

# JOHN WESTERN'S OUTCAST CAPE TOWN

(University of Minnesota Press, 1981. xvi + 372 pp., maps, illustrations.)

Reviewed by M. G. Whisson

In his generous foreword, Robert Coles declares, "When the reader has finished this book he/she will know how South Africa's outcasts live." He/she will not, of course, as Western deals specifically with the Cape Town area, overwhelmingly with the "Coloured" rather than with the Black African population, and with the resettlement camps and "homelands" not at all. But the reader will have experienced far more than empathy with those who were driven from their homes by the Group Areas Acts or who have been harassed from shack to shack across the Cape Flats. He will have confronted the central moral issue of South African politics with an inescapable logic.

In the great debate between the nationalists and their opponents, the nationalists' case has rested on a moral pragmatism which may be summarised roughly as follows. Historical circumstances have put together groups of people whose languages, ways of life, material expectations, appearance and culture differ so greatly that ultimate justice and peace can only be achieved through the unambiguous definition of separate spheres of interest, allocations of space and political institutions. To pretend that the Xhosa can lie down and eat potatoes like the Whites (or fish like the Coloureds) is as fanciful in this world as Isaiah's vision of the lion and the ox living in harmony. Where possible the solution to this problem is to be attained through separate independent states, where not possible through separate districts and institutions in the urban areas. Western, a human geographer, sets up a hypothetical model of how an enfranchised group would organise a metropolis in such a way as to ensure not only segregation, but also (and primarily) domination i.e. a conscious attempt to maximise its political advantage. Such a model produces a segmentary plan, the centre being monopolised by the enfranchised, boundaries between the groups being enhanced by arterial roads, railways, industrial belts or even open space, and the segments ordered in such a way that the groups defined as being most distant socially from the enfranchised are in segments with the least common boundary with the ruling group. This is not "apartheid", but the spatial dimension of "baaskap."

What emerges from the ideal type model, when compared with the actual group areas of Cape Town is an 80% correspondence. Put another way, while the representatives of local groups, churches and, notably, Donald Molteno, argued the case for District Six, Mowbray, Wynberg and the other affected areas on a piecemeal basis, the planners were essentially unconcerned with the details or with the individuals concerned, and the hearings did no more than provide them with a short term estimate of the political strength of white opposition in an area largely outside the National Party sphere of influence. Without ever becoming shrill, Western spells out the simplest possible explanation for the "racial" geography of Cape Town today, and deals in turn with the explicable and the inexplicable deviations from his model.

From the macro-analysis of Cape Town, Western proceeds to a detailed account of the experience of the people of Mowbray, a "brown spot" which had grown up before

the expanding metropolis swallowed up the ribbon of villages which had developed between Table Bay and False Bay. A hundred or so families with close kinship ties and over a century of unbroken residence in the area were "disqualified" and scattered over the growing Coloured Group Areas. A few mourned their lost homes until they died. Most of those who were able to buy their own homes, while resenting the insult of disqualification, have come to terms with their new environments, welcome the additional space and standard of living at home, and fear mainly the street gangs which lurk in the sub-economic areas and occasionally invade the home owner estates. Those who could not afford to buy their way out of the City-Council-owned ghettos have suffered far more in every imaginable way — in access to amenities, cost of fares to and from school or work, grocery bills, personal safety, contacts with friends and kinsfolk, and in self-esteem. Western tabulates and calculates like any mindless social surveyor, but he also penetrates much deeper into what it feels like to be a victim of the Group Areas Act. He has a good ear for apposite comment, a good eye for symbols, and sensitivity to the suffering of the many strangers who accepted him as a friend.

The final section of **Outcast Cape Town** looks more closely at the real outcasts in the region — those whose homes are unambiguously in the area, but for whom there is no legal space and/or no money to buy legal space. The growth of shanty towns and the draconian measures undertaken by the state to remove them are simply described. Despite the awfulness of what they are doing to the tens of thousands of individual victims, the officials of the Administration Boards and their political masters remind one of the Walrus and the Carpenter.

"If seven maids with seven mops swept it for half a year, Do you suppose," the Walrus said, "That they could get it clear?"

"I doubt it," said the Carpenter, and shed a bitter tear.

Not only will they fail to clear the sandy wastes around the mother city, but, if Western's demographic arithmetic is sound, they will be faced by increasing numbers as the millenium reaches its last decade. Just as the houseproud ladies who were driven from Mowbray to the Flats lament that they cannot keep the sand out of their council cottages, so will the Commissioners of the Administration Board lament, ever more loudly, that they cannot sweep away the human dunes blowing in from the thiristlands of the Eastern Cape. And each new effort they make, each new turn of the legal screw, achieves, and will achieve, no more than a further exacerbation of the racial tension and hatred that the whole policy is supposed to prevent.

The tale that Western has to tell is as familiar as it is dreadful, but what he has achieved in his account is a vital measure of detachment and theoretical rigour, a use of statistical and empirical material worthy of Muriel Horrell, and a command of evocative language which our legion of creative "writers" might envy. If at times he rambles, and makes comparisons which tell us more about the breadth of his reading or his assessment of his American readership than about the issue, he can be forgiven, for this is a first work, produced with style and remarkable expedition. □