

POPULARISING THE PAST

A review of:

Robert Edgar; **Because they chose the plan of God
The Story of the Bulhoek Massacre**

Ravan, Johannesburg, 1988

and

Leslie Witz; **Write your own history**

SACHED Trust/Ravan, Johannesburg, 1988

It is a truism that historians, whoever they are, are influenced by their times. They mirror prevailing views of their age in their work, or the kinds of issues they research, and the questions they ask arise out of the problems that permeate their worlds. In some degree, at least, "presentism" is an inherent part of the process of historical reconstruction.

Certainly "people's history" in South Africa was born in the highly charged atmosphere of the 1970s – a decade characterized by unprecedented widespread labour and political unrest, such as the Durban strikes of 1973, and the Soweto uprising of 1976. "Ordinary people", about whom South African historiography had hitherto largely been silent, were flexing their muscles and staking their claim to consideration, not only in the present, but also about their past.

These stirrings, in conjunction with trends in world historiography, most notably the theoretical input of neo-Marxism, which had been gaining ground in Western Europe and North America from the late 1960s, the pioneering work on "history from below" by the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, and the total history approach of the French *Annales* historians, led to a dramatic and enriching increase in research and publication on South African History.

In order to promote the "history from below" approach, the History Workshop was established at the University of the Witwatersrand, and in 1978 initiated the first of a series of triennial conferences which sought to capture the experience of those ordinary people who had hitherto 'slipped through the net of history'. (1) Initially such work was in the main directed to a specialist academic readership, but there also followed attempts to popularise that history outside the universities. As part of this process, the History Workshop Topic Series was devised in conjunction with Ravan Press. The aim of the series is to make recent historical research accessible to a wide audience through short, lively and lavishly illustrated texts.

BULHOEK

The story of the Bulhoek massacre is an appropriate choice to kick off the series. As one of the first post-Union cases of government using police and army troops to crush recalcitrant Africans, placing it on a par with subsequent tragedies like Sharpeville (1960) and Langa

(1985), the Bulhoek massacre has become, in the words of Z.K. Matthews, part of 'the political history of the people'. It is therefore essential to know how and why it happened. Edgar succeeds admirably in this task.

The booklet has been skilfully organised and vividly written so as simultaneously to tell a story, while providing a wider context in order to deepen understanding of the tragic happenings of 24 May 1921. On that day, which happened also to be Empire Day and Smuts's birthday, a force of 800 white policemen and army troops confronted an African prophet, Enoch Mgijima, and his religious followers, the Israelites, who had refused to leave their holy village, Ntabelanga, where they were awaiting the end of the world. The sticks and spears of the Israelites were no match for canons and machine guns, and the encounter left at least 183 dead and 90 wounded.

In order to understand how and why a disagreement between the government and a church group could have ended in such a tragedy, Edgar begins with a biographical account of Enoch Mgijima, the leading figure in the story. Through this technique he is able clearly to recreate the economic, social and political context without which the subsequent events cannot be fully understood. Enoch Mgijima's father, Jonas, was an Mfengu, who were a group of refugees thrown up during the turbulent Shakan wars of the early 19th century. As a reward for assisting British forces in the frontier wars of the Eastern Cape, the Mfengu were given land to occupy in the Ciskei so that they could simultaneously serve as a protective buffer and a source of labour for white farmers. In this way the Mgijima family came to be settled at Kamastone near Queenstown in 1856. They called their home Ntabelanga, "the mountain of the rising sun".

STRUGGLE

While some Mfengu did well, others struggled, and with the passage of years, those who had done well began to struggle too in the face of drought, disease and government legislation, which restricted African access to land in order to obtain labour. Born in 1868, Enoch Mgijima grew up in this changing environment. In 1907, Mgijima had a vision that the end of the world was coming, and only those who worshipped God in the traditional manner would survive the holocaust. He broke away from the Wesleyan Methodist Church, of which he had been an active member, and joined the black American Church of God and Saints of Christ. He regarded himself as the

Church's prophet in Africa. Among the new religious practices he adopted was the annual observance of the Passover, when all church members were expected to come to a specific place to worship for a week. His refusal to give up his vision of the coming of the end of the world resulted in his expulsion from the American church. Mgijima's faction became known as the Israelites, because of his love of Old Testament stories.

In 1919, Mgijima called Israelites from all over South Africa to come to Ntabelanga to await the coming of the Lord. By 1921 their numbers had swelled to 3000. In a world that was being turned upside down by soaring inflation, the 'flu epidemic of 1918, drought in 1919, and increasing political impotence, Mgijima's prophecies offered attractive hope that outcasts would become chosen ones.

Passover gatherings had hitherto been temporary affairs, now Ntabelanga was acquiring the look of a permanent, well-developed settlement. Spurred on by complaints from surrounding white and African farmers, government authorities determined to deal with what they deemed to be a squatter problem. This determination was intensified by the humiliating retreat of a police force sent to disperse the Israelites in December 1920, after which Israelite resistance had extended to the point of refusing to pay taxes. The final outcome was the massacre at Bulhoek on 24 May 1921.

Edgar concludes his account with the meaning of Bulhoek down the years. While the range of viewpoints he considers varies, they all see the Israelite movement as more than a religious movement. It constituted a challenge to white political and economic control. In order to illustrate his point that millenarian movements are not uncommon in societies under extreme stress, he discusses the role of 19th century Xhosa prophets in a box separated from the text. A second box discusses the role of independent African churches which seek to transform the Christian religion from an instrument of conquest to one of resistance. This technique assists in creating a wider context for understanding Bulhoek without cluttering the main narrative. A well-chosen list of books for further reading concludes the booklet.

PEOPLE'S HISTORY

After 1985, "people's history" acquired a dimension beyond merely making sophisticated research accessible to a wider public. Here the initiative came primarily from black South Africans. Tired of the myths and distortions about the past which black children were expected to imbibe passively as facts in history classes, the National Education Crisis Committee set up a History Commission with the specific objective of providing material to rectify distortions, and to teach history in such a way as to promote a questioning and critical participation of pupils in the learning process. In 1987, a history pack entitled **What is History? A New Approach to History for Students, Workers and Communities** was produced to this end.

Leslie Witz's book, **Write your own history**, which was developed under the auspices of the History Workshop and the SACHED Trust, seeks to take this approach a step further by encouraging ordinary people to research and write history themselves. His exposition of the skills

necessary for such an undertaking is based on his own training as an historian, and on the problems and experience of three groups: workers from Kagiso on the West Rand who set out to write a history of the Young Christian Workers organisation; students at the Witwatersrand Council of Churches Project, who had been in matric during the Soweto uprisings and had chosen to write a history of Soweto '76 from a family perspective; and young residents of Driefontein in the south-eastern Transvaal, whose community had suffered the threat of removal and resettlement, as a "black spot" in a designated white area. Witz has also drawn on the experiences of other groups such as the Grahamstown and Swaziland Oral History Projects.

The practical value of writing history, in overcoming prevailing distortions and uncovering 'the hidden past', is stressed. History is empowerment – understanding the past helps to explain the present, and equips people to work towards change in the future. As Antonio Mussapi, involved in People's History Work in Nampula, Mozambique put it:

Time past
Which lights up today
And tomorrow
Making it clear.

But amidst his very serious aim, Witz never loses sight of the sheer fun of writing history, and effectively conveys this.

DISCUSSION AND EXERCISES

The book begins with a discussion on how to choose a topic and the first questions to ask, both specific and contextual. Then follows a discussion of where to look for the answers (the section on where to get help at the end of the book is useful) and an exposition of the different kinds of sources which the writer of history needs. The discussion of each source is accompanied by a practical exercise on how to use it, with suggested answers at the end of the book. Of particular value is the excellent section on how to make notes from books (a skill which seems to evade even university students!), and the exposition of the techniques of collecting and evaluating oral history which is of fundamental importance to the history of people, whose lives and activities seldom find their way into written documents.

I talk,
Talk with people,
The people who speak to me
Of time past
Which falls and does not germinate
If I don't talk.

Also valuable is the practical advice on how to construct a chronological table, where events specific to the subject being researched are placed in the wider context of national events. There is also practical advice on how to use a library, and the equipment needed for research.

Perhaps the most important part of the book is the discussion of bias. Recognising that all history is written from a point of view, and this involves not merely the activity of reconstructing history, but also the making of the sources themselves, the book provides activities for

detecting it and dealing with it. For instance, the evidence of different witnesses given at the trial of Constable Nienaber for fatally shooting the Driefontein community leader, Saul Mkhize, is juxtaposed, and the reader is asked to evaluate this conflicting evidence through a series of questions. The judgement of Justice P.O. de Villiers on 24 April 1984 is provided, and the reader is then asked to compare his/her conclusions with those of the Judge, and to consider to what extent point of view had influenced the respective evaluations of the evidence, and one might add, the evidence of the witnesses themselves.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

If history is to throw light on the present then it must be critically reconstructed and considered, even though point of view is inescapable. Without this critical evaluation, the past can become a misleading source of darkness instead of light in the present. Witz quotes the words of Rosalee, a member of the Soweto '76 group:

We must include both the good and bad things if we want people to respect our work. They might not agree with our political aims but at least they will see we are not distorting our information just to further our line . . . We have to learn from history in order to develop our organisation.

The book ends with a discussion on how to present the findings of the research undertaking. This presentation need not necessarily take the form of a book, but could also be presented as a talk, a play, an exhibition, a video or a film among other things. For those unable to complete the task of writing, there are these comforting words:

Don't be discouraged if you have not had enough time to write up your history. The information you have collected is very valuable . . . Store your information in a safe place so that you or someone else can use it in the future.

This advice is particularly important as far as the collection of oral history is concerned, which could provide a valuable adjunct to the individual attempts of professional historians, and the systematic attempts of institutions, such as the University of the Witwatersrand, to collect and preserve such evidence, without which "history from below" cannot be adequately written, or a feel for it developed.

So sound is the exposition of historical method in Witz's book, and so effectively have the practical activities been devised and drawn up, that it has potential uses beyond its intended readership. For instance, with some adaptations it can be used to encourage the development of history essay-writing skills in undergraduate students, as well as to devise primary-research activities among them. One thing that is missing from the book, although it is there implicitly, is a discussion of the role of theory and hypothesis in historical reconstruction. It is difficult to see, though, how this could be done overtly within the scope of this particular book. But there is a useful section at the end with suggested readings 'about different points

of view' for those who wish to add a more sophisticated dimension to their analyses.

"PRESENTISM"

In "presentism" lies both the use and abuse of history. The latter has been far too prevalent in South African historiography, causing Rodney Davenport to comment in a recent article that 'we South Africans are among the least historically-minded people on earth', meaning by historically-minded 'being curious to know what the past was really like, and being prepared to make a bit of an effort to find this out'. (2) Instead the past has been plundered to serve present political purposes. Without historical-mindedness the primary function of history as a means of understanding the present through an honest and critical attempt to understand the past (and thus of possibly acting wisely in the future) cannot be achieved – and historical-mindedness most usually proceeds from curiosity about present issues.

Developments in South African historiography since the early 1970s, not least the emergence of people's history, have greatly enlarged and enriched the understanding of the South African past, and promise to continue doing so. As Davenport himself has said of the exponents of people's history,

They have managed to change the agenda of historical studies in important respects, enabling us to get a better grasp of the inwardness of our own past.

Yet he goes on to argue that people's history, with its need for simplicity and bold lines of argument, rather than subtle qualification, constitutes an 'inferior, essentially secondary role for the history profession'.(3) The evidence of the value and potential of Edgar's and Witz's work suggests the contrary. While people's history should not be the only kind of history to be produced about South Africa, it constitutes an important part of the overall strategy to capture the South African past in its totality insofar as this can be done, so that the present can be better understood in all its complexity. While there will always be different points of view, the critical study of history can lead to understanding why this should be so. And the critical method, which is the basic technique of the discipline of history, provides common ground for all historians, whatever their ideological persuasion or nationality, so that they can at least engage in meaningful discussion, if not reach full mutual agreement. History, in its best sense, has a key role to play in this era of fundamental transition in South Africa if new myths about the past are not to succeed the old. As Willie Lee Rose has put it in the different context of slavery historiography in the United States, 'what long ago happened need not determine what will occur tomorrow'. (4) □

Notes:

1. Saunders, C., 'Towards understanding South Africa's past' in **South Africa International**, Vol. 19, No. 2, October 1988, P.67.
2. Davenport, R., 'History in South Africa in the 1980s: Why bother about it?' in **South Africa International**, Vol. 19, No. 2, October 1988, p.96.
3. *Ibid*, p.103.
4. Rose, Willie Lee, 'The New Slave Studies: An Old Reaction or a New Maturity?', in W.W. Freehling, ed, **Slavery and Freedom Willie Lee Rose**, Oxford, 1982, p.176.