

UNRAVELLING THE COMPLEXITIES

HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF SOUTH AFRICA
by CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS.
African Historical Dictionaries No. 37. The Scarecrow
Press, Metuchen NJ, 1983.

Dr. Saunders' *Historical Dictionary of South Africa* is one of a series produced by Scarecrow Press devoted to countries of the African Continent. Dictionaries of this kind are useful to non-specialists and specialists alike as handy, quick reference tools. The *Historical Dictionary of South Africa* has been admirably produced: entries are written simply and clearly, with lots of cross references.

The Dictionary commences with a chronology of South African historical and contemporary development, beginning in the third century AD and ending in August 1982. Two contemporary maps are followed by a brief introduction to South Africa. The dictionary itself has 354 entries in its 191 pages, on a wide variety of topics. The breadth of subject matter in the dictionary is suggested by the scope of the select Bibliography which is divided into nine subject headings: reference; biography; culture; the economy, history; politics, religion; sciences, society. A brief bibliographic guide is also provided.

The majority of South African school children learn that relevant history began in South Africa in 1652 with the landing of Jan van Riebeeck, an official of the Dutch East India Company, at the Cape. They just might have learned that prior to 1652, in the fifteenth century, it was the Portuguese who first discovered the Cape. Dr. Saunders' chronology has provided us with a quite different beginning point and perspective, which is elaborated on in entries in the dictionary itself.

The chronology begins in the early iron age, which lasted from the third century to the tenth century AD. So we have over a thousand years of 'pre-history' in South Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch East India Company. The entry under **Iron Age** elaborates on these early inhabitants. From the third century, they worked and used iron, they practiced agriculture, raised cattle and made pots. The people of the later iron age, from the eleventh century onwards, distinguished by their pottery style, moved from the valley bottoms, lived on hilltops and the sides of valleys. They were engaged more fully in cattle husbandry. In the Transvaal, their productive activity centred around mining for gold, copper and tin hundreds of years before the modern mineral revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. The people of the later iron age appear, too, to have lived within wealthy and powerful state systems.

Dr. Saunders' periodization pushes back the conventional view of historical origins in South Africa. The evidence he brings to the dictionary calls into question, as does much revisionist scholarship in South African historiography, the notion that Bantu-speaking people have tenuous claims to being original inhabitants and that they, as much as the Europeans were colonisers. This is a myth that has been used to justify contemporary racism and whitewash the conquest and consequent oppression of black South Africans by Voortrekker and British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By contrast, the strength and originality of Dr. Saunders approach is the weight he gives to the historical experience of all groups in South Africa.

The balance of Dr. Saunders' approach can be seen in the way he gives equal weight to the precolonial as to the post-colonial periods in the entries of **agriculture** and **economic change**. The entries, taken together, provide a neat history of economic transformation. They begin with the transition from hunting and gathering to pastoralism, a movement which occurred amongst the Khoi-Khōi. Agriculture was associated with iron technology, which developed sui-generis. The Khoi-Khoi and Bantu-speaking people were engaged in production for long distance trade from about AD 1000, long before Europeans established a victualling station, and later a colony, at the Cape. The advent of a European settlement transformed, in its turn, the nature of the economy. It introduced a merchant economy locked into a world-wide trading network, the effect of which was to increase the scale of trade and increase demand for agricultural over pastoral products. In the late nineteenth century, the discovery first of diamonds, then of gold, shifted the centre of gravity from the coastal merchant parts to the interior. The mineral revolution provided the basis for subsequent growth and the industrial transformation which occurred in the twentieth century. In entries under **diamonds, gold, mining, manufacturing industry** these developments are discussed. The development of **trade unionism** and **industrial conciliation** in the twentieth century is also narrated.

There are entries chronicling the history of South Africa's diverse cultural groups. Following these through, one gets a sense of the rich fabric of South African historical experience. The history of conflict and of opposition appears under such varied entries as: **Afrikaans, 'Coloured', African National Congress, Pan African Congress, Indians**. There is somewhat of a Cape bias in Dr. Saunders' emphasis. For instance, whilst he notes early Cape African political involvement in the formation of **Imbumba Yama Nyama**, he fails to note the formation in 1888 of the Funamalungelo Society of the Natal Kholwa exempt from customary law. The Funamalungelo Society subsequently changed its name to the Natal Native Congress, and its members were founders of the South African National Native Congress, along with other provincial organisations in 1912.



Helen Joseph

Natal Witness

The entry on the **Congress Alliance** of the 1950s is a bit vague. When was it formed? What was its relationship to the early 'Doctor's Pact' of 1947 between the leaders of the ANC, and the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress? Dr. Saunders has erred in claiming that the Alliance included the Federation of South African women. Though it is true that individual women, members of FSAW affiliates, were on the National Executive Committee of the Alliance, they were there as representatives of their own organizations. Lilian Ngoyi represented the ANC, and Helen Joseph the Congress of Democrats. It is also somewhat misleading to say that the FSAW was founded by Helen Joseph. It was first mooted in 1953 by a group of Cape-based women in the trade union movement, amongst them Frances Baard and Ray Alexander. Helen Joseph rose to prominence in the FSAW as a result of

her organizing tour of South Africa prior to the great march of women to Pretoria on August 9th, 1956. Thereafter she became National Secretary, and Head Office was transferred from Cape Town to Johannesburg. Cheryl Walker's recent book, **Women and Resistance in South Africa**, banned in South Africa, provides a good history of the FSAW.

There will invariably be differences in approach to history. Dr. Saunders has admirably brought out some of these in his entry on **historiography**, and entries under individual scholars like **De Kiewiet, Macmillan, Thompson, Marks and Legassick**. The **Neumark thesis** on trekker links to the market, and the **Bundy Thesis** on the rise and decline of a black peasantry are explained. Surprisingly, the **Wolpe thesis** is not mentioned, although its influence on South African socio-economic analysis has been profound. A weakness of the dictionary is the neglect of a key aspect emphasised by Harold Wolpe in his seminal article "Capitalism and cheap labour - power in South Africa : from segregation to apartheid", **Economy and Society** vol 1 no. 4; that is, the issue of labour control.

South Africa arguably has the most sophisticated system of labour control in the world today. The **Bantustans, migrant labour and mass removals** are part of that system, and, in fairness Dr. Saunders has given them a place in the dictionary. But he does not mention the influential Riekert Commission on influx control, nor is the key institution of labour allocation and control in South Africa, the labour bureau, administered through the Department of Cooperation and Development mentioned. This key government department is almost an **imperium in imperio** with enormous discretionary administrative and policing powers over the African population. It at least deserves a mention in any dictionary on South Africa.

But no dictionary on South Africa is going to be able to capture the totality of the South African experience from the third century to the present. Dr. Saunders has approached his task with considerable skill and insight, and with a thoughtfulness that unravels some of the almost intractable complexities of South African history without creating confusion. The dictionary is one that any South African school or household ought to have on its bookshelves. □

A SAD TALE

It's a pity about George. He was a nice lad in many ways. He was well brought up by his parents, who taught him to be thoughtful and considerate. He was an outgoing, pleasant, hard-working, creative sort of person. But he had this terrible vice that he simply couldn't get rid of, and that no advice or persuasion could remove : he didn't like killing people.

His parents spent many anxious hours discussing the case with their friends and with specialist psychologists. He was subjected to various tests and questionnaires and interviews. But the true root of the problem couldn't be found. Somehow his nature seemed not to possess that

willingness to obliterate other people which is one of the obvious hallmarks of common sense and civilization.

In the end the experts had to tell his distraught parents : "All we can say is that he was born with something missing. It's not brain damage, exactly, but a sort of cerebral deficiency."

The parents were relieved, however, to be told that researchers had perhaps found a cure for their son's illness. And they were only too happy for him to be hospitalized in the army's detention barracks.

Vortex