

# HISTORY TEACHING IN AFRICAN SCHOOLS

By Edgar Brookes

The subject of history textbooks is one which interests all schools, and not only African schools. Thus in the years immediately following the Anglo-Boer War, Russell's "Natal, the Land and its Story" had a huge Union Jack on the cover which seemed to seep through into the body of the book. But perhaps African schools have been placed at a special disadvantage which we have come to realise more and more during the last decade.

There have, of course, been some excellent history textbooks written for schools—it would be invidious to mention names—but they have not entirely replaced earlier books which have come to be taken for granted in a large number of schools.

How is it that the writing of history textbooks has taken the form which it has? If we must go back to the origins of our problem it must be stated that the "orthodox" view of history accepted by most of these textbooks has been that of Dr G. McCall Theal. I remember a distinguished professor of history complaining about the great South African historians of the past in these terms: "Theal writes as a Cape Civil Servant, Cory as a reader of the 'Grahamstown Journal', and McMillan for the members of the Bantu Men's Social Centre." Be that as it may, Theal had a distinct bias. For him the "farmers" were almost always right and the Africans almost always wrong. Authors preparing text books for schools did not approach Theal's work in any critical spirit. It is only fair to add that Theal was a pioneer and that a great deal of the writing of South African history since his day has started from his work and the criticism which it has aroused.

Let us take a very simple example. The series of wars between the frontier farmers and the Xhosas are described by Theal and by a large number of text books as the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth "Kaffir Wars". The term "kaffir" is considered insulting by nearly all Africans. Children could not have enjoyed having it used in their history lessons. But there is more than this in the nomenclature used by school textbooks. These wars should simply have been described as "frontier wars" or "border wars". They are very reminiscent of the border struggles between the English and Scots borderers. Children in Scottish schools would not have liked to have them described as the first, second, third, fourth, etc. "Scottish Raids".

Great changes have taken place in South African history teaching and in the writing of South African histories, but they have only just begun to percolate into the African schools and it is to be hoped that the old-fashioned textbooks will be replaced at an early date by those based on the good modern histories which have been produced during the last ten or fifteen years. Shaka was indeed a sadist but he was much more than that. Going to an African school in mature life the writer of this article was especially struck by the fact that Shaka, whom he had learned to think of as a bloodthirsty savage, was a Zulu equivalent of William the Conqueror. Even in the new atmosphere of these days few authors will be found to justify Dingane's massacres but a careful and impartial study of the circumstances surrounding these will show that Dingane had real reasons for fear of white penetration and his actions, however regrettable, were intelligible. Modern research has made it very clear that in the Zulu War of 1879 Cetshwayo was not the aggressor and that the war was really forced on him, incidentally against the wishes of the Governor of Natal, by the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, whose Indian experiences had made him feel that all "Native states" would have to be annexed sooner or later, and the sooner the better.

Text book writers in the 1970s have before them not only the Oxford History of South Africa but many other historical works of great value. It is to be hoped that more text books of the better kind will be produced and replace the older ones in African schools.

It is of course very undesirable that historical writing should swing from one extreme to the other. History books in the 19th and early 20th centuries assumed the right of the white man to rule African races and therefore the main emphasis in their historical account of the period they were studying was thrown on the whites. We do not want to swing to the position where everything that the blacks did was right and that the whites gave no benefits to South Africa. History is not political propaganda. Historians are very fallible people but they ought at any rate to attempt to be impartial and to write about the inter-relation of white and black in South Africa as a highly educated Eskimo might do. Macaulay, in his famous "History of England" was sure that the Whigs were nearly always right. This bias of his should not be met by books written to prove that the Tories were nearly always right, but by a discriminating judgment such as might be exercised by an impartial Frenchman writing the history of England. □