour the former.

I am, Sir, yours very truly,
GEO. M. THEAL.

15, South-hill Park, Hampstead, London, N.W.
June 7.

Prof. A. N. Pelzer.