

FROM PROTEST TO CHALLENGE

A review of *From Protest to Challenge, Vol I. Protest and Hope 1882 – 1934*, by Karis, T. and Carter, Gwendolen M., selected by Sheridan Jules (Hoover Institute Press, Stanford University, California).

by Edgar Brookes.

The volume under review ("Protest and Hope") is the first of a trilogy. The two volumes yet to appear are "Hope and Challenge, 1935-1952" and "Challenge and Violence 1953-64". The general editors, well-known to many South Africans, are Professor Thomas Karis, of City College, City University of New York, and Professor Gwendolen M. Carter of Northwestern University. The volume presently under review has been compiled by Dr Sheridan Johns of Duke University.

The very nature of the trilogy implies certain assumptions – that the role of African leadership is vastly more important in South African history than traditional historians have made it, that it is worth recording in detail, that its movement towards fulfilment and liberation is right, that the time for requests is passing and the time for demands has arrived. These assumptions, by and large, are the assumptions of "Reality", which must therefore welcome this monumental work.

Even if their views are different, all students of South African affairs would be bound to welcome this documentary history. It fills, and fills well, a gap in our historical records, and is edited with skill, reasonable impartiality and great thoroughness.

In pre-Union days appeals to the Crown or to the British Government were frequent and not unjustifiable. It took the Africans a long time to realise that Britain had, in effect, abandoned them to the ruling South African Whites. This final abandonment, strangely enough, was the work of the British Liberal Party which, with quite indefensive optimism, sacrificed them on the altar of Afrikaans-English reconciliation after the Anglo-Boer War. Petitions to King George V are recorded just before World War I started (20th July 1914) and just after it ended (16th December, 1918). "It is with painful regret," say the petitioners in the latter document, "that we remind Your Majesty that those Victorian principles with which our people associate with the high ideals of the British Constitution have been departed from and in the main dishonoured and ignored by Your Majesty's representative governments in South Africa." As late as June 1925 there is recorded a petition to the Prince of Wales by the Transvaal Mine Clerks' Association.

It is to be noted that as late as 1930 Africans describe themselves as "Natives" or occasionally as "Bantu".

As one reads through these documents, one is struck with the dignity and good sense of them, and the ability of the writers, certainly not less than that of the leaders of the present day. There were some very great men in the period 1882-1934. As one reads these documents one is filled with a burning shame that White South Africa did not react as it ought to have done to their decency, honesty and tolerance. If the White man's place in South Africa is in peril today, it is due to his own fault. We Liberals must have our own moment of truth – and of penitence – as we realise how easily we dismissed some of these potent, courteous but devastating arguments.

Nor is it South Africans only who need to be ashamed. Many of those Englishmen who are so smug about South Africa in this second half of the twentieth century ought to realise that Lord Milner and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman no less than General Smuts let these moderate, reasonable and courteous representations fall to the ground while there was still time to do something constructive with them. It is they and others like them who have, by their failure to do anything effective, led the South Africa of 1973 into the quicksands and morasses of the present day.

When one reads the works of D.D.T. Jabavu, Sol Plaatje, V. Selope Thema, Z. R. Maabane or H. Selby Msimang, one cannot but feel sad at the contrast between them and some of the crude black militant leaders of today. But who created the movement for black exclusiveness and black aggression? Surely the white man, not merely the advocates of baasskap and apartheid, but the timid and hesitating well-wishers, the so-called friends of the Africans who put comfortable living and the *status quo* above the justice of God. Few of us who lived before the apartheid election of 1948 can escape some burning feelings of penitence about our inadequacy.

Professors Karis and Carter and Dr Johns have put us all in their debt, not merely by getting between the joints of our armour of complacency, but by preserving a permanent record of the humanity and decency, moderation and good-will of the past generation of African leaders. These are great qualities. They are not dead. Even now if white South Africa were to wake up and face facts and ethical demands, our coming together in unity would not be impossible. But if (which heaven forbid) South Africa should go down in blood and fire and tears, this volume will show conclusively that it was not the work of the earlier African leadership that this should be so. □