

WORKING FOR BOROKO

MARIAN LACEY: WORKING FOR BOROKO. RAVAN PRESS JOHANNESBURG 1981 (R9.95)

Reviewed by Christopher Saunders

From about 1970 the dominant 'liberal' approach to South African history writing in English was increasingly challenged by 'radical' writers. Some were Marxists; all were influenced, directly or indirectly, by the revival of Marxism in Western intellectual life. What gave unity to the new radical school was the concern of these writers to challenge liberal interpretations and to argue the determinant importance of material, and especially productive forces. Within a decade the radical challenge had revitalised the study of South African history. By 1981 the radicals were claiming that 'We've largely won our battles against the liberals . . . In the social sciences, we dictate the terms.'¹

At first the radical challenge came from outside South Africa, from political exiles like Harold Wolpe and Martin Legassick, from those studying at British universities, like Colin Bundy, Mike Morris and Rob Davies, and from occasional 'outsiders' like the Canadian Frederick Johnstone. But in the later 1970s important radical work began to emerge from within the country, from South Africans who had returned after completing their studies and from others who were radicalised by exposure to the growing corpus of work and by living in post-Soweto South Africa. Marian Lacey is one of the latter, her book a revised version of an M.A. thesis for Rhodes University. Published locally, it is uncompromisingly written from a radical perspective. Much of it is a detailed examination of the policies of the Hertzog government from the election victory of 1924 until Hertzog and Smuts joined forces in the early 1930s. Viewed through her materialist lenses, this well-known period in our history takes on a very new appearance and a new significance.

Lacey argues that the 1924-32 period was crucial in the establishment of a coercive labour system in South Africa, the roots of which she traces to Cecil Rhodes' Glen Grey Act of 1894. The supply of African labour to the mines, to the white-owned farms and (relatively neglected in her book) to the new secondary industries in the towns became controlled in an almost totalitarian way by the state; for the first time the entire country was subjected to a common system to exploit (she prefers 'super-exploit') African labour. 'Working for Boroko' meant working for nothing. This, then, not Jim Crow segregation, Group Areas or Bantustans, is the essence of apartheid; Hertzog becomes its principal architect. To support her argument, Lacey investigates such issues as the amount of land set aside for African occupation after 1913, what happened to African squatters and labour tenants on white farms, and how 'Stallardism', mainly through the mechanism of the Urban Areas Acts, rigidly controlled the entry of Africans to the towns and degraded and isolated them in urban locations. 'Civilized labour' is seen as a device on the one hand to divide the working class to prevent it threatening capitalist interests and on the other to facilitate the super-exploitation of Africans. The Cape African franchise was eroded and then destroyed, she argues, not because white politicians feared that it posed any real threat to white supremacy — it clearly did not — but because until it was removed the Cape could not be included in the uniform coercive labour system.

Lacey spends a lot of time attacking previous interpretations.

Many of her blows find their mark, for the older liberal historians were indeed often exceedingly blind to the importance of material forces and interests, and too easily took ideology at face value. C. M. Tatz, in particular, is taken to task; much of Lacey's book is a critical reworking of the first half of his M.A., published as *Shadow and Substance* (University of Natal Press, 1962; moving to Australia, Tatz turned his attention to that country's race relations). She is of course right to stress the very different needs of mining and farming capital: whereas mine-owners wanted the reserves preserved and extended because they were the labour pool from which migrant labour was drawn, farmers believed the reserves robbed them of their labour and they did not want to see any more land in African hands. But here as elsewhere in her book she carries her argument too far, tending to see Smuts and Hertzog as mere agents of mining and farming capital respectively, and their parties as mainly expressing such monolithic interests. Hers is good corrective history, provocative and stimulating, but the overall picture she draws is too crude, too mechanistic, and she is too ready to make unsubstantiated assertions. If previous historians overstressed the importance of race and ideology, she goes to the other extreme in dismissing them as merely secondary and derivative. Adept at seeing how exploitation fostered racism, she refuses to recognise that non-economic variables — racism, the differential access to political power — helped shape the labour system. Nor did Smuts, Hertzog and others set out as deliberately as she implies to create such a system, while even the capitalists were not always agreed on what was in their best interests. The super-exploitation of Africans removed a massive potential market. And while she has shown very clearly that some major steps towards the modern apartheid state were taken in her period, she surely exaggerates its significance when she argues that the main struts of that state emerged in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She is right to stress continuities in policy, but the Nationalist victory of 1948 was hardly of no significance in the evolution of the coercive labour system, and its implementation.

Working for Boroko, then, is an important but-flawed book. Radicals will be disappointed that she does not have more to say about the class struggle and the way it helped to shape the evolving labour system. While she makes good use of statements by members of the African petty bourgeoisie, the experience of the mass of the people does not come alive in her pages. Yet in providing the first full radical interpretation of this period based on a considerable body of evidence, she has indeed moved discussion of it onto new ground. Now it is up to today's generation of liberal historians to show that the radicals, having fired some powerful shots, have not gained lasting control of the field. One hopes that Lacey's challenge will soon be met by a more subtle work which closely examines a wider range of sources than she does to test her assertions and which, while incorporating her insights, will treat her period and topic in a more balanced fashion, in all their true complexity. □

1. Charles van Onselen, quoted in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 4 September 1981, p. 8.