

Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith

(Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010, 291 pp., photographs, appendices, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-1-86914-192-9)

Scott Couper

Nicholas Southey

Department of History

University of South Africa

southnd@unisa.ac.za

Albert Luthuli served as president of the African National Congress (ANC) for fifteen years, between 1952 and 1967, a period which was arguably more tumultuous and ideologically divisive in the organisation's history than at any time before the late 1980s. He was closely involved with the major political developments from the Defiance Campaign of 1952 through to the important watershed events of 1960 and 1961, which culminated in the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Luthuli, both at the end of 1961. Despite his prominent, indeed central, role in these events, and many more besides, Luthuli has not been the subject of a serious biographical study, and therefore Scott Couper's new study is most welcome.

The reasons why historians have neglected Luthuli are not all that easy to fathom, and Couper sheds no light on this matter in his discussion of much briefer explorations of aspects of Luthuli's life and career by other authors (p. 4, see also pp. 113–115). The absence of a collection of Luthuli papers or a dedicated archive is perhaps one factor that has prevented fuller historical assessment until now, although this has not been an insuperable obstacle in the compilation of biographical studies of other twentieth-century political activists and leaders. Couper has done well to collect evidence from some 30 archival depots and libraries, both in South Africa and abroad, as well as from a wide variety of published material.

Of much more importance to Couper than the paucity of scholarly assessments of Luthuli is the marginalisation and misrepresentation of Luthuli's political philosophy and actions by ANC politicians and leaders since the 1960s. This theme dominates the entire book, from introduction through to postscript. Couper is at pains to point out that the dominant nationalist narrative of the struggle has seriously distorted Luthuli's contribution, and in particular has violated his principled commitment to non-violence throughout his career. Nationalists have long argued that the ANC as a whole supported the adoption of more militant, radical and violent tactics and strategies from 1961 in the face of brutal suppression and the absence of legitimate and legal political space. Couper contends that Luthuli always believed that armed struggle was avoidable, and he never agreed with the establishment of MK and its subsequent acts of sabotage. He was careful to show 'solidarity' with leaders such as Nelson Mandela who actively pursued armed resistance, but personally held fast to non-violent philosophies and strategies to attain political rights and a democratic non-racial future. Luthuli's stance did not fit the dominant paradigm, and hence he has been marginalised and misunderstood, sometimes even wilfully, by the ANC.

Couper marshals considerable evidence to support his arguments. The first chapter situates a young Luthuli as a product of Christian mission education and influence, in the Congregational tradition of the American Board Mission, a formation which was indelibly to influence his subsequent life and actions. The theme is developed further in Chapter 2, entitled 'The Christian mode', which chronologically traces Luthuli's journey from the age of about 30 to 60, and explores his deepening involvement in public life. Further evidence of Luthuli's Christian commitment, expressed at times through participation in international missionary conferences, at least up till the end of the 1940s, is presented throughout the chapter. There can be little doubt of the driving Christian impulses of Luthuli's life; and although this is knowledge is not new, nowhere else has so much evidence of it been presented.

The next three chapters deal with the events of the first half of the 1960s, and here the core political tensions over the most effective means to counter the apartheid government's banning and crushing of black political opposition are explored in considerable detail. Couper captures the climate and the debates of the period well, as free political space was closed down in the months after the Sharpeville massacre. Luthuli is portrayed as negotiating a path between white liberal Christian concerns and various Africanist, radical,

and communist positions. Political discussions were tense and fraught in an increasingly difficult and more oppressive environment. Luthuli is shown to be careful, considered and consistent in his political decisions, always guided by his Christian principles. His own ability to shape events became increasingly restricted during this period, given that state suffocation of opposition through its use of its range of resources proved increasingly effective.

Couper's arguments are presented directly, sometimes even polemically. He leaves little room for ambiguity or uncertainty as he advances his case, and he presents a strong counter-narrative to the nationalist paradigm. Some of the evidence can surely be read more ambiguously and less dogmatically, as Raymond Suttner has done in a recent article (see "The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross": "Just Means" in Chief Albert Luthuli's Life', *South African Historical Journal*, 62, 4 [2010], pp. 693–715), which appeared in print at the same time as Couper's book was published. All might not agree with Couper's reading of the evidence, but there can be little doubt that his arguments deserve serious evaluation. At the very least, he has successfully demonstrated considerable flaws in dominant depictions of the early 1960s and Luthuli's views.

The last chapter deals with the circumstances of Luthuli's death on a rail track near his home in Groutville in July 1967. That people, including his family, have had reasonable grounds for suspicion that Luthuli died in mysterious circumstances is hardly surprising, given the machinations of the police and armed forces of the apartheid state from the early 1960s. Couper, mainly through the use of inquest reports, shows that Luthuli's death was accidental and he was not assassinated. From the evidence he presents, this does seem convincing.

This book, because of its provocative and direct engagement with conventional and convenient wisdom, is unlikely to be universally admired, but it certainly is a long overdue and important study that demands serious attention. It makes a valuable contribution to historical writing about the 1950s and 1960s in particular, through its evaluation of this important political actor. At times, the treatment of Luthuli is a little episodic and even occasionally one-dimensional, but this does not detract from the overall achievement. Luthuli has long been muffled, and his views interpreted through the words of others; it is good to have his voice presented with passion, clarity, sympathy and insight.

Luthuli emerges as a person of modesty, dignity and integrity, all leadership qualities which are attractive and increasingly rare in public life. His career and legacy deserve much more prominence and more honest appraisal than they have enjoyed thus far. Couper deserves much credit for his empathetic portrait of a fine individual, and his study deserves to be widely read.

The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims from 1815 to 1915

**(Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2011, 318 pp., maps, illus.,
bibl., index. ISBN: 978-1-86919-236-5)**

**Achmat Davids (edited by Hein Willemsse and Suleman E
Dangor)**

Gerald Groenewald

Department of Historical Studies

University of Johannesburg

ggroenewald@uj.ac.za

Until the 1980s, Afrikaner national unity was maintained by two historical myths: that the Afrikaners were the descendants of the Dutch, with some German and French admixture, but firmly European; and that their 'pearl of great value' – Afrikaans – was likewise a European transplantation: it developed gradually out of Dutch dialects and its recognition as a 'separate' language was thanks to a group of men from Paarl in the Western Cape who in the late 19th century attempted to broaden the functional uses of Afrikaans – the so-called 'First Afrikaans Language Movement.' In the mid-1980s – at the height of the 'state of emergency' – Afrikanerdom was assaulted further with the publication of two books: Hans Heese's *Groep Sonder Grense* (1984), which detailed the extent of miscegenation and inter-marriage at the early Cape, and Theo du Plessis's *Afrikaans in Beweging* (1986), which argued for the existence of a number of Afrikaans language movements during the 19th century, most notably a 'Malay movement' which existed *before* the advent of the men of Paarl and used Afrikaans in higher functions several decades

earlier. Of course, these were the years of the tricameral parliament, and variationist linguistics (*variasietaalkunde*) was all the rage among Afrikaans linguists: M.C.J. van Rensburg investigated the Afrikaans of the Griqua, Hans du Plessis that of Namibia, while Ernst Kotzé studied Malay Afrikaans. The same period also saw the beginning of a renewed interest in the genesis of Afrikaans in the early Cape, especially among foreign scholars such as Hans den Besten and Paul Roberge who challenged the hegemony of the ideas of J. du P. Scholtz *cum suis* and argued for the importance of substratum influences in the development of Afrikaans.

It is against this background that the book under review should be seen, for it is the long-overdue publication of an MA-thesis (of exceptional length and quality, it should be added) which the late Achmat Davids submitted in 1991 under the supervision of Theo du Plessis. While in some senses it is the product of Afrikaans variationist linguistics as described above, it is also more than that since Davids straddled different fields and roles: unlike the linguists, he was also an historian and a community leader with deep roots in the Muslim community of Cape Town. He first established himself in the 1980s as an expert on 19th-century Cape Muslim history with two books, *The Mosques of the Bo-Kaap* (1980) and *The History of the Tana Baru* (1985). His work contributed much to inspire a new generation of historians of the colonial Cape to write more inclusive histories which also paid attention to Islam. Thus, when Achmat Davids turned his attention to the contribution of Cape Muslims to the history of Afrikaans, he did so with a foremost knowledge of their socio-cultural history and with extensive access to informants and (private) sources which probably no other individual could have commanded. For this reason, this book is of as much importance to historians of the colonial Cape as it is to historians of the Afrikaans language and South African Islamic culture.

Davids claims that his book has the humble aim of evoking ‘a greater awareness of the existence of Cape Muslim Afrikaans as a useful source for broadening our understanding of the linguistic nature of Cape Afrikaans’ (p. 257). Although Davids rightly states that his work is not an exhaustive study of the linguistic nature of Arabic-Afrikaans (the Afrikaans of Cape Muslims written in Arabic script), this book has certainly laid the foundation for such a study. One of Davids’ main objectives was to create a standard system of transliterating the Arabic script of Arabic-Afrikaans texts into roman script to demonstrate that the Cape Muslim community wrote as they spoke – thus

proving that Arabic-Afrikaans texts are in a way similar to audio-recordings which preserved the original sounds of Muslim Afrikaans speakers and thus represent a remarkable treasure trove for the Afrikaans historical linguist. These aspects of his study Davids achieves in the second part of the book which consists of a lengthy linguistic analysis (centred on Davids' concept of 'innovative orthographic engineering') of how Muslim Afrikaans speakers adapted the Arabic alphabet and Muslim 'rules of reading' (p. 206) to preserve their own unique sounds. Davids develops a system of transliteration for these Arabic-Afrikaans texts which would bring to the fore much better the actual sounds of past speakers than previously existing systems. In the final chapter, he applies his system to extracts from three texts (both the originals in Arabic script and the transliterations are presented, along with English translations provided by the editors), and discusses some of the linguistic features of the texts.

But to the historian the most innovative part of the study is its first half. Davids quite rightly criticises earlier writers on Arabic-Afrikaans for not contextualising these texts, thus failing 'to fit them into the milieu in which they occurred. The result is that an invaluable source or social history ... is lost' (p. 96). Davids, on the other hand, magnificently achieves this ideal; and it is in doing so that his experience as a Cape historian and Muslim community leader greatly aided him. Chapter 2, entitled 'The world the Cape slaves made', traces the 'social milieu in which the Arabic-Afrikaans literary tradition emerged' (p. 87). In much detail – based on an intensive study of literary and archival sources – Davids treats the origins of Cape slaves from the Indonesian archipelago (paying much attention to the religious, literary and linguistic background of the region), the development of a free black community, the various languages and lingua francas spoken by slaves, the development of a Cape Muslim educational system from the early 19th century onwards, and the issue of literacy among the slaves. This socio-historic chapter is followed by one which looks in greater detail at the nature, production and dissemination of the 74 known Arabic-Afrikaans texts produced between 1845 and 1915 (although Davids argues that the tradition of writing Afrikaans in Arabic script was already in place by 1830, no earlier texts have survived), dividing their development into three distinct phases.

Considering that this research was done more than 20 years ago, Davids' achievement is remarkable. He was the first Afrikaans linguist to argue for, and demonstrate, the importance of detailed historical research for an

understanding of linguistic phenomena (practising what is sometimes known as 'socio-historical linguistics'). In many respects he was ahead of his time: e.g. his careful study of literacy and the role of different literary traditions in its development. In this, as well as his investigation of the production of different genres of Arabic-Afrikaans text, he was an early South African practitioner of what is now called 'book history'. In at least two cases he was most prescient: in his discussion of the famous 1760-slave letter in Bugis script he states unequivocally, 'I do not believe it was the only [slave letter] written. Nor do I believe that a network of correspondence existed only among the Buganese [*sic*] slaves' (p. 79). And indeed, the past decade has seen the discovery of another Bugis letter (including some Arabic in Bugis characters) from 1786, the notebook of a slave teacher covering 1717-32 (which includes some text in Tamil), and a large cache of correspondence between slaves and ex-slaves at the Cape with their relatives in Batavia. Likewise, when Davids suggests that one of the reasons for the demise of Arabic-Afrikaans was the inability of converts to Islam to read Arabic script, he mentions that the extent of conversion through marriage might be higher than has been assumed (pp. 99-100). Recently, V.C. Malherbe has indeed demonstrated that in the second half of the 19th century, many women of European descent entered into liaisons with Muslim men.

While I am delighted that Davids' study is finally available more widely, in a carefully edited version, rereading his work made me realise what a missed opportunity its late publication represents: had this book appeared in the early 1990s, its impact would have been so much higher. As it is, Davids' work has loomed large on Cape historiography over the past decade or two, and the seminal studies of Kerry Ward on exiles and convicts in the VOC empire, Ana Deumert on the varieties of Cape Afrikaans in the 19th century, John Edwin Mason's exploration of Sufism among Cape slaves, as well as Robert Ross and Sirtjo Koolhof's examination of Bugis slave networks, have all taken their cue from Davids' work on the language and culture of the Cape Muslims. The editing and production of this book were labours of love; well-deserved by a scholar as renowned for his enthusiasm and generosity as Achmat Davids.

