

Sound and Fury

P.S. Thompson: **Natalians First Separatism in South Africa 1909-1961**. Southern Book Publishers. 231 pp.

The 1911 Union Census records a population in Natal of 939398 Blacks; 133420 Indians; 98114 Whites and 911 Coloureds. Of those alive two years earlier, 11121 of the 14822 who voted (out of 25463 voters on the roll - overwhelmingly White save for a mere handful of Coloureds and Blacks) had taken Natal into the Union. Most of the White leaders - Sir Manfred Nathan (the Governor), Moor, Smythe, Greene, Hyslop, Morcom had really wanted some form of federal state but at the sessions of the National Convention which later gave birth to the Union, they were impotent. It is with the subsequent post-Union wailing, winge-ing and the gnashing of rubber teeth that this book is painstakingly concerned.

The author has been meticulous in his research and in his recounting of who voted for what and where and when. In his appendices he analyses the voting in 1909 (the Union Referendum); 1910 (the first election for the Union Parliament); 1933 (the Parliamentary and the Provincial Elections when the Provincial system was at stake) and 1960 (the Referendum on the Republic). These provide sufficient fixes from which to plot the ill-fated course of separatism in Natal until finally it wrecked itself on the rocks of reality.

He deals with the recurrent swells of White political emotion in –

- * the Natal League (1910)
- * The Natal Party (also in 1910)
- * The Federal League (1913)
- * The Democratic Reform League (1922)
- * The devolutionary League (1932)
- * The Hollander Memorandum Saga (1932)
- * The Dominionites (1933);
- * The Defendants of the Constitution (1951)
- * The Torch Commando (with which this bewildered reviewer rode in a jeep to Capetown: 1951)
- * United Democratic Front (no less! : 1951)
- * The Voice of Natal (1952)
- * The Natal Stand (also 1952)
- * The Federal Party (1953)
- * The Anti-Republican League (1961)

* and finally the mildly Gilbertian “Horticulturalists” (amongst whom the same reviewer was a humble sweeper of leaves).

In theory, all this is valuable “for the record”, but in reality to what avail? The proper question, of course, is how important is this record. Whilst strictly it is not the task of this reviewer to venture an answer to this particular question and, in any event, he suffers from the probable disadvantage of having known quite well a number of the players who strutted earnestly upon the stage towards the end of this provincial drama (and who, like Malvolio, had had greatness thrust upon them), nevertheless he proffers this answer. Some of the actors seem to have been mentally cross-gartered and – as victims of their origins – quite unable to accept the rapidity with which the Sun (contrary to Nature) was setting upon the British Empire.

Lurking behind Dr Thompson’s analysis of events, the problem of these late players (and the problems of those who blazed an ephemeral and atmospheric trail in earlier days) was that they never tried to understand, nor ever understood, the aspirations of the Afrikaners in whose hands and loins the power lay. Nor do they seem to have concerned themselves about the Coloured community; or the Indians – unless it was to try to stem “Indian penetration” by means of the notorious “Pegging Act” of 1942 or trade competition with the 1942 Licensing Ordinance. Most serious of all their ears did not hear, nor their eyes perceive, the now-no-longer-silent Black majority waiting in the wings.

This indeed is a tale (as Macbeth would have it) “full of sound and fury and signifying nothing”, told this time **not** by an idiot but by a careful historian with a United States teaching background.

Dr Thompson has rendered to the survivors of the Natalians First breed, and their descendants, a singular service by recording dispassionately the best efforts of many distinguished and well-intentioned, but unavailing, men of their times. □