

## BOOK REVIEW

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# Martin Plaut, *Promise and Despair. The First Struggle for a Non-Racial South Africa*

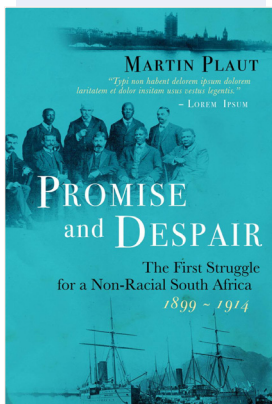
*Despite prevailing orthodoxy of the roots of South Africa's deep racial inequalities dating back to the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, Martin Plaut's book Promise and Despair. The First Struggle for a Non-Racial South Africa looks at more recent events with a particular focus on the negotiations around the creation of the Union of South Africa. Professor Milton Shain reviews this work and looks at the failings that led to increased oppression and racial segregation that would last for decades.*

'Jan van Riebeeck's arrival in Cape Town', claimed President Jacob Zuma in early 2015, 'was the beginning of all South Africa's problems'. Herein lies our original sin. Martin Plaut, a former African editor of the BBC World Service, would disagree. For him it was the South Africa Act of 1909 - ratified by the Imperial power - rather than van Riebeeck that ensured South Africa's racial order for most of the twentieth century. After all, Plaut reminds us, the old Cape Colony and Natal had a colour-blind franchise from 1853 and 1856 respectively, in fundamental opposition to the northern Boer Republics where race defined all. And despite limited implications for 'non-whites' in the Cape Colony and especially Natal, race did not inevitably have to define South Africa's polity.

While acknowledging the erosion of African, Coloured and Indian representation as the nineteenth century progressed (supported by English- and Afrikaans-speakers), Plaut insists the blame lies with those who negotiated the Union's constitution and - perhaps most importantly - with the Colonial Office and British House of Commons and Lords that ratified the Act. For Plaut, therefore, this was the original sin.

The signs that Britain would kowtow to Boer interests were already apparent at the conclusion of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902 when the ambiguous Clause 9 of the Vereeniging Peace Treaty left the door open for the black franchise to be considered only once responsible government had been returned to the Boer Republics. But the Boers had no intention of reconsidering that ambiguous clause. For them an extension of the Cape qualified franchise would exclude many previous Boer voters. This was unacceptable. They wished a return of the white franchise as had been the case antebellum.

Yet all was not lost for the black population, many of whom had participated in the colonial war effort. Whitehall had periodically spoken of ameliorating the exploitative conditions under which they lived and they had good reason to believe they would be rewarded for their loyalty to Britain. As one commentator put it 'the



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British Government, led by their known and proverbial sense of justice and equality, would, in the act of general settlement, have the position of the black races upon the land fully considered, and at the conclusion of the war the whole land would revert to the British Nation, when it would be a timely moment, they thought, for the English to show an act of sympathy towards those who had been despoiled of their land and liberties (p.46).

Alas, this did not happen. Instead the Colonial Office empathised with Boer fears and black concerns were side-lined. Political divisions within the black population did not help matters. Abdullah Abdurahman, a Glasgow-trained medical doctor and leader of the African People's Organisation (APO), for example, wished to extend the Cape franchise to the north for 'coloured subjects', but showed a willingness to exclude 'aboriginal natives' (p. 63).

When the South African National Convention deliberated from October 1908 to May 1909 black concerns were effectively ignored: at issue was a compromise between the English and Afrikaners. In the final South Africa Act of 1909, the Union constitution, steered under the chairmanship of Sir Henry de Villiers, blacks were excluded from the franchise other than in the Cape, and 'non-Europeans' excluded from membership of Parliament. Convention leaders it would seem were confident that Britain would ratify their plans. Whitehall was certainly delighted to see old division between the Boers and English relegated to the past.

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This was apparent when a South African Native and Coloured People's Delegation travelled to London in an attempt to thwart the efforts of the South African National Convention. Setting sail from Cape Town in the winter of 1909, the delegates had one objective: to persuade the British parliament not to ratify the constitution. Former prime minister of the Cape Colony, William (W P) Schreiner, was joined by John Dube, Matt Fredericks, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, Dr Walter Rubusana, John Tengo Jabavu, Thomas Mapikela, Joseph Gerrans, Daniel Dwanya and D.J. Lenders. All were highly motivated, distinguished and competent leaders with Schreiner providing direction to the mission.

The one time prime minister of the Cape Colony - a liberal with important contacts in the 'mother country' and a steely determination to ensure a future without racial exclusion - left no stone unturned. Working tirelessly, Schreiner met with a range of progressive individuals, among them the MP Sir Charles Dilke, Keir Hardie, and Ramsay MacDonald, as well as influential lobby groups such as the Aborigines' Protection Society. It was an uphill task. As Plaut explains, the 'deputation was up against well-co-ordinated and well-resourced opposition: the combined weight of the political leadership of white South Africa and the British government' (p. 87).

In essence, however, Whitehall had made up its mind. Secret minutes detailing formal negotiations with the official South African delegation on 20 July, 1909, make it abundantly clear that the British government supported the new constitution: 'It is the fixed conviction of His Majesty's Government that these matters must be settled in South Africa itself. It was of no use to express academic options, and His Majesty's Government feel that circumstances have not made it possible to adopt a

different course than that adopted' (p.100). Indeed, Whitehall was relieved that the Boers and English-speakers had come together, only eight years after the Anglo-Boer War. Wary of a looming confrontation with Germany - ratcheted up from the time of the Jameson Raid in 1895 and the Kaiser's cosying up to Paul Kruger - Whitehall anticipated the help of Union in its future geo-political plans.

Plaut traces the passage of the South Africa Act through the House of Lords and Commons. Although many spoke up for South Africa's majority black population, and although many Liberals and Labourites willingly engaged with Schreiner and his team, in the end all efforts failed. Even Schreiner's warning that confidence in the two-third safeguard against removing blacks from the Cape Franchise was misconceived - as was the belief that the king would be able to prevent constitutional change - could not prevent the Act's approval.

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Afrikaner fears had to be assuaged and a new beginning for white South Africans ensured. Henceforth South African whites would fashion their own future. As Jan Smuts told the Manchester Guardian, two issues had been confronted by the South African National Convention: relations between English and Afrikaners and relations between black and white. 'After weeks of discussion of this latter problem we came to the

conclusion that it was impossible to solve both problems at the same time. We solved the one and left the other to the larger and wiser South Africa of the future which could deal with the question much better than we could even hope to do at the Convention' (p133).

Yet opponents of the Act had not wasted their time. Contacts were established and those British organisations that had supported the delegation were greatly appreciated. 'A small but influential group of British men and women had come over to their side', writes Plaut. 'Many who had been the backbone of the "pro-Boer" movement during the Anglo-Boer conflict had revised their ideas about the Afrikaners. While Smuts managed to maintain his personal links with some of his Pro-Boer friends (and women in particular), a more sceptical attitude towards South African whites was emerging among the British left and a section of the intelligentsia' (p.154).

While detailing in the main the delegation's efforts in London, Plaut also pursues the parallel efforts of Mohandas Gandhi in the metropole on behalf of Transvaal Indians and in South Africa where he wrestled with the wily Smuts. Refreshing insights are drawn from the papers of Betty Molteno and Emily Hobhouse, while divisions within the Coloured and African communities are explored. Plaut also traces the tireless work of black elites, leading to the emergence of the South African Native National Congress in 1912, later renamed the African National Congress, is traced.

Yet despite all the efforts to establish a non-racial order, white supremacy entrenched itself and the racial order was solidified. Sadly little vision was demonstrated in the ensuing decades. Notwithstanding Dube, Pixley Seme, Solomon Plaatje and others doing their best to illustrate the dead-end of race based politics, much water had to flow under the bridge before the white minority came to its senses and negotiated a future in which all would participate.