

LETTER FROM A READER

(It is not the policy of Reality to publish letters; but we thought readers would enjoy this one.)

Dear Sir,

With reference to REALITY January '79: Someone gave my father a copy. It blew his 82 year-old and somewhat conservative mind.

He then gave it to me. "This is very depressing stuff but I think we had better read it", were his cautionary words. It blew my 39-year-old and somewhat less conservative mind.

I've given a copy to my 32-year-old wife.

When my 6-year-old daughter can read better I'll give the copy to her.

I'm also going to get Colenso's sermon "done" on tape and use it at Jo'burg College of Education (where I teach) to blow a few minds.

Perhaps the somewhat Marxist revisionism is showing history too far the other way. And perhaps not. My father and I feel that REALITY has been presented with integrity. But perhaps we are naive. Not being historians is a problem.

Please find a cheque for R12. This is to cover a one year's subscription, some extra copies of January '79 issue and back copies as far as the money will take you.

Right on!

Sincerely,
Victor Rodseth. □

NEW CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

By Andrew Duminy

Seldom do historical events arouse sufficient interest to become matter for popular debate. Historians are usually able to engage in disputes with each other in the happy knowledge that their disagreements are of little or no interest to others.

That the Anglo-Zulu War proved an exception to this rule is in large measure due to challenges that were issued in the January edition of **Reality**. "Popular historians", together with professionals, were accused of "ethnocentricity" and of not concerning themselves with the "realities of the Zulu experience", and so of presenting a perversion of the truth. The public generally were castigated for preparing to "celebrate" (though "most of them would not consciously recognise it") the "victory of British civilization over Zulu savagery". In addition, nameless profiteers were accused of preparing to cash in on the centenary of a war which reduced the Zulu to the status of wage-slaves.

The public reaction was immediate. Numerous letters appeared in the Durban and Pietermaritzburg press. The organisers of the Anglo-Zulu Centenary Celebrations at once pointed out that all the functions were planned in conjunction with the KwaZulu Government. So far from celebrating the victory of civilization over savagery, they protested, the intention was to emphasise the need for reconciliation. **Daily News** columnist, Michael Green, took exception to **Reality's** insinuations regarding the motives of those who had brought about the destruction of the Zulu Kingdom. "Tell that to my Zulu War Grandpa!" he wrote in reply to the contention that those who fought in 1879 did so as the agents of capitalism and therefore "to reduce the Zulus to a nation of mineworkers, farmhands, domestic servants, office messengers and petrol pump attendants". "I think it a pity", he commented, "that a group of academics should have used the occasion to reopen old wounds, question the motives of those involved

in the commemoration and draw sweeping conclusions, couched in the jargon of the new left".

What these exchanges reveal is a lack of understanding by the public of the radical point of view. In common with other isms, Radicalism is difficult to define, not least because, although the word was adopted by a group of academics to emphasise that they occupy common ground, there are many shades of difference between them. The word "radical" is here used to describe historians who contend that South African history is to be explained in terms of the means of production and exchange. As enunciated by their leading spokesmen, this leads to the conclusion that present-day South African politics is essentially a class-conflict, industrial capitalism having reduced the blacks to the status of an exploited proletariat. A further extension of the argument is that whites, no matter what their politics might be, serve the interests of exploitative capitalism.

It could not have surprised the radicals that the Natal public took offence at the accusations that were thrown at it and missed the subtleties of the argument regarding class, race and capitalism whereby the man-in-the-street becomes the unwitting agent of class interest, they can see the futility of attempting to "popularize" their views. Indeed, one may ask whether radicals are not trapped forever in an academic nightmare, condemned to be perpetually misunderstood except by a small group of "enlightened" persons who, like themselves, have escaped from the ideological straightjacket of the society to which they belong.

If the same analysis is applied, radicals can also expect little understanding from blacks for if, it is argued that blacks form an exploited proletariat, then it must follow that they too have become conditioned by the capitalist system. The resultant "wage-slave mentality", which the radicals thus themselves diagnose as the result of a century of industrialization, is geared to think in terms of simple material reward and, as the working class is educationally underprivileged, it should therefore be even less able than the ruling class to grasp the intellectualism of the radical case. True, the radical argument can have obvious political appeal because it propounds the idea that blacks belong to an oppressed and exploited class. But, when it comes to their arguments regarding history, this "popular" appeal is no longer quite as obvious. For one thing, it is arguable that the radicals do not really escape the ethno-centricity of which they accuse the "popular historians". That is to say, while they accuse the white ethno-centric historian of bias against the Zulu "savagery", and while these historians are accused of portraying nineteenth century South African history as a struggle between a "civilization" rooted in western Europe and the dark forces of African "barbarism", the radicals argue that the conflict is between international (read Western) capitalism and African blacks, whose technological know-how did not enable them to resist this foreign exploitation. In both cases the historical image of the black is basically the same: he is the sad victim of a foreign and superior force.

The radical's interest in the supra-personal interaction of Classes is likely to further reduce their appeal to blacks. This is because, as they see one dominant theme in the past, they cannot interest themselves in history's other "lost causes". Furthermore, as the triumph of industrial Capitalism is viewed as virtually – if not completely – inevitable, there would seem to be little point in paying attention to the feeble foredoomed efforts of individuals to oppose it. Radical history thus becomes depersonalized. It is full of victims but has no heroes, except those who succeed in some way in promoting changes which affect the modes of production. In Zulu history, Shaka thus becomes the great innovator and his successors are merely part of the long depressing tale of oppression. One asks whether such an interpretation does justice to Cetshwayo or, for that

matter, to Chief Gatsha Buthelezi? Professor Butterfield once took "Whig historians" to task for distorting history because he argued, they assumed an inevitability, and therefore, assumed also that unsuccessful statesmen were misguided or inferior because they opposed "progress". Radicals are in danger of excluding from their reckoning not the "badmen" of the Whigs, but ironically – the very people who should, by their definitions, be regarded as heroes because they opposed retrogression. These are dismissed as unimportant because they are seen as having been powerless to alter the course of History.

The difficulties which confront the Radicals, highlighted in newspaper and other debates, were again spotlighted at the recent conference on the Anglo-Zulu War in Durban. Professor Colin Webb, in analysing the problem of interpreting the origins of the war, showed how "revisionist" historians, who had concentrated on the role of individuals, had been taken to task by the radicals. There could be no disagreement, he argued, if the radicals were merely stating that "the motives of the men who initiated the war must be seen within the framework of the attempt to construct a federal South Africa in which capitalist production would be facilitated". But, he suggested, the radicals seem to be asserting much more than this. Their assertion that "capitalism caused the war asserts the primacy of the impersonal forces of the system over individual will and intelligence". Thus, the essential difference between "traditional history" and radical history is that the one is a "world of individual judgement and will; the other a world of economic imperatives".

In thus reducing the Liberal/Radical debate to its essentials, Professor Webb has issued a challenge which each individual radical must answer for himself. While this debate is in progress, it should be born in mind that other fundamental differences separate the radicals from the "revisionists" or, for that matter, from "traditional historians". One is that the radical's interpretation of history is not rooted in empiricism. In part, this is due to the fact that their conclusions regarding causation are the result of the analysis of post-industrial society generally and are not the result of an examination of the empirical evidence relative to any particular problem itself. In answering the question "What caused the Anglo-Zulu War?" the radical feels no great compulsion to delve into the complexities of the matter. It does not illuminate but seems to obscure what for him is the essential truth.

The radical's indifference to empiricism can also derive from the rejection of the notion of scholarly objectivity. While "conventional" historians acknowledge that their perception of the past is conditioned by the many limitations which act against objectivity, they remain committed to the academic belief that the "truth" (or at least a part of the truth) lies in the examination of evidence. Marxists, and Marxist-radicals, however, are frequently led to argue that objectivity is a total impossibility. Historians, they say, are themselves conditioned by the societies in which they live. What point is there therefore in attempting the impossible? Some Marxists would go so far as to contend that the frank recognition of their own "bias" makes them more honest than are scholars who pretend to impartiality.

Both these tenets of radical thought appear to mean that radicals are led in the opposite direction to that which is customarily followed by historians. This does not of course mean that radicals are totally disinterested in empirical research. What it does mean is that this research is likely to be undertaken with the intention of bolstering conclusions which have already been reached. It will therefore increase the danger that radicals will ignore evidence which contradicts their theory. To that extent, the likelihood is that the result will fail to provide a satisfactory answer – at the empirical level at least – to the question as to why a particular event occurred. The

result is more likely to be an embellishment of pre-held theory.

For example, radicals viewing the Milner administration in the Transvaal concentrate on the pre-war gold crisis and the need to restart mining activity after the British occupation. Their approach leads to the conclusion that the Milner administration became the tool of mining capitalism, as is illustrated by the decision to allow the importation of Chinese indentured labour, a development which set the pattern for South Africa's future industrial growth. This analysis is, of course, partially true. Milner did in fact see gold production as a priority. But this interpretation misses a large slice of the truth regarding his administration. It overlooks, for example, Milner's profound dislike and distrust of the "goldbugs" and his **refusal** in numerous instances to yield to their demands. It misses also the fact that the **dominating** political problem, as seen by the actors themselves, was that of ensuring British control of a self-governing South Africa. From this it may be seen that, while it is true that Milner played a part in creating the modern South African state with all its ugly characteristics, if one attempts to understand the politics of the 1902-5 era from this standpoint, one is likely to fail. To achieve real understanding, it is necessary to attempt to uncover the thoughts and the aspirations of the people who then lived and to view the political problems of the day in the way in which they were seen **at the time**.

Putting this another way, one could say that radicals are content with what they believe is an "inside explanation" of the history of the period. "Conventional historians" believe that their task goes beyond this. It is to explore all possible avenues of enquiry and to attempt to come to grips with the problem of what people thought. Even if the radicals are right in their assertion (or what appears to be their assertion) that the individual acts and thoughts of men are of no consequence because more important forces are at work, the historian's task remains that of, attempting to reconstruct an accurate picture of the past in order to answer the question "What happened?"

The Liberal/Radical debate has now raged for nearly seven years. It has absorbed a great deal of energy on both sides. In many ways, it has stimulated historical thought and has opened many new vistas. It would, however, be a pity if the debate were to continue to dominate South African historiography. One reason for this is that the influence of the radicals can be stifling. Concerned as they are with what they see as a central theme, they are inclined to dismiss as "irrelevant" matters which do not touch upon it. They are also intent upon establishing and extending an ideological and therefore an "orthodox" interpretation of History. Both of these seem to threaten the free exchange of ideas and obscure the truth that History like other academic disciplines, cannot co-exist with orthodoxy. In order to survive, it must continue to be a subject of debate in all its facets.

It is also arguable that the Liberal/Radical debate is diverting attention from other issues which are at least as important for South African historiography. One of these became very clear at the Durban Anglo-Zulu War conference. It is the failure of the South African universities to produce black historians. Mr Oscar Dhloomo, the KwaZulu minister of Education and Cultural Affairs, spoke very plainly about this. The departments of history at black universities, he said, had produced honours and masters graduates but lecturing posts remained closed to them. Chief Buthelezi made similar criticisms of the failure of the black universities to allow black students to present interpretations which challenged the "traditional view of historical events". Only one Zulu historian, S. Maphalala, in fact presented a paper at the conference.

"White South African history" owes an immense debt to historians who were trained in the British universities. Scholars such as Eric Walker, W. M. Macmillan, Michael Roberts, W. A. Maxwell and A. F. Hattersley saw their role in this country as producing not only scholars who would be trained in the discipline of historical scholarship but who would also apply these skills to the uncharted fields of South African history. The result is evident not only in the writings of trained South African scholars beginning with C. W. de Kiewet and J. S. Marais, it is also to be seen in the "local content" of the history department of any English-speaking South African university today. One could point out that a similar role was played by British scholars like J. D. Fage in Ghana, Kenneth Ingham in East Africa and Terence Ranger in Rhodesia. In South Africa, the black universities have, it seems, failed in this regard and South African history is the poorer for this neglect.

Another matter of importance for South African historiography, to which reference was also made at the Durban conference, is the collection of oral evidence. Without these sources, as Mr Dhloomo expressed it, "the complete story of the Anglo-Zulu war and indeed the whole history of the Zulu people will never be told from the Zulu point of view".

By far the most important concern for South African historiography, however, is specialised research. English-speaking universities in this country do not, as a rule, carry their good students through to the doctorate level and academic staff are overloaded with teaching duties. These facts help to explain why South African history is still largely unexplored.

In the absence of detailed knowledge, dangerous generalisations can flourish. It is in this light that the Anglo-Zulu War conference must be viewed, for it was unprecedented in this country that seventeen scholars could meet to deliver papers on a subject so specialised. The resultant exchange of ideas was predictably exciting. It re-emphasised how necessary for History is the stimulus of informed disagreement. □

THE REASON WHY

One night the shooting begins:
strange shots, thumps, explosions;
the whine of bullets,
the cry of victims.

"What is it all about?
Who is the target?
What have we done wrong?
Why be violent against us?"

A bullet howls and smashes through the glass,
ricochets around the room,
and ends up, spinning, under the table.
It is hot. But I pick it up.
On it are written three words,
words that recall a part of the past
and send it crashing into the present:
"For Whites Only".

by Vortex