

# Exposing the myths of 'white history'

By Hans Pienaar

**DURING** the past two decades an almost insatiable appetite has developed for history in South Africa. New Nation newspaper every week devotes several pages to history and even the Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa has sold 130 000 copies.

These observations were made by Prof Colin Bundy of the University of the Western Cape in his introduction to the Weekly Mail Book Week panel discussion on "Peeling the Myths off South African History" in Johannesburg in November.

There were good reasons for this, he said. An entire generation's contempt for the history offered at schools and the need for a substitute has led to a palpable pressure on historians from the most surprising quarters.

Communities who glimpse the possibility of a different future also want to know something about their past because without this knowledge they resemble children without knowledge of their parents - insecure, uncertain and invalidated.

Dr Neville Alexander, of the South African Committee for Higher Education in Cape Town, later illustrated the urgency of a rewriting of history when he read from the recently rediscovered notebooks he had kept on a kind of alternative history workshop which was held during his "10-year course" at the "University of Robben Island".

"Consider what would happen if we did not have this (rewritten) image of the past," he said. "The revolution would then be superimposed upon an alien soil, it would appear as a natural catastrophe, frightful and inexplicable."

He revealed that the Robben Island inmates actually decided that a foundation should be established for historians to write an alternative history, without knowing that a revolution in historical studies had already started shortly after the 1976 student uprising.

By now this has become a tide, as Prof Bundy described it, within which a particularly strong current flows: The assault

on perceived wisdoms or myths. Two demonstrations were given of this "assault": Self-employed historian Jay Naidoo spoke on the Jan van Riebeeck myth, and Xhosa history expert Jeff Peires on the infamous cattle killing instigated by Nongqause in the 19th century.

Naidoo, a South African who works in

peaceful co-existence, although there was no actual evidence to support this contention.

The facts could easily have been checked, Naidoo said, as Van Riebeeck's deeds were very well documented in the compulsory diary of his activities and his steady correspondence with the Dutch East India Company (DEIC).

In fact, David Livingstone already exploded the myth in 1853, when he pointed out that Van Riebeeck had suggested the enslavement of Khoi women and children on ships bound for Batavia, and forced labour for Khoi men, as the only way by which they could be deprived of their livestock, in order to ensure a steady supply of meat to passing ships.

The DEIC themselves knew that Van Riebeeck was an advocate of plunder, and not of peace. They consistently denied his requests for more muskets and horses and entreated him over and over again to display more friendship towards the Khoi. They finally lost their patience after he had provoked a war with the Khoi, and transferred him to Batavia.

Peires tackled the myth that a "different mode of understanding", or superstition, had led to the infamous cattle killing instigated by

Mhlakaza, Nongqause's uncle, a myth centred around the description of him as the Xhosa nation's greatest witch doctor.

Not so, he said. Mhlakaza actually was the first Xhosa to be baptised in the Anglican Church. With his new name, Wilhelm, he tacked on to Archdeacon Merriman of Grahamstown, and was at his happiest when he accompanied the latter on his long evangelising journeys to Eastern Cape towns.

Back in Grahamstown the archdeacon eventually rejected him because he was a lazy servant. This led to Wilhelm's return to his Xhosa village, and the re-adoption of his original name. Among the Xhosa he began to spread his own gospel of the Resurrection, which was one of the main forces bringing about the cattle killing.

Slightly adapting an adage of Ambrose Beirce, Peires said that myths were designed to conceal a truth. "Once a myth is spotted, it is the task of the historian to unearth the particular truth that is being con-



Panelist Lezlie Witz . . . elicited lively response from the audience.

## The Dutch East Indian Company knew that Van Riebeeck was an advocate of plunder, and not of peace

France, called Jan van Riebeeck "white South Africa's first hero", around whom a deliberate myth was created in a specific year, 1852, by a specific institution, the Dutch Reformed Church.

For more than a century historians embroidered on this first portrayal of Van Riebeeck as the man who brought Christian charity to South Africa. As late as 1976 scholars insisted that he was a believer in

cealed."

Throughout the session the panelists in various ways warned that progressive historians should also be aware of the danger of developing their own myths.

In such a vein Steven Friedman, policy researcher at the South African Institute of Race Relations, speculated on a provocative theory he called "Wellingtonism".

This was named after Wellington Buthelezi, who in the 1920s had amassed a huge following by preaching the liberation of black South Africans by Russians and American negroes who would descend from the heavens.

A similar line of thinking dominated resistance politics until the forties, Friedman said. Instead of mobilising their supporters, ANC activists poured most of their energy into a strategy of petitioning the government and the Crown.

The myths surrounding this history become dangerous when latter-day activists teach that after the forties the ANC drastically changed course and transformed itself into a militant mass-based organisation. On the contrary, Friedman argued, many strategies which the Congress movement adopted then had been designed to undermine the moral legitimacy of the South African government by appealing to foreign opinion.

The earlier strategies of petitioning had merely been translated, and not abandoned. Forms of mass protest were used primarily to influence the United Nations.

Since then a lot of anti-apartheid politics has been dominated by the idea that freedom comes from abroad. That has begun to change only in the last few years. The trade union movement and civic associations have begun to instill the idea that blacks do have power and that the freedom they long for, is going to be won by their own efforts.

In an earlier session on teaching alternative history in the classroom, Wits historian Cynthia Kross expressed her concern about the "snappy headlines" of newspaper pages devoted to alternative history.

She got the feeling that journalists believed that they had "extracted the answers from fumbling academics", an attitude which had its dangers because it implied that it was possible to be in possession of the "real story at last".

Alternative methods of teaching history were presented by Ishmail Waadi and Lesley Witz, which elicited some lively responses from the audience on the almost insurmountable problems presented by working in a hostile system still very much devoted to government policies.

In his talk on the Inkatha school syllabus Blade Ndzimandze showed how the classroom remains a political arena for apartheid forces. Inkatha cynically employs black cultural concepts like ubuntu (brotherhood) and hlonipa (respect) in its syllabus to reinforce the establishment of Inkatha Youth Brigades in schools.

At the same time he warned against viewing ethnicity in terms of the government's divide and rule strategy and not from the perspective of lived traditions as part of the daily experience of black people.

Hans Pienaar is a freelance journalist based in Johannesburg.

## THREE NEW BOOKS ON CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Available now from Idasa

### JOURNEY TO THE ANC/ OP REIS NA DIE ANC

A diversity of opinions on a meeting with the ANC. Ordinary South Africans report on their impressions of a journey to Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Compiled by Chris Louw

R12 (Postage included)



### STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

This book reflects on the strategies adopted to attain a non-racial democracy in South Africa. Essential reading for understanding the dynamics of constantly changing strategies for change.

Edited by Stephen Fourie  
Published by Idasa

R14,95 (Postage included)

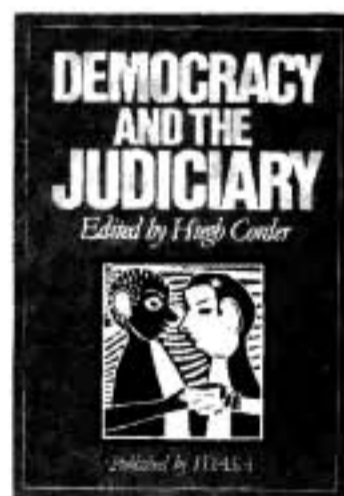


### DEMOCRACY AND THE JUDICIARY

Leading legal practitioners and academics explore the relationship between democratic values and the judicial function in South Africa. The book analyses the record of the judiciary since 1910, the role of lawyers in a deeply divided society and the phenomenon of "people's courts".

Edited by Hugh Corder  
Published by Idasa

R16,95 (Postage included)



### THE FREEDOM CHARTER AND THE FUTURE

Now in its Third Impression by Popular Demand

Based on the proceedings of the Freedom Charter Conference, it reflects the views of leading political actors on this important document around which much of the debate on a non-racial, democratic South Africa has centred since 1955.

Edited by James A. Polley  
Published by Ad. Donker

R12 (Postage included)



All available from Idasa at 1 Penzance Road, Mowbray, 7700  
(or Idasa's Regional Offices — addresses on Page 2)