

Unfair “affirmative action” in South African historiography

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I have some concern that the Afrikaner does not figure in the “New History” books on South African history, except as the scapegoat and the villain. The Afrikaner is ignored particularly in the historiography covering the nineteenth century. For most non-Afrikaans historians South African history has become the suffering, struggle and eventual victory of the suppressed masses, that is, African or black history – the African struggle. Afrikaners are judged and condemned in negative terms. Just like there was a “native problem” in Afrikaner national historiography, there is now an “Afrikaner problem”. The Afrikaner has achieved nothing positive in the history of South Africa. The pendulum has indeed swung to the other side. For the victor reconciliation seems to mean that the view of the majority has triumphed. There is no room for other views beside the “official” view.

This intolerant new view on history is nowhere better illustrated than in a series of six history books published by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation with the overall title of *Turning points in history*.¹ And do not underestimate the impact of this series. In the latest matriculation examination paper for history (higher grade, October/November 2005) of the National Department of Education it was expected of learners to comment on an extract from *Turning points in history*.²

The planning of the *Turning point* series was launched with commendable goals, judging from the point of departure expressed by the chairperson of the editorial committee, Professor Bill Nasson. He reckons that, in contrast to the one-sided Afrikaner-centric school histories in the era of apartheid, “it is the responsibility of a democratic perspective to embrace not only the experiences of different groups but also to reflect the existence of divergent historical memories in the making of a shared past”.³

But do not be fooled by this. Nasson’s writers have left him in the lurch. With the exception of a small number of authors in the series to give the past experiences of all the different communities in South Africa, most of them seem to embrace a different meaning than Nasson to the concept “democratic perspective”.

¹ The *Turning points in history* series, with Bill Nasson as chairperson of the editorial board, is a joint initiative of the South African History Project in the Department of Education and the Educating for Reconciliation Programme of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (Johannesburg, 2004).

² Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, History Paper 1, Addendum, Higher Grade, October/November 2005, 503-1/1 A, p. 2.

³ Bill Nasson, *Turning points in history*, Preface of each volume, p. 9.

With regard to Book 2, *The impact and limitations of colonialism*, Jeff Peires discusses the uneven development of colonialism in South Africa. A whole page is devoted to condemning the “atrocities” of the Boers in 1854 in the “Makapansgat massacre”, when between one and three thousand Africans were murdered out of revenge for the murder on 28 Boers in three separate incidents.⁴ It is noticeable that nowhere in the series is there a reference to the Zulu “atrocities” in February 1838 on the Voortrekkers at Bloukrans or to the killing of Piet Retief and his party that preceded the Bloukrans incident. As a matter of fact, there is no reference to the battle of Blood River (Ncome) – neither in Book 2, nor in Book 3, where the Great Trek receives more attention.⁵

Two pages are devoted to Sir Harry Smith, British Governor at the Cape, and King Msoshosho of the Basotho also receives attention, but Andries Pretorius and Piet Retief’s contribution to South African history vanishes into oblivion, though Andries Pretorius is called “the leader of the Transvaal Republic”⁶ – which in effect he was not. And I would reckon that in this age of reconciliation one could make something of Retief’s intent in his Manifesto, where he confirms the desire of the Voortrekkers to live in peace and friendship with the black communities in the interior.⁷ But obviously it does not fit in with the image that the author (Yonah Seleti, “State formation in nineteenth-century South Africa”) wants to convey.

In the chapter by Wayne Dooling in Book 2 on the development of colonial slave society, there are extensive portrayals of the experiences of the slaves at the Cape.⁸ In vain one looks for a similar portrayal of the Voortrekkers on trek.

In Book 3, entitled *Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, the chapters of Yonah Seleti on state formation in nineteenth-century South Africa and Timothy Keegan on imperialism and the union of South Africa catch the eye.

Rightly Seleti states that the history of nineteenth-century South Africa has been a history of struggles for dominance and resistance to dominance.⁹ And it is laudable that he discusses both the liberal and the Cobbing theory on the Mfecane or black migrations.¹⁰ However, these seven pages overshadow the four pages on the Great Trek.¹¹ Noticeably black on black violence is not discussed in detail or condemned, but, as indicated above,

⁴ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 2, The impact and limitations of colonialism*, pp. 15, 16.

⁵ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*.

⁶ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 29.

⁷ F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Honderd basiese dokumente by die studie van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis 1648-1961* (Johannesburg, 1972), p. 54, from *The Graham’s Town Journal*, 2 Februarie 1837.

⁸ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 2, The impact and limitations of colonialism*, pp. 43-49.

⁹ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, pp. 17-23.

¹¹ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, pp. 27-30.

Voortrekker “atrocities” on black people are presented extensively. Shaka isn’t a murderer, but Piet Potgieter is.

It is good that Seleti places different views on the Great Trek alongside each other. This is what Bill Nasson meant by a democratic perspective. But to declare that wherever the Voortrekkers went they found African societies that were better organised than they were,¹² is highly contentious. Fact of the matter is that the Voortrekkers were on trek, and the moment they came to a relative halt, they established their own republics, admittedly initially frail and poor, but with a constitution, representation by the people and democratic franchise for all white male citizens, thirty years before all male citizens received the vote in Britain. Anybody complaining that the Boers did not give the vote to Africans, think a-historically and apply an early twenty first century norm to the nineteenth century. How many indigenous people (“Red skins”) had the vote in the southern states of the USA in 1852?

Seleti’s chapter is stimulating, and he acknowledges that both the Mfecane and the Great Trek changed the face of South Africa¹³ – in contrast to the well-known *Oxford history of South Africa* that relegated the Great Trek to a sub-section of the rise of the Zulu kingdom.¹⁴

Timothy Keegan’s revisionist petticoat is clear to see. He seems to have 1994 in mind all the time. In his treatment of the Anglo-Zulu War the battles of Isandhlwana and Ulundi are mentioned, and there is even a photograph of Isandhlwana hill, but no battle of the Anglo-Boer War or South African War of 1899-1902 is mentioned. Not even Majuba in the first Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881. There we merely read: “The Boers pushed the British out again in 1881”.¹⁵

Keegan only concedes two lines to Paul Kruger (p. 45) – the man who led the Boers/Afrikaners through a critical period in their emergent national consciousness and struggle to maintain their freedom – and that in a negative way, stating that Kruger was not always sympathetic to the needs of the mining industry. That’s all. On the other hand, much attention is paid to Cecil Rhodes (pp. 45-46), plus a large photograph (p. 47), part of which is even on the front page of Book 3.

There are six lines on the nature of the Anglo-Boer War (South African War) of 1899-1902,¹⁶ with no reference (as has been mentioned) to any battle, but also no reference to any Boer leader in a struggle for freedom against foreign domination with which the

¹² Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 28.

¹³ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 33.

¹⁴ M. Wilson en L. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford history of South Africa, vol. I.* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 334-390.

¹⁵ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 46.

modern South African could identify him- or herself. On the other hand the role of Africans in this war is covered in nine lines, and tells us of the many deaths in the African concentration camps. Nothing is mentioned of the deaths in the white concentration camps.¹⁷ This is unfair “affirmative action” in the historiography of South Africa par excellence. And then more than a page and a half is devoted to the question what role Africans played in shaping their history.¹⁸

In Book 4, *Industrialisation, rural change and nationalism*, Rachidi Molapo devotes 33 lines to a discussion of how Africans were affected by migration to the cities – whites get eight lines.¹⁹

Albert Grundlingh’s chapter on Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s²⁰ is, as with all his work, stimulating. His analyses are honest and perceiving, and make a meaningful contribution to the debate on South Africa’s past. I would regard his chapter as an asset to the series.

I refrain from commenting on Book 5: *People, places and apartheid* and Book 6: *Negotiation, transition and freedom*, and leave it to people who are more acquainted with the second half of the twentieth century than I.

The lack of Afrikaans sources or works by Afrikaner historians in the whole series is noticeable. Only a few are mentioned in the bibliographies. This is not the way to achieve Professor Nasson’s ideal of a democratic perspective. The most important African writers are there. But when it comes to the choice of illustrations and photographs, the series shines in its one-sidedness. If one does not consider Book 1 on ancient civilizations and global trade and one makes a list of objects from British/English, Boer/Afrikaner and African origin, the result is amazing. There are only twelve illustrations of Boers/Afrikaners, of which one is Dr Beyers Naudé. Nine British personae are portrayed. On the other hand there are at least forty photographs or illustrations of Africans, and they are often presented in the captions as the exploited.

It is true that one-sided national Afrikaner viewpoints characterised our school textbooks in the era of apartheid. It was – depending on your point of departure – the Great Lie, or the Great Truth. And that was a mistake. In 1994 democracy was established and there is rightly a need for a new interpretation of the past, a democratic interpretation that illuminates the experiences of the different communities, in effect an affirmative action in our historiography. But for the sake of reconciliation the pendulum must not now swing to the other side. The question is whether the New Great Lie or New Great Truth is now upon us?

¹⁷ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 3, Migration, land and minerals in the making of South Africa*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁹ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 4, Industrialisation, rural change and nationalism*, pp. 20-21.

²⁰ Bill Nasson (ed), *Turning points in history, Book 4, Industrialisation, rural change and nationalism*, pp. 46-61.

In recent times a number of voices have been raised that unwittingly are connected to *Turning points in history*. The first was Wilhelm Jordaan's article in a column in the Afrikaans newspaper *Beeld* of 2 November 2005, entitled "Van mens tot mens". He pleads for an integrated approach to the past, and points out the subjective presentation of the past in the apartheid dispensation. He reckons there should not be a subjective claim to history, as was long the case with official white historiography on for example the Anglo-Boer War (South African War). On the other hand he states that Africans cannot now claim the Anglo-Boer War for themselves. Thirdly he pleads for an integrated history of the whole, where the narratives of the different communities must exist alongside each other. This viewpoint reminds strongly of my argument in the final chapter of the book *Scorched earth* in 2001. I quote: "While Afrikaner politicians and Afrikaner historians in the twentieth century claimed the war for Afrikaners, the opportunity now exists to study the war in its totality – including the scorched earth policy. However, it is important *not* to wipe Afrikaner feats and Afrikaner suffering from the table. New perspectives must complement, not supplant, each other. It is equally important now not to view black involvement and suffering as the only perspective on the war. No group may claim the Anglo-Boer War for itself. It would be healthy to allow room for various perspectives on the war – including for example, different perspectives among Afrikaners. It is indeed important to convey a broad and multifaceted perspective to the South African nation and the outside world."²¹

A second voice that has relevance to *Turning points in history*, was Z.B. du Toit's report on the front page of *Rapport* of 6 November 2005, with the heading "Regstel-aksie vasgevat"(Affirmative action taken to task). It informs us that the machine is in motion for a code of practice to eradicate unfair or unjust racial discrimination or excessive affirmative action in the working place in South Africa. The campaign stems from a discussion on 20 August 2005 when a senior government delegation under the leadership of Dr Essop Pahad, minister in the office of the State President, discussed fundamental issues with a group of Afrikaner leaders under Mr F.W. de Klerk. According to *Rapport* the two delegations agreed in a mutual statement that a code of practice for the fair application of affirmative action be developed. *Rapport* quotes Mr Dirk Herman, spokesperson for the trade union Solidariteit, as saying that one of the main aims with the fair code of practice is to counteract the alienation of some South Africans (that is, Afrikaners) by stopping new forms of racial discrimination.

The third voice relevant to *Turning points in history*, was *Beeld*'s leading article on 8 November 2005 with the heading: "Regstelkode" (Code of affirmative action). It comments on the initiative to draft a code of practice against unfair affirmative action in the South African working place. It criticises the over-eager application of affirmative action by some companies who in this way render themselves guilty of a new form of discrimination. *Beeld* says: "It is therefore important that it is constantly emphasised that unfair application of affirmative action, like apartheid, marginalizes the victims and that South Africa cannot afford to return to the practices of the past."

²¹ Fransjohan Pretorius (ed), *Scorched earth* (Cape Town, 2001), p. 281.

How do these voices relate to *Turning points in history*? The point is that South Africa should, over and above the attempt to check unfair affirmative action in the working place, also avoid unfair “affirmative action” in the new historiography. Otherwise there is going to be alienation and marginalization. It is already present? Is the Afrikaner historian already on the sideline? *Turning points in history* indicates that. But then it is our task to write objectively, with unbiased judgment on the past.