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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)

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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

brief 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 the life 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
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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