

BLACK MEN ON WHITE LAND

Keegan, Tim, *Facing the storm. Portraits of black lives in rural South Africa*, Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Phillip, 1988, X + 169; R14,95.

Ndae Makume, Lucas Nqandela, Barney Ngakane, Petrus Poee: these are the four men whose relations with the land form the basis of Keegan's analysis of agrarian transformation on the highveld (rather than "rural South Africa", as the title suggests) in the early decades of this century.

The "life stories" of these men, unknown to each other, "obscure" (Keegan's term, though he would view Ngakane, a community leader of some standing, as an exception) and battling in disparate small groups against the growing might of organised white politics, reveal much in common. Most obviously, they are all male accounts. Keegan is aware of the implications of a male bias; he writes,

the perspectives of women are likely to reveal different dimensions of the rural experience to that of their menfolk... But the difficulties of investigating women's experiences and perspectives should not be underestimated. Patriarchy itself (the domination and control of men over women) is a major obstacle; women are not supposed to view the world through independent lenses . . . (pp. 160-1).

Even with this acknowledgement, however, there is little indication in the book that gender — men's gender in this instance — can in any way help to explain the life chances of individuals. Race and class for Keegan are the critical factors.

HISTORIES

This problem aside, there is much that these men's histories tell us. We learn of how they skilfully exploited opportunities for survival — even for accumulation — in a variety of landlord-tenant relationships, from share-cropping proper to labour tenancy; of the basic importance of education for improving one's status and also for ensuring some more secure future for the following generation; of the wide appeal of an inclusive, self-bettering style of Christianity, which gave way only later to bitterness and disillusion as "the boundaries of freedom clos(ed) in rapidly" (p. 111); of the force of local custom and habit rather than the strictures of the law *per se* in determining what was possible or impossible; of the effects on the size of family groups and households of increasing tenuousness on the land; also, as life on the farms became more insecure, of the growing appeal of the towns, as "investment in upward class mobility on the basis of rural enterprise gave way to investment in ragtime trousers" (p. 123); and fascinatingly, of the way in which people themselves reconstructed "ethnic" ties and "tribes" — af-

ter proper consultation of Ellenberger and Macgregor's **History of the Basuto** — as a form of self-defence against encroaching state authority. Sometimes this was done in order to assemble enough people together to buy land; on other occasions, it was felt that the reassertion of chiefly authority would assist in negotiations with the state.

Although all four of the men whose experiences are recounted in the book maintained some link with the land through the greater part of their lives, some were more successful than others at escaping the "proletarian vortex" (p. 59). Education, as well as a reasonably secure rural base, seem to have been the twin factors here.

Yet stacked against all of them, a theme which recurs again and again, is that none of them was the owner of the (white) land on which they were farming and largely as a result, they were mostly consigned to a fate of wandering. Lucas Nqandela, for example, moved to 10 different farms in his adult working life before being dumped in the Bophuthatswana bantustan in the 1960s. This sense of upheaval permeates all these oral histories and underlines the inherent disadvantage faced by African tenant farmers already excluded from the ownership of private property on the highveld, a point curiously underplayed by Keegan. (It is true that some of these men did come to own or co-own farm land and even this was no guarantee of security, as they suddenly found themselves declared a "black spot" and vulnerable to forced removal, or as pressure on available land became acute and farming unviable.)

The four men did not simply have these experiences (or variations of them) in common. Each case history, as Keegan explicitly notes,

reveals aspects of the experience of a class, of a racial or ethnic group, of a community, of a geographical region, of a particular economic enterprise (p. 159).

INDIVIDUALS AND PROCESSES

Although the book is divided into two sections, the first containing the "life stories" and the second concerned with broader issues of social transformation and the recovery of oral tradition, in fact Keegan attempts to make links between individuals and wider social processes throughout. He makes this intention clear in the preface:

This book then, is . . . a history of ordinary black folk, but it is also more. It is concerned as well to investigate wider themes of social and economic change by examining the lives of a handful of individuals (p. ix).

The distinction between the two sections, then, is somewhat misleading. It is probably more accurate to characterise the presentations of the individuals as "portraits" (cf. the book's subtitle) — suggesting a fairly extensive reconstruction, selection and interpretation of the interview material — than as "life stories" (cf. the title page). One takes Keegan's point that 'seldom can the informant's own words be quoted verbatim without being explained and translated' (p. 161); nevertheless, there is an important distinction between the "straight" presentation of a life story and the selection of only certain parts of it, which are recast to show up key processes, events, meanings. There is a ready and striking example of these two approaches: the publication of the South African Institute of Race Relations, **A community man. An oral history of the life of William Barney Ngakane** (SAIRR, 1982) could much more properly be treated as a "life story". There is of course an interviewer, of whom one is constantly aware, prodding with questions (and in this sense, exercising to some extent prior selection of information) but in the responses one is left in no doubt that it is Barney Ngakane

telling Barney Ngakane's story. In Keegan's portrait, on the other hand, one is never sure whether the storyteller is Keegan or the same Ngakane (and by the same token, any of the other three informants) — which one is making the links between personal reminiscence and the big issues.

A portrait as painted by Keegan turns into a work of analysis: it is no longer simply a "life story". One is not questioning the use of oral testimony in this way but rather, to ask that the bigger job of appropriation that has been undertaken be recognised as such. A work of analysis based on oral sources (supplemented as Keegan's has been by archival work) can be as valuable an addition to "history from below", and as valuable a statement that "society is an organism that grows rather than a structure that can be dismantled and reassembled like a motor car engine"¹ (Keegan being one of the most forceful proponents of this view) as any "straight" life history.

1. "Introduction" to Wilson, F. and M. Ramphela **Uprooting poverty. The South African challenge**. Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Phillip, 1989, p. 5.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

In his article 'Suggestions for an economic policy for the future'. Gavin Maasdorp is clearly torn between the Free Market and Redistribution approaches to the elimination of poverty. I have no such conflict.

I find it inconsistent to give even 'careful consideration' to minimum wage legislation while finding 'the presence of absolute poverty unacceptable' to all liberals. Minimum wages and trade unions for that matter, in their very nature upgrade the employed at the expense of the poverty-stricken unemployed, and further confound the issue by reducing profits which are the ONLY generator of employment and/or taxation.

Mr Maasdorp has also fallen into the trap of treating poverty as a given. In fact the primary cause of poverty is the parent who brings into the world more children than he can afford to feed, clothe and educate. We cannot discuss poverty without drawing attention to this, at the very least. Upliftment is only one way of reducing the birth rate. A direct attack on the problem is surely as 'liberal' as drawing attention to the appalling death rate.

What is inherently liberal about increasing my taxes in

order to pay for the education and health care of my neighbour with twice as many children as I? The words liberal and humanitarian cannot mean the same thing. No society can prosper where the parent is relieved of primary responsibility for launching each of his children into economic life.

The state has no more than an overall role to play in the elimination of poverty. Every R5 000 it extracts from me in the form of taxation prevents that R5 000 from finding its way, through institutions, to expansion and the employment of one more worker earning R5 000 per annum. To add insult to injury after the bureaucrats and bunglers have done their work on my R5 000, only R2 500 remains to give to a citizen in need.

Can R2 500 once only, be compared with R5 000 per annum for life?

Yours sincerely,

C.L. Kidson