

A HUNDRED YEARS

IN OPPOSITION

A review of *Outlook on a Century: South Africa 1870–1970*; ed. Francis Wilson and Dominique Perrot; Spro-cas and Lovedale Press, 1973; R15.

by Marie Dyer

Outlook on a Century is a collection of editorials and articles from the 100-year-old *South African Outlook*. This journal, still appearing regularly, is the oldest in the country, having been first published in 1870 at the Lovedale Mission as the *Kaffir Express*. Writers such as Jabavu, Thema, Dube, Schreiner, Brookes, Gandhi, Kerr, Z. K. Matthews, Paton, have contributed to it and are represented in the collection.

The continued existence of the journal, and the extraordinary contemporary relevance of many of even its oldest articles, clearly reveal the venerability and consistency of the anti-apartheid tradition in South Africa. The centenary editorial (Oct, 1970) points out that the *Outlook* was founded before the *Afrikaner Bond*, and is almost twice as old as *Die Burger*. In 1880 and 1894 editorials 'drew attention to the two traditional policies of the country, and reiterated its belief that legislation which had the effect of widening the chasm between black and white was unchristian and would be disastrous' (p.1)

For 100 years, as this principle with its implications has been steadily breached and eroded, the journal has defended it; often, perhaps, too mildly; usually, until recently, more in sorrow than in anger (though there are some outbursts of noble passion), but consistently, patiently and humanely.

Much of the fascination of the book—often a melancholy even a dismal fascination—is its evidence that anxiety and concern have been voiced for scores of years over the problems which are still acute now. Poverty, passes, migrant labour, forced removals, the right to strike, the rule of law, church and politics—these are consistent subjects throughout the book, as the following brief extracts show.

Pass Legislation. Editorial, June 1889

Any Native who does not carry this certificate, who may have lost in on a journey, or forgotten to take it on every occasion, when he goes a short distance from his house, is liable 'to a fine of twenty shillings, or in default a month's imprisonment with or without spare diet and hard labour'. But penalties such as these belong to the criminal code; and under just laws, in any country, can only be inflicted for crimes or offences against life or property, or morality or decency. Is it then a crime for a native to live in the land where he was born, and which was his was his before it was ours, and is he to be liable to criminally penalties for the non-possession of a document whose value is merely arbitrary? It is certain that many will fall victims to this law, through error and omission as well as by intent. In the criminal statistics as they are summed up each year all these offences will go to swell the totals of the crime of the country, and will help to make the Cape Colony appear worse than it really is. Is this manufacture of crime and criminals on a purely non-moral basis to be called statemanship?

The Pass System. Editorial, July 1940.

It appears as if the system has been kept in being and intensified through the influence of a certain class of employers, who want labour forced into their service without the necessity of attracting it by better wages or better conditions. Is then a proper function of the state by criminal process to force labourers out of one area in order to compel them to go to another, where conditions may be less desirable? The procedure only needs stating to stand condemned. This is not the way free countries assist employers or the unemployed.

What benefit to the state can be placed to the credit of the pass system, to counterbalance the insult and humiliation it inflicts directly or indirectly upon two thirds of the population, the undeserved imprisonment of great number of most inoffensive men, the rankling sense of injustice produced in the hearts of its victims, and the bitterness against the White race and, most unfortunately, against the police?

The pass system may have had, and may still in some limited degree have, its uses; but, regarded as a whole, it is a wrong way of doing things, unsound in principle, oppressive in effect. It has become a form of social persecution.

Broken Homes. Editorial, January, 1920

Any one coming into contact with the Native people at their homes is soon forced to realise the harm that is being done to Native family life by the repeated and prolonged absences from home of the men who work at the mines, the docks, the railways, and the city stores. A large proportion of the Native male population is always away from home. As boys of seventeen they begin to go; with intervals at home to rest and to plough their little plots, most of them continue going until they are middle-aged, that is until they have sons to go in their place. A large proportion of these men send home or bring home the money they earn; some even injure their health by overeconomising on their food in order that they may bring home more. A good proportion, in spite of the temptations of the towns, remain sober men and faithful to their wives. Is it surprising that others fail? 'Where is your husband?' you ask some poor woman. 'He is at the Mines.' 'When did he go?' 'Three years ago.' 'Does he send you money?' 'No.' 'What is the matter; is he drinking?' 'I hear so.'

Unhappily there is another side to the question, and it is not surprising that there should be another side. Many of the wives have no homes of their own. The erection of a house, even a hut, is beyond the means of many of the men; the wife also would be afraid to live alone; therefore she lives along with some other family, in the same room it may be, because a round hut has often to accommodate all and sundry. A young man came home from work and found that during his long absence at Cape Town his attractive young wife had fallen victim to some young scoundrel who has probably been a school mate of hers. The wife was packed off to her home. Phthisis developed and not long after the birth of the child, the writer saw her at home. Emaciated and weak, her bright looks faded, she was a mere spectre of her former self. She was in a state of extreme mental distress. 'I can't sleep' she said. Her lost home, her husband's unforgiving anger, her ever-present sin.

Effects of Migratory Labour, D. W. Semple, November 1946

It is no part of my duty to assess the damages and apportion blame for the evils of our migratory system,

but I am constrained to say this. Countries that were involved in the war know at first hand and very sorely what disruption of the home means, for in many cases all the sons and some of the daughters were away from home for years. The condition was bearable only because it was a war condition, and always there was the end of the war to be looked for—'this one thing I do'. We have grown so accustomed to the African people having to go to work and leave their home for indefinite periods, we accept it as a matter of course. But we ourselves would regard it as intolerable and utterly wrong if we could not stay at the place where we work and have our wives and families with us. We are guilty of a great sin in our facile quiescent acceptance of such a condition, and though we may say we can't help it and that it is none of our doing, God will not hold us guiltless. It is no use railing at the millionaires and the other lesser creatures who have made fortunes out of gold shares and who don't care a hang at what cost to the souls and bodies of the mine workers. We are all involved directly or indirectly, for we are citizens of the Union of South Africa, and the reason why our taxation is so relatively light is that the Government takes so much of the running costs of the country out of the gold mines.

Community of the Careless, Anthony Barker, April 1970

Economic or even social analysis of migratory labour will fail to reveal the full picture of its costs in terms of human misery. To learn this you must listen to the lonely wife, the anxious mother, the insecure child. Small tokens, it may be said, yet straws blown by the rising wind, indications of the gale that blows around the bend of the decade. It is at family level that the most pain is felt, and we cannot forget that the African cultural heritage enshrines a broader, more noble concept of family than that of the West. The extended family has proved a marvellous security for those for whom, otherwise, there was no security at all. The extended family is a net wide enough to gather the child who falls from the feeble control of neglectful parents; it receives the widow, tolerates the batty, gives status to grannies. Migratory labour destroys this, by taking away for long months together, the father, the brother, the lover and the friend. Each must go, and no one fools themselves that these men can live decent lives in a sexual vacuum. The resultant promiscuity is but one aspect of a mood of irresponsibility. For your migrant is concerned with nobody but himself; his own survival is the only survival that he can influence by any act he performs. He may be well fed; doubtless he is. He may be well cared for; doubtless he is. He may have the companionship of others like himself. Yet the food he eats cannot fill the bellies of his children, nor the blanket he sleeps under warm any but himself. His care, his love, his family loyalty cannot reach out to his wife, nor caress his children, nor extend to the grandmother who brought him up.

*Orlando 'Model Native Town'. Neil Macvicar,
March 1940*

Take the £4 6s 8d. man, an abstainer, occupying a three-room house. Rent 25s. railway fares 8s 6d., poll tax 1s 8d., burial society fees 2s 6d. Total for items that must be paid £1 17s 8d. This leaves for food and other items a margin of £2 9s. But the food alone costs £3 14s., plus supplements. It is obvious that in the case of neither of these typical tenants can the family be fed on the wage earned; at best they can be half-starved on it.

It is clear that the average man living at Orlando cannot himself support a family. He cannot ask a woman to share his home, cook his food and look after his children on the usual basis that he has a wage sufficient to maintain the home. His wage is sub-economic.

Eviction, Editorial May 1914

But it is to the harsh condition under which these changes are being made that we direct special attention. In one instance that has recently come to our notice, a chief and his people have been living on land on which they and their fathers have dwelt for eight generations. This 'farm' recently was purchased by a farmer resident in another Province who decided to terminate rent-paying conditions previously in existence between the former owner and the Natives, and to substitute labour conditions, under which even the chief, an old man, has been required to give service. The people were called on to quit their houses, which are square buildings of bricks and timber and thatched. Most of the people are Christians and had erected a good building which they used for church and school purposes. In connection with this the new owner gave less than one month's notice in the following terms: 'This is to notify you that I can let you have the school building no longer. I bought the farm and wish to receive same at the end of of your school quarter.'

In another instance from the Northern Transvaal the Natives have been given only three months to leave the place occupied by them and their fathers for generations. They have to abandon their houses with their beams, doors and thatch, and their school-room.

These are typical instances exemplifying the hardship, and the callous enforcement of 'rights' which is going on. The Native Affairs Department when appealed to, indicated that in such cases Natives may have a claim for compensation for buildings they have to abandon a claim which it might be advisable for them to seek legal assistance to enforce. Few Natives in such circumstances would go to law, knowing full well that the expense of such suits would consume most, or all, of any compensation that might be awarded to them.

The long road. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

(acknowledgement to 'The Classic')

