



BOOK REVIEWS

The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937 by Professor J. S. Marais. Published by the University of Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg. 1939. Reprinted 1957. Price 25s. 293 pp. with index.

Now that one has re-read Dr. Marais' book some 18 years after its first appearance, one wonders why it has been allowed to remain out of print for so long. For Marais' **Cape Coloured People** remains the most authoritative work on this subject, and the 'subject' remains one of the most vital in South African politics.

A good deal of time is spent on investigating the origins of the Coloured people; almost too much, the reader might feel. It will always be a contentious question to what degree the different racial groups have contributed towards creating the Coloured people. Probably there is no single answer. Marais finds that slaves and Hottentots contributed chiefly, and the Europeans and Bushmen in lesser degree. As no records were kept of all early contacts, there can be no finality upon this.

Dealing firstly with the question of so-called racial characteristics, we should note Marais' remarks regarding laziness, improvidence and drunkenness. These charges have been levelled against the Hottentots and their descendants from the time of Van Riebeeck, coupled also with accusations of immorality and thieving. Marais' book serves to show us how these are by no means inherent tendencies; how utterly improper indeed is the application of these terms to the aboriginal peoples at all. In actual fact, these phenomena should be viewed and evaluated as the impact of a foreign culture on primitive man, and the matter described in the neutral terms of an objective science, rather than in the emotionally loaded language of everyday intercourse. The Hottentots did indeed drink the White man's fiery liquor and succumb to it, so that they wanted more. And why not? What standards did these people have to check

their indulgence? Why not, after all, get drunk?

And when it is remembered that the Hottentot did not *steal* the liquor but received it as a gift, was thereby encouraged, and was encouraged by people who were culturally more advanced, it is not difficult to see where the weight of opprobrium must fall if judgment must be passed in regard to the Hottentots' drinking habits.

When, further, it is recalled that the White man did not merely *give* the Hottentot liquor, but that there is ample reason to believe that he gave it with the motive of weakening the Hottentots' hold on their property—land and cattle—the part of the White man becomes all the more despicable.

One could deal with the alleged laziness and the alleged improvidence of the Hottentots in the same way. But when all has been said in defence of the Hottentot, one fact remains which it would be folly to attempt to deny or explain away: "The habit of drinking to excess, implanted from generation to generation, is still one of the besetting sins of the Coloured people" (p. 3.)

Anyone who wishes to assess the part played—or to be played—in South African history by the Coloured people would do ill to ignore this state of affairs. Whether the weakness is hereditary or not; whether it was acquired innocently or not; the Coloured people *do* drink too much, and their future progress is retarded by this fact. Let us not let the sins of the White man in the past blind us to the realities of the present and the needs of the future. If we do, then the White man's motive of undermining the non-Whites permanently will be realized.

South Africa is a young country, far too young to have forgotten the sins in its history. The Whites harp on the moral degeneracy of the Coloured people, while they sedulously forget their eradication of the Bushmen. The records quoted by Marais in this respect are of overwhelming authority, and leave a horrifying picture of the manner in which a so-called Christian people behaved towards other, less privileged persons.

"I heard one man declare," says Collins, "that within a period of six years the parties under his orders had either killed or taken 3,200 of these unfortunate creatures (Bushmen). Another has stated to me that the actions in which he had been engaged had caused the destruction of 2,700." (p. 18). Nicholson is quoted as saying that ". . . many Bushmen have been killed without any pretext whatever. The evidence I

have taken, states that parties were in the habit of going out to hunt and shoot any Bushmen they might find." (p. 28.)

The story of the Griquas, or Bastards, the first considerable group of Coloured people, makes interesting reading. Here we have a group already grown out of savagery and heathendom. In many ways Westernized, they spread to the Orange River and became the first true Voortrekkers. In both Griqualand West and Griqualand East these Bastards were the true pioneers, the carriers of Western ideas into the interior.

The contacts between these Griquas and the White men were typical. Time and again the Boers encroached on their lands and infiltrated into territory at first occupied by them. We see how they came with signs of their higher culture, brought churches, schools—and canteens. And in the end dispossessed the people they claimed they had come to save. An interesting feature of this process is the manner in which freehold rights for the Coloured people led in every instance to the loss of their land. This process has not yet ceased.

Partly, I feel, we must concede that the early Griquas had not sufficiently mastered Western civilization to have developed an appreciation of its standards, its economics, its values and its techniques, so that they could counter the wily Boers. They were as children in the hands of these hardened frontiersmen who soon took possession of their best watering-places, their land, and reduced them to servility. But also, we must beware of the inference that this is still the case. Unfortunately, as I have said, the process has not yet ceased. Yet intervening generations have had the benefit of education and of a much more thorough and intimate knowledge of Western civilization, and it would not be valid to draw facile conclusions about present-day Coloured people generally, any more than one could draw general conclusions about Whites on the basis of the poor-whites of fifty years ago.

Most enlightening about this whole process of Boer-Griqua contact is the mental attitude of the Boer to the Coloured people. "The Boers knew quite well that left to themselves the Bastards were no match for them, and the Bastards knew it too . . ." (p. 89.) The Boer thus entered into his relationship with the Griquas confirmed in an attitude of superiority. According to the Special Commissioner for the Northern Border, the Boers ". . . could not bear to see a Coloured man in any other position but that of a servant. . . ." (p. 89.) This

attitude, it would seem, has altered hardly at all.

One of the most valuable features of Marais' book is the telling manner in which he analyzes the Boer mentality. His appraisal of the frontiersman is typical and explains a great deal of the course of South African history. For instance: "The Graaff Reinet (White) colonists had had little experience of the rule of law. Each tended to be a law unto himself and resented any interference with his actions, especially his actions towards his servants." (p. 112.) This arrogance showed itself not only towards his actual servants, but towards all people of Colour and led to antipathy and hatred towards all who, like the London Missionary Society missionaries, sympathized with the people of Colour. These feelings have persisted to the present day.

Marais makes much of the effect the ever-pressing need for labour had on Colour attitudes, and rightly so. From the start, the aboriginals were seen as a source of labour. Slaves were introduced in order to supply labour. Hottentots, although 'free', were pressed into service; and many laws were made later to stop their 'vagrancy', but in reality also to bind them to their masters and to secure a constant and adequate labour supply. Even such well-respected institutions as Genadendal came to be looked upon with considerable hostility when it was felt that they were 'harbouring' the Hottentot servants.

Hence the passing of Ordinance 50 of 1828, which decreed the liberation of Hottentots, establishing their equality before the law and freedom to move from place to place, was not calculated to gain Boer support for the Government. On the contrary, it angered them greatly.

Marais links Ordinance 50 with the emancipation of slaves as the two great acts for which the Coloured people have to thank the philanthropists. He points out, though, how the social and racial prejudices and attitudes which had been built up prior to these events proved too strong for a spirit of real liberalism to take definite root. In actual legislation there was Colour-blindness after 1828, but social pressures continued to ensure that in practice the people of Colour received differential treatment. Yet, again, the very idea that things could go so far as to entrench rights in law for the Coloured and Black people was too much for many Whites. Hence the Great Trek: "In its most important and most distinctive aspects the

Great Trek was nothing else than the rebellion of the Boers against the ideas of the philanthropists"; and again: "... the Great Trek led to the establishment of two resentful Republics where the old Boer attitude to people of Colour, an attitude in utter contrast to the post-1828 'Cape Liberal tradition', took deeper root." (pp. 160-161.)

When it came to the construction of the Cape (elected) Legislative Assembly, we see how it was felt necessary to 'protect' the Coloured people against the Boer attitude. In the face of Britain's refusal (in 1853) to accept a differential franchise, we see the beginnings of a period of intrigue with regard to voting qualifications which has not yet ended.

The Masters and Servants Blue Book left no doubt of the intentions with regard to the Coloured people, and in 1850 the Governor expressed apprehension of the future and said that under an elected legislature "... the Coloured classes ... will, by means of compulsory contracts for lengthened periods, and vagrant laws with severe punishments and penalties, be reduced to a state of virtual slavery." (p. 210.)

Reading the history of the Coloured people again, one is filled with a feeling of sorrow, even despair. Here is the story of a trusting people exploited from the beginning, a people doomed to slavery and all its sufferings.

One redeeming feature is this—that Marais closes his narrative in 1937. Since then so much has happened by way of integration in industry and by way of achievement in avenues demanded by the growth of the country that one sees hope in this 20-year advance alone. On much of this progress, of which signs must have been very clear in 1937 already, Marais says nothing.

True, there has been oppression ever since, in both legislation and administration. And it is true that Marais' dismal prophecies about "the political segregation of Coloured voters, compulsory segregation in the towns of the Cape Province, Natal, and Coloured 'quotas' in industry" (pp. 283-4) have been proved correct. But Marais gives no clue that he anticipated a tremendous upsurge in the general economic strength of the Coloured people, in their political enlightenment, and in the strengthening of their bonds with other non-White groups. Perhaps it is because he failed to see this that he ends with the words "... as far as one can see ahead at present, the outlook for the Coloured people must remain dark."

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