

Besprekingsartikel

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Review Article

Peter Limb, The ANC's Early Years: Nation, Class and Place in South Africa before 1940

Unisa Press, Pretoria, 2010 (Hidden History Series)

540 pp

ISBN 978-1-86888-447-6

R295.00

Susan Booysen, The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power: People, Party, Policy

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2011

512 pp

ISBN 978-1-86814-542-3

R225.00

Kader Asmal and Adrian Hadland, with Moira Levy, Kader Asmal: Politics in My Blood. A Memoir

Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2011

313 pp

ISBN978-1-43140-257-1

R249.95

The ANC's 100 years: Some recent work on its history in historiographical context

*Chris Saunders**

Centenaries are often the occasion for publishers to bring out new work,¹ and the centenary of the African National Congress, the oldest nationalist movement on the African continent, in 2012 has proved no exception. By the time of writing in mid-2012, however, few new works of substance had appeared to open up new perspectives on the history of the organisation over its hundred-year history. In January, the ANC's Progressive Business Forum published a very expensive coffee-table book, *Unity in Diversity*, in celebration of the leaders of the ANC over the century. After a copy was presented to Nelson Mandela, it was launched at lavish events in Cape Town and Johannesburg in February, but its brief sections of text, interspersed with numerous full-page photographs, did not add anything to our knowledge of the movement over time.² The journalist Heidi Holland brought out a new, updated edition of her 1989 book on the history of the ANC, now entitled *100 Years of Struggle: Mandela's ANC*. The sections dealing with the early ANC often reproduce, sometimes line by line, what she had written over two decades previously. Though she now includes a brief chapter on the ANC in power, and in an Epilogue begins to criticise Mandela, not only on failing to respond to the AIDS crisis, but also for not

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1. The centenary of the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 2010 did not see any major new publication devoted to the Union over the century, though the *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa* did devote a special issue to the topic: 64, 3, July–September 2010.
2. R. Schoeman and D. Swanepoel (eds), *Unity in Diversity: 100 Years of ANC Leadership (1912–2012)* (BM Books, Johannesburg, 2012). The Sandton launch was attended by over 300 businessmen, 12 ministers and deputy ministers and 25 ambassadors. For information on Mandela receiving a copy, see for example <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=9339>.

dealing with corruption and for allowing the arms deal to be signed on his watch, her treatment remains anecdotal and relatively superficial.³ More significant, as representing new work on the ANC's history, are two books recently published in the Jacana Pocket History series: the first history of the ANC Youth League from its establishment in 1944 to the present, and the first biography of Govan Mbeki.⁴ These follow the publication in the same series of a brief history of Umkhonto we Sizwe, which became the ANC's armed wing, by Janet Cherry.⁵ All three are admirable short surveys, but their very conciseness inevitably means that they lack great substance.⁶ Other scholarly work is in the pipeline for publication later in the centenary year,⁷ but in mid-2012 it remained to be seen whether any of it would equal in importance the two monographs under review here, which appeared shortly before the centenary year began. The same size and

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3. H. Holland, *100 Years of Struggle: Mandela's ANC* (Penguin Books, Johannesburg, 2012). Other popular works included, C. Smith, *Mandela and America* (New Africa Books, Cape Town, 2012).
 4. C. Bundy, *Govan Mbeki* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2012); C. Glaser, *The ANC Youth League* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2012).
 5. J. Cherry, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2011).
 6. The publicity for Bundy's *Govan Mbeki* referred to him as "an intellectual giant who radiated an unflinching commitment and devotion to the struggle for freedom ... [and] set a sterling example of dedication to the rural poor and the working class of South Africa. A disciplined and hardworking member and leader of the ANC and SACP, he devoted his life to the struggle for the liberation of his people."
 7. Including a revised edition of S. Ellis and T. Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (James Currey, London, 1992); a special issue of the *South African Historical Journal* on "The ANC at 100" (64, 3, September 2012); a collection of papers edited by A. Lissoni and others from the conference on "One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories and Democracy Today", held in September 2011 (Wits University Press, forthcoming in 2012); and a volume on liberation struggles in the region edited by H. Sapire and C. Saunders (UCT Press, forthcoming in 2012). A. Odendaal's *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2012) is a major work on the background to the formation of SANNK in 1912.

shape, they both run to five hundred pages.⁸ The one concerns the ANC to 1940, the other the ANC from 1994.

To understand the importance of these two works, and of the memoir also under review, it is necessary to sketch some of the relevant historiographical context. As is well-known, a vast literature has been spawned on the ANC. Much of what emerged from within the ANC during the struggle was, hardly surprisingly, partisan, polemical and propagandistic, designed to help promote the ANC in that struggle. Since the advent of formal democracy, some writing on the ANC has continued in the same vein, glorifying the ANC's role, while those disillusioned with the ANC have instead emphasised negative aspects, such as the promotion of violence implied in the concept of a people's war and the horrific incidents that took place in the movement's camps in Angola.⁹ With the coming of independence to tropical African countries around 1960, new histories of the new nations were written by scholars who looked back into the past to trace the road to independence, and tended to present independence as the goal of a struggle by a united people under the leadership of one or other "great men". While there was no similar historiography in the South African case after 1994, what may be called a nationalist interpretation of our recent history has begun to develop in public discourse. This emphasises the armed struggle as the key force making for victory over apartheid, and tends to play down the negotiated settlement that was reached, based as it was on a series of compromises. The primary role of the ANC in the struggle, the heroism of its leaders and the importance of its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), are emphasised. Like the much more extreme version in Zimbabwe, which Terence Ranger has called "patriotic history", this is a set of myths about the past.¹⁰ While

8. Both have predominantly yellow and green covers, with some black as well, making up the three ANC colours.

9. For example A. Jeffrey, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2009); P. Trewhela, *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the Exile History of the ANC and SWAPO* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2009).

10. A similar approach is to be seen in Namibia, most notably in Sam Nujoma's autobiography, significantly entitled *Where Others Wavered* (Panaf Books, London, 2001).

history of course allows for different interpretations, historians must aim for the truth, based on the evidence available, and have a duty to puncture myths about the past, nationalist or otherwise. In the South African case, in a recent example of an attempt to do this, the American Scott Couper, the author of a major biography of Chief Albert Luthuli, has criticised what he calls nationalist writing that downplays Luthuli's opposition, when president-general of the ANC, to the idea of turning to armed struggle in 1961.¹¹

While we need more critical history of this kind, we also need to know, if we are to assess new work, how historical literature of the ANC has developed over time. To date, no scholar has analysed how the now vast and varied historiography of the ANC has evolved.¹² All I can do here is to discuss, briefly and inevitably very selectively, some relevant works, emphasising scholarly writing, and focusing mainly on the history of the ANC as an organisation, rather than, say, on the individuals who worked within it.¹³ In his short history of the

11. Especially S. Couper, "Irony upon Irony upon Irony: The Mythologising of Nationalist History in South Africa", *South African Historical Journal*, 63, 2, 2011, pp 339–346; and S. Couper, "Emasculating Agency: An Unambiguous Assessment of Albert Luthuli's Stance on Violence", *South African Historical Journal*, 64, 3, 2012, pp 564–586.
12. Tom Lodge produced perhaps the closest approximation to this over twenty years ago, but he was concerned with the ANC's own writing and he touched only very briefly on the way in which that writing had progressed chronologically. See T. Lodge, "Charters From the Past: The African National Congress and its Historiographical Traditions", *Radical History Review*, 46, 7, 1990, pp 161–188.
13. For the more recent history of the ANC, there are now a dozen biographies of Nelson Mandela, while more than 20 of his close colleagues have written memoirs. Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (Little, Brown & Co, Boston, 1994), preceded by the autobiography of Albert Luthuli (Collins, London, 1962) and, for example, R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle against Apartheid* (Heinemann, Oxford, 1993), was followed by many others, including those by Rusty Bernstein, Ahmad Kathrada, Jean Middleton, Jay Naidoo, James Ngculu, Archie Sibeko, Ray Simons, Raymond Suttner and Ben Turok. Among the many biographies are those of Peter Brown (Michael Cardo), Albert Luthuli (Scott Couper), Mac Maharaj (Pdraig O'Malley), Trevor Manuel (Pippa Green), Thabo Mbeki (Mark Gevisser),

ANC, published in 2000, Saul Dubow expressed his surprise “that no reliable, unpartisan and well researched general history of the ANC from its foundation to the present exists”, and this remains the case over a decade later.¹⁴ While the complexity of the relationship between the ANC and the broader liberation movement may help explain why we still lack such a history, it is also the case that the writing of such a history requires a combination of distance from the movement and empathy that has to date been lacking. We can certainly not go to the ANC itself for a reliable history of its hundred years. The “brief history of the African National Congress” on the ANC’s website does not focus throughout on the ANC as an organisation, but includes, say, Black Consciousness, the Soweto uprising and the Township revolt of the mid-1980s, without explaining the relationship between other movements and events to the ANC.¹⁵ For the ANC was not always the most important resistance movement against segregation and apartheid: it was eclipsed by the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) in the 1920s; the All African Convention in the mid-1930s; the newly formed Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in late 1959/early 1960; the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)

Cyril Ramaphosa (Anthony Butler), Walter and Albertina Sisulu (Eleanor Sisulu), O.R. Tambo (Luli Callinicos), Desmond Tutu (John Allen), Alfred Xuma (Steven Gish) and Jacob Zuma (Jeremy Gordin).

14. S. Dubow, *The African National Congress* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2000), p xi. For a recent short survey see R. Suttner, “The African National Congress Centenary: A Long and Difficult Journey”, *International Affairs*, 88, 4, 2012, pp 719–738.
15. See www.anc.org.za (accessed July 2012). It begins: “Our struggle for freedom has a long history. It goes back to the days when the African people fought spear in hand against the British and Boer colonisers.” It then has a section entitled “the African Kingdoms are Defeated 1860s–1900”, before it reaches “The ANC is Formed: 1912”. Then follow sections entitled “Working for a Wage”; “The ANC Gains New Life: 1940s”; “A Mass Movement is Born: 1950”; “The Armed Struggle Begins: 1960s”; “Workers and Students Fight Back: 1970s”; “The Struggle for People’s Power: 1980s”; and, finally, “The ANC is Unbanned”. The last two sentences of this brief history merely read as follows: “On the 10th of May 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the President of South Africa. The ANC has been in power ever since.”

in the 1970s; and the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s. While the UDF did have links to the exiled ANC, neither the UDF nor the ANC was directly responsible for the bulk of the internal resistance of the 1980s that arguably was the single most important factor in the collapse of apartheid. Dubow also warned against a teleological approach that saw the ANC as always in the vanguard of the struggle, and therefore necessarily the leading player in the transition to democracy.¹⁶ A sketch of how knowledge of the ANC's history has developed over time will help set the books under review in their relevant historiographical context.

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Reflective writing about the period of ANC history that Peter Limb is concerned with – from the founding as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912 to the advent of the presidency of A.B. Xuma in 1940 – may be said to have begun with Eddie Roux's classic *Time Longer than Rope*, first published in London in 1948, the year the apartheid government came to power. Roux's pioneering history was concerned with much more than the ANC, however, and his book had very little impact in South Africa itself, not being widely read until it appeared in a second, paperback edition in 1964.¹⁷ By then, others sympathetic to the organisation had begun work on aspects of the ANC's early history. Before his tragic early death, Lionel Forman had written a brief work that pointed towards the larger work on the liberation struggle he did not live to complete.¹⁸ It was instead Mary Benson, a South African who became an activist journalist, involved with the ANC through her work with the Anglican priest Michael Scott, who wrote the first general history of the organisation, entitled *The African Patriots*. On a visit to South Africa from England in the early 1960s, she interviewed a range of ANC leaders, including Walter Sisulu, a fount of knowledge of the history of the organisation, and Canon James Calata, a key figure in

16. Dubow, *African National Congress*, p xiv.

17. E. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: The Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1964). Roux's book was based in part on articles he penned in the 1930s.

18. L. Forman, *A Trumpet from the Housetop: Selected Writings*, ed. S. Forman and A. Odendaal (Zed, London, 1992).

the organisation in the late 1930s.¹⁹ After another visit to her country of origin a few years later, Benson produced a more popular, updated version of her history, under the title *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright*.²⁰ This readable account, by one who did not hide her sympathies for the organisation, had very few footnotes and was especially brief on the early decades. It began with the background to the formation of SANNAC, but soon lost its focus: what it said on Calata was buried in a chapter oddly entitled “The White Man’s Path of Honourable Trusteeship”.

Scholarly work on the early ANC, along with related organisations, was pioneered by Jack Simons, long-time lecturer at the University of Cape Town who was banned by the apartheid state and forced into exile. With his activist wife Ray, Simons published a large work of historical sociology entitled *Class and Colour in South Africa* in 1969. This focused particularly on the ANC and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and argued that by 1950, the year in which the CPSA was forced to dissolve itself in the face of new anti-communist legislation, the parallel histories of nationalism and socialism had come together: the class struggle, Jack and Ray Simons wrote, had merged with the movement for national liberation.²¹ A history of black protest movements in South Africa to 1924 by the Russian scholar Apollon Davidson, based on the limited sources available to him in Moscow, was, unfortunately, never translated into English.²² It was an Oxford University doctoral thesis that became the first major scholarly work to be published specifically on the early ANC, based

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19. M. Benson, *The African Patriots* (Faber & Faber, London, 1964). She also met Mvelo Skota, as she records in her moving but very anecdotal memoir, *A Far Cry: The Making of a South African* (Viking, London, 1989).
 20. M. Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966; IDAF, London, 1985).
 21. J. and R. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969). Another scholar, educated in South Africa and an academic in the United States, who wrote about the ANC in the late 1960s was Edward Feit. His work includes “Generational Conflict and African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1949–1959”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 5, 2, 1972, pp 181–202.
 22. Apollon Davidson’s book is cited in Limb, *Early Years*, p 38, note 36.

on archival and a large range of other sources, both in South Africa and England. Peter Walshe's seminal history, influenced by writing on tropical African nationalism, appeared under the title *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*, in 1970. The first detailed study of the ANC's first forty years; it remains, over four decades after it was published, an excellent survey of the organisation's activities in that period.²³

A team of American scholars continued Walshe's work in the early 1970s. Gwendolen Carter, author of a general work on South African politics,²⁴ and Tom Karis, a former United States diplomat in South Africa, led the process of compiling a major documentary multi-volume history of African politics in South Africa, which they entitled *From Protest to Challenge*. This not only included some of the many seminal documents they collected, but also lengthy commentaries on them. The first volume, written and compiled by the political scientist Sheridan Johns of Duke University, took the story back into the late nineteenth century, to show the antecedents of the SANNC, as well as forward into the 1920s; the second volume carried the story on to 1935.²⁵ That the early history of the ANC was even more complex than these first histories suggested, was shown in the 1980s, particularly, in a key chapter by Philip Bonner on the radicalisation of the Transvaal Native Congress in the aftermath of the First World War.²⁶ In 1990 the Barbados-based scholar Alan Cobley published a

23. P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912–1952* (C. Hurst, London, 1970).

24. G. Carter, *The Politics of Inequality: South Africa since 1948* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1959). This had an embarrassingly brief few paragraphs about the ANC; it focused mainly on white politics.

25. G. Carter and T. Karis (eds), *From Protest to Challenge*, volumes 1–4 (Hoover Institution, Stanford, 1972–1977). The series was continued in volumes 5, T. Karis and G. Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence*, (Unisa Press, Pretoria, 1997), and volume 6, G. Gerhart and C. Glaser, *Challenge and Victory* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2010).

26. P. Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917–1920: the Radicalisation of the Black Petty Bourgeoisie on the Rand", in S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa* (Longman, Harlow, 1982). Other seminal writing included Brian Willan, *Sol. T. Plaatje* (Heine-

major study of the black petty bourgeoisie from 1924 into the 1940s that inevitably had much to say relevant to the history of the ANC in its early decades.²⁷

The general histories of the ANC that appeared – the first to come from within the movement bore the immodest title *South Africa Belongs to Us*, by Francis Meli²⁸ – did not draw on major new source material or present important new perspectives on the early years of the organisation. In a critical history, written after 1994, Dale McKinley covered the early ANC very sketchily indeed, but did make the general argument that there had been too much emphasis on leaders, and he called for more attention to be given the rank and file.²⁹ Like McKinley, most of those who wrote on the ANC after 1994 focused their attention, often exclusively so, on the period between 1940, when the ANC's revival was often said to have begun, and its advent to power in 1994. It was not until 2011 that the first major biography of the first president of the ANC, John Dube, appeared, while we still await scholarly biographies of Pixley Seme and others prominent in the ANC's early years.³⁰

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mann, London, 1984) and, say, Shula Marks's account of the ambiguous roles played by John Dube, George Champion and others in what was then Natal Province in the ANC's first two decades: *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986).

27. A. Cobley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1990).
28. Francis Meli (a surname derived from Marx, Engels and Lenin, his name was originally Madolwana), *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the ANC* (James Currey, London, 1988). Meli's history was based in part on his articles in the *African Communist* in 1972 (Limb, *Early Years*, p 37). The ANC had earlier brought out a short history, entitled *Unity in Action* (n.p., 1982).
29. D. McKinley, *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Political Biography* (Pluto Press, London, 1997).
30. H. Hughes, *First President: A Life of John Dube* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2011). A biography of Josiah Gumede by Raymond van Diemel appeared in 2001: *In Search of Freedom, Fair Play and Justice. Josiah Tshangana Gumede, 1867–1947: A Biography* (R. van Diemel, Belhar, 2001). And see M. Mashamaite, *The Second Coming: The Life and Times of Pixley ka Isaka Seme, the Founder of the ANC* (Chatworld Publishers, Pretoria, 2011).

Let us now turn to Peter Limb's history of the ANC's early years. Limb is well-known as a leading African bibliographer and the author of a number of chapters and articles on the early ANC, along with a biography of Nelson Mandela.³¹ This year his volume on A.B. Xuma, ANC president from 1940, has been published, and he has edited a forthcoming volume on the ANC's first newspaper, *Abantu Batho*.³² In the book under review, which appears appropriately in a "Hidden History" series, he draws upon his unrivalled knowledge of the documentary material on the early ANC to write about the intersection of early nationalist politics and the social history of labour in the first three decades of the ANC's existence. (Some of the material he collected on the 1940s, and had to omit from this book, he was able to use in the Xuma volume.) He has long had an interest in the relationship between the ANC as an organisation and the broader mass constituency of what he calls black workers. (Though he sometimes equates them with "proletariat", he often uses "workers" loosely to include migrant, rural, domestic and women workers, and therefore to mean "ordinary people" (pp xi, x)). As long ago as 1993, Limb published a most impressive bibliography on the relationship between the ANC and black workers that listed over 4 000 items.³³ His monograph under review will long remain one of the most important works on the early ANC, not least for the way in which it drills down to regional and local level and explores the context in which the ANC operated in all its complexity. In a pioneering attempt to provincialise the history of the ANC, Limb gives us separate substantial chapters on the ANC in the four provinces of the Union in each of the three decades he is concerned

31. P. Limb, *Nelson Mandela: A Biography* (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 2008).
32. P. Limb, *A.B. Xuma. Autobiography and Selected Works* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 2012); P. Limb, *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho* (Wits University Press, forthcoming in 2012). His articles include "Intermediaries of Class, Nation, and Gender in the African Response to Colonialism in South Africa, 1890s–1920s", in P. Limb, N. Etherington and P. Midgley (eds), *Grappling with the Beast: Indigenous Southern African Responses to Colonialism, 1840–1930* (Brill, Leiden, 2010).
33. P. Limb, *The ANC and Black Workers in South Africa, 1912–1992: An Annotated Bibliography* (H. Zell Publishers, London, 1993).

with. This provides rich data for those who may in the future attempt separate provincial histories of the movement. In this way Limb has significantly broadened our conception of ANC history, revealing Walshe's work to have been relatively top-down and limited.³⁴

In Limb's book, like Walshe's, "the spotlight is firmly on the ANC" (p xi), but Limb has necessarily to write about the organisations with which it interacted, not least the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) and, later in the 1920s, also the CPSA. Limb draws out these interconnections – some close and positive, some more remote and antagonistic – in a more sophisticated way than Walshe, helping thereby to explain the roots of what later emerged as the triple alliance between the nationalist movement, the Communist party and the unions. While the ANC's leaders in these decades were mostly members of the black elite – ministers, clerks, professionals, small entrepreneurs and even landowners – Limb is able to show that they did not live in a world of their own, cut off from other black Africans, but that they had links to a more popular politics, involving a much larger constituency. He therefore moves away from the idea of the ANC as an elite organisation in which only middle-class men played significant roles, and in so doing uncovers a range of previously little-known activists. Limb provides the segregationist context in which the elite had to operate, and in which it had constantly to struggle against marginalisation. While the leadership often preached moderation, and engaged in the politics of deference, Limb traces a number of radical currents in the organisation – Walshe particularly drew attention to the influences of liberalism and Christianity, whereas Limb highlights Garveyism, communism and social democracy – and shows that on occasion the ANC was receptive to the interests of workers.

The value of Limb's book is not significantly reduced by his tendency in places to overstate his case, as when he presents the ANC as a grassroots movement, and writes that "when conditions favoured their interaction, the ANC moved closer to workers and

34. In this he followed in the footsteps of André Odendaal, who had done this for the period before 1912 in *Vukani Bantu* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1984) and has now extended this in *The Founders*.

always maintained an interest in them. The ANC, in theory and practice, sought to articulate black worker aspirations” (p 492). As Limb shows, the ANC was only occasionally concerned with women’s issues, though he does explore this relationship in more detail than any previous writer on the ANC has done. The ANC did not promote the unionisation of black workers, while its annual conferences only discussed worker issues on rare occasions. The Transvaal Congress’s active involvement with workers immediately after the First World War, which Bonner wrote about in his 1982 chapter, was not sustained.³⁵ While some of Limb’s claims at revisionism may go too far, the great value of his monograph lies in its detailed investigation, based on an astonishing range of archival and newspaper sources, many of them previously unused, of hitherto little-known facets of ANC activity in these years. It will be for some later scholar to incorporate his many new insights into a more general history of the ANC in these years.

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Limb sees his history as helping to uncover the roots of the tripartite alliance, led by the ANC, which came to power in 1994 (p xi). From the ANC’s early years, let us now jump to its eighteen years in government. Susan Booysen of Wits University is not, of course, the first to write about the ANC since 1994 – Tom Lodge has done so in a number of places, while others have written important journal articles, some of them not mentioned in her text³⁶ – but hers is now the most detailed account of the ANC in the years since

35. B. Hirson, “Review of The ANC and Black Workers in South Africa, 1912–1992: An Annotated Bibliography”, *Journal of African History*, 36, 1, 1995, pp 167–168.

36. For example T. Lodge, *Politics in South Africa: From Mandela to Mbeki* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2002); V. Darracq, “The African National Congress (ANC) Organisation at the Grassroots”, *African Affairs*, 107, 2008, pp 589–609; K. Lotshwao, “The Lack of Internal Party Democracy in the African National Congress: A Threat to the Consolidation of Democracy in South Africa”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 4, December 2009, pp 901–914.

it moved into government.³⁷ She has said herself that her book is “more of a reference book than a casual night time read”,³⁸ and that is certainly the case. It includes numerous tables that break up the text and make it difficult to read.³⁹ If one is looking for a readable account of the ANC in power, one should turn instead, say, to Martin Plaut and Paul Holden’s more recently published *Who Rules South Africa?*, which has the additional merit of being more directly focused than Booysen’s book on the ANC as part of the tripartite alliance.⁴⁰

This does not mean that Booysen’s book is unimportant. She tackles her subject as an extremely well-informed outsider. She was present at the ANC’s key Polokwane Conference in 2007 and has clearly been able to keep good contacts within the organisation.⁴¹ She traces in detail the ways in which the ANC has sought to keep and control power as an organisation, in relation to a broader public and in the electoral contests it has fought since 1994. As is well-known, the ANC has failed to tackle poverty, unemployment and inequality effectively, with most indices no better now than in 1994; it now faces numerous so-called service delivery protests at local level; and it has become deeply divided into factions and is riddled with corruption. Yet it remains dominant in our political system. Booysen explains this by pointing to the ANC’s liberation credentials, claiming that people are not yet ready to vote for another party, and explaining that in recent elections many eligible voters have abstained from

37. We still await a general history of, say, the Mandela presidency. Mandela himself was to have continued his *Long Walk to Freedom*, but this did not materialise. Jakes Gerwel, the director-general in the Presidency in these years, has not yet published his memoirs.

38. <http://witspress.bookslive.co.za/blog/2012/01/06/susan-booysen-explores-the-ancs-power-quest-and-17-years-of-governance/>

39. There are nine tables in chapter 2, fourteen in chapter 3. There is no list of these tables.

40. M. Plaut and P. Holden, *Who Rules South Africa? Pulling the Strings in the Battle for Power* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2012).

41. She has therefore moved a long way from her 1988 Rand Afrikaans University PhD, which was on the socialisation of Afrikaans students. She cites this on page 123, note 47.

voting. She investigates what she calls the “multiple faces” (chapter 3) of the ANC’s power, including cadre deployment; the use of state institutions; floor-crossing (chapter 7); and the presidency (especially chapter 11). In a chapter entitled “ANC and State Power”, she analyses the scramble for resources, summed up by the phrase “it is our turn to drink at the trough”. She shows how, as it became increasingly difficult to separate the ANC from the state, people in the ANC have increasingly used state institutions for their own political and personal purposes. Moving beyond the ANC itself, she analyses the collapse of the New National Party and why the Congress of the People was not able to establish itself as a rival after it broke away from the ANC (chapters 7 and 9). Mbeki sought to fuse party and state and thought he could control the ANC, only to discover at Polokwane, to his shock, that he was no longer in control of the movement. After the revolt at Polokwane against the old guard ANC leadership that had entrenched itself in the state – what Booysen in places calls “the Polokwane war” (e.g. pp xv, 41ff) – Mbeki’s subsequent ouster as president of the country was not, she believes, all that surprising.⁴²

Booyesen is not a historian, and in many places does not treat her material chronologically. The way she jumps from one period to another is often disconcerting. She tries to show how the ANC had first, after 1994, to consolidate its power before it adopted new methods of holding on to power. She suggests that for all that the ANC has been adept at reinventing itself, and remains politically dominant; it has nevertheless now reached its peak and is now in decline. She does not, of course, enjoy the necessary perspective to be certain of this. As we move towards the ANC’s Mangaung Conference in December 2012, the question of succession dominates our politics, along with debates over economic policy and whether or not the ANC has swung to the left (which Booysen discusses in the final chapter before her Conclusion). Because this is all such very recent history, her account is bound to undergo revision in the future, and her book is therefore unlikely to remain a key text nearly as long

42. F. Chikane, *Eight Days in September* (Picador Africa, Johannesburg, 2012) tells the story, in great detail, of Mbeki’s ousting by his own party in 2008. Chikane was the director-general of the Presidency under Mbeki.

as Limb's.

One of the sources Booyesen was not able to use on the ANC in government is the memoir by Kader Asmal that was only completed and published after his death in June 2011. Though there have been numerous memoirs published since 1994, this one stands out from the others as that of an academic activist who served in the first two ANC governments. With its apt title of *Politics in my Blood*, Asmal's book ends with a Conclusion by his widow Louise and an afterword by his son Adam that pays tribute to Louise. It tells the story of Asmal's life from his relatively impoverished childhood in Stanger, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal, during which Albert Luthuli became a mentor; to his exile, first in London, then for nearly three decades in Ireland; and then his return in 1990, initially to a chair in Human Rights created for him at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).⁴³ As with all such memoirs, this one is self-serving, and is far from being the whole story of a fascinating life.

Short in stature, Asmal was a larger-than-life character who could be an astonishingly fluent debater.⁴⁴ This book reflects his admirable concern to promote constitutionalism and non-racialism. In successive chapters he gives his views on four main themes: the relationship between law, his academic field, and humanity; his role in the writing of the new South African constitution, which was significant, even if the idea that its Bill of Rights was drawn up by Albie Sachs and him on his kitchen table in Dublin is a myth; three famous men whom he knew: Luthuli, Tambo and Mandela; and truth and reconciliation, a topic on which he and Louise Asmal and Ronald

43. Though himself a heavy smoker, he moved the motion in the university senate to ban smoking on campus. See P. Vale, "Asmal's Biography Sheds Light on Lessons that Go Unlearned": <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-11-29-asmals-biography-sheds-light-on-higher-educations-unlearned-lessons/>

44. This reviewer vividly remembers the verbal fireworks with which he demolished someone whose views he disagreed with at a public meeting in Observatory, Cape Town.

Roberts published a somewhat controversial book in 1997.⁴⁵ Here I have space only to look at the chapters that follow these, and concern his years in the first and second ANC governments, first as Minister of Water and Forestry and then of Education.

Asmal was overjoyed to be appointed to Mandela's first cabinet, even if he did not get the post of Minister of Justice for which he was so well suited. As water minister he was a great success, though it was often said that when he took the post he only knew water as something to use to mix with whiskey (p 224); he was known to attend meetings with a bottle of the latter in his briefcase. He soon saw water's vital significance, and became famous for the many steps he took to expand its provision, especially to those living in rural areas. His work gained international recognition: he became chairman of the World Commission on dams and was awarded the Stockholm Water Prize. All this is very eloquently described in the chapter he devotes to "water and trees". The chapter that follows concerns his years as Minister of Education in Mbeki's cabinet from 1999. These were years of great activity – he writes of himself, rightly, as "exceedingly energetic" (p 256) – but were also uncomfortable years. He is critical in his memoir of Mbeki's authoritarianism, but, presumably fearing he would be ousted from the cabinet if he spoke out against the president's HIV/AIDS fantasies, he failed to do so. He encountered much criticism, not only for the education policies he inherited, such as Outcomes Based Education (p 262), which he continued to implement, but also for those he initiated, which included the merger of many universities, the key decision relating to which was taken at his Cape Town home when he was ill but was fortified with whiskey.

Had Asmal not been prevented by illness from finishing his book himself, would he, one wonders, have said more about other initiatives he took in these years, such as arranging for a series of lectures to be given on the importance of the humanities, the first of which was delivered by the historian Shula Marks? Readers of this journal will

45. K. Asmal et al, *Reconciliation through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1997).

especially be surprised that he does not write about the many ways in which he went out of his way, when Minister of Education,

to promote History in general and history-teaching in schools in particular. The History Project that he set up was very active in its short life.⁴⁶ He found time, during those years, to be co-author of a book entitled *Legacy of Freedom: The ANC's Human Rights Tradition*,⁴⁷ while in one of the many forewords he contributed to other books he wrote that in re-reading Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, he had "found the inspiration for the passion without which political life is meaningless and sterile".⁴⁸ He certainly had that passion in abundance, and it is now sadly lacking in our public life. Unfortunately, most of his initiatives in education were not continued by his successors, and today many parts of the education system are in shambles. It is to be hoped that someone will write a biography of Asmal that will present a fuller account of his life, and at the same time be more critical, and reflective, than this memoir.

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46. Asmal's Values in Education Initiative led to a report by a Working Group on "Values, Education and Democracy" chaired by Wilmot James in 2000 that emphasised the value of History teaching for the promotion of human values, including tolerance and proposed the establishment of a panel of historians and others to advise the government on how to strengthen the teaching of History in South African schools. The panel was chaired by Njabulo Ndebele and the project was established in August 2001 in Johannesburg, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with Dr June Bam as its CEO. Various volumes were produced, including M. Morris, *Every Step of the Way* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2004); and S. Jeppie (ed.), *Toward New Histories for South Africa* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2004). All secondary schools received copies of the eight volumes of the *General History of Africa* published by UNESCO, along with supplementary material, and History was reintroduced as a separate subject in the curriculum. For an overview see K. Walker, "The History of South Africa: A Twice-Told Tale", *Carnegie Reporter*, 2, 4, Spring 2004.
47. K. Asmal et al, *Legacy of Freedom: The ANC's Human Rights Tradition* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2005).
48. K. Asmal, "Foreword" to Sol. T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Picador Africa, Northlands, 2007), p xi.

While we have come a long way in our knowledge of the history of the ANC, and while the books by Limb and Booysen reviewed here undoubtedly add significantly to that knowledge, we still remain without the well-researched and non-partisan history of the ANC that Dubow called for over a decade ago. In the year of the ANC's centenary some have looked back to the early ANC leadership and, explicitly or by implication, drawn comparisons between the situation then and now.⁴⁹ What, if any, continuities are there between the ANC in its early years, when it brought Africans together to challenge the segregationist state, and since 1994, when it has operated in a fundamentally different context? What has happened to the strong commitment to moral values and non-racialism in the ANC that Asmal was so proud of? There is much work for future historians to do on the ANC and its history.

Abstract

Much has now been written about the history of the African National Congress (ANC) over its hundred years, but surprisingly there is no survey of this literature. This article surveys some of this historiography before proceeding to discuss two major recently-published monographs, by Peter Limb on the early years of the ANC and by Susan Booysen on the eighteen years since it took office. Limb's book is characterised by its use of new sources to tell the detailed story of what the ANC did at the local level, and is a book that will long retain its importance. Booysen's book is equally detailed, but is not based on the same kind of source-material, and is therefore inevitably unable to see the ANC in recent years in the same kind of perspective. We will learn more about the ANC in its years in power from the memoirs of key figures becoming available, one of which, by the late Kader Asmal, *inter alia* recounts his experiences as Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry under Mandela and then as Minister of Education in the Mbeki cabinet.

49. For example, H. Hughes, "Leadership in the Early ANC", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 66, 2, April-June 2012, pp 3-12.

Keywords: African National Congress; Asmal, Kader; Booysen, Susan; historiography; Limb, Peter; Mandela, Nelson; Mbeki, Thabo; political memoirs; South African Native National Congress.

Opsomming

Heelwat is nou al geskryf oor die geskiedenis van die African National Congress (ANC) in sy honderdjarige bestaan, maar verbasend genoeg bestaan daar geen oorsig van hierdie werk nie. Hierdie artikel verskaf 'n oorsig van sommige van hierdie historiografie waarna dit oorgaan na 'n bespreking van twee belangrike onlangs-verskene monografieë, een deur Peter Limb oor die vroeë jare van die ANC en die ander deur Susan Booysen oor die 18 jaar wat dit aan bewind is. Limb se boek word gekenmerk deur die gebruik van nuwe bronne om 'n gedetailleerde verhaal te vertel van wat die ANC op plaaslike vlak verrig het, en dit is 'n boek wat lank sy belangrikheid sal behou. Booysen se boek is ewe gedetailleerd, maar is nie gebaseer op dieselfde tipe bronmateriaal nie, en is daarom gevolglik nie in staat om die ANC van die onlangse verlede in dieselfde perspektief te sien nie. Ons sal meer leer oor die ANC se bewindsjare uit die memoirs van sleutelfigure wat beskikbaar word, waarvan een deur wyle Kader Asmal, wat onder andere vertel van sy wedervaringe as Minister van Watersake en Bosbou onder Mandela en toe as Minister van Opvoeding in die Mbeki-kabinet.

Sleutelwoorde: African National Congress; Asmal, Kader; Booysen, Susan; historiografie; Limb, Peter; Mandela, Nelson; Mbeki, Thabo; politieke memoirs; South African Native National Congress.