

Review of Phyllis Lewsen, *Reverberations. A Memoir.*

Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996. Paperback. vii+ 220pp. Illus.

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(Barlow Limited Archives)

This is an eminently readable autobiography from the pen of one of South Africa's most distinguished historians, editors and biographer of John X Merriman. In this memoir, written originally in response to her daughter's suggestion and intended for private circulation among family and friends, Phyllis Lewsen intermingles her personal narrative with public events which caused deep reverberations in her psyche.

Born in 1916 of Lithuanian immigrant parents in the Ventersdorp-Potchefstroom district she had a 'mixed kind of upbringing' among Scots, Australians and Afrikaners, including a few years of convent education, but always knew that her Jewish family was different to their neighbours. Against this background she describes herself as a happy natured child who enjoyed farm life and adventures with her brother Harry; the financial hardships and eventual impoverishment, endured by her unhappy parents; the strictly orthodox household of her fanatically religious and chauvinistic maternal grandfather Chaim Sack; her numerous aunts, uncles and cousins. Dubbed a 'swot' at school, she tried to disguise her cleverness by being good at games although she was more attracted to the scholastic side, manifesting an early and lasting interest in English and History.

Having decided in her matric year to take up teaching, Lewsen enrolled in February 1932 at the Normal College and proceeded to do the five first year subjects which were allowed in terms of College regulations. However in 1933 and subsequent years, she received generous bursaries from the University of the Witwatersrand which enabled her to complete the degree course. She enjoyed campus life to the full, participating in a range of social and political activities, and studying under distinguished scholars like Professors J. Y. T. Greig, W. M. (Pinky) Macmillan, the young Arthur Keppel-Jones, Margaret Ballinger and Professor Leo Fouché who refused her permission to apply for the Ainsworth Scholarship on blatant sexist grounds. Alas, when Lewsen joined the University staff in 1942 to lecture in the Departments of English and History at various times, she was again the victim of discrimination, this time of the archaic ruling that married women could only be employed in a temporary capacity. This applied until 1965 when she was finally appointed to the permanent staff.

Describing herself as a social democrat Lewsen explains that having been converted to socialism during her first year at university, she wove together her socialist and liberal beliefs into a doctrine that combined individual freedom, political accountability and the full range of social services, with an educational and economic programme which offered genuine and not fictional, opportunities to all. When disillusionment with the United Party came she and attorney husband Jack (who represented the Party on the Johannesburg City Council and whom she had met while a student), joined first the Liberal Party in 1957 and later the Progressive Party. A great admirer and friend of Helen Suzman, whom she regarded as the 'star freshette' of 1933, she edited Suzman's *Solo Years* which was published in 1991.

Throughout her busy academic life, and role as wife, mother and grandmother, Lewsen

has reflected, analysed and delivered shrewd commentary on local and international political issues although her first opportunity to travel abroad only came in 1963 when she was 47 years old. During most of the turbulent 1980s and transitional 1990s, she has kept in touch with events mainly through the medium of television, newspapers and discussions with a large circle of family and friends as well as many of her former students. The publication of her definitive biography of Merriman entitled *John X Merriman Paradoxical South African Statesman* coincided with her retirement in 1982. She has continued writing historical works and scholarly book reviews and was the first historian to win the coveted Pringle Award of the English Academy in 1975 for her review of Golo Mann's *The History of Germany since 1780*, published in *The Sunday Times* in 1974.

This book deserved better quality production, particularly of the photographs and family tree, and would have benefitted from good copy editing and a hardcover binding and attractive dustjacket which a commercial publisher would have given it. It is surprising that an academic press would have neglected to include as an important feature as an index.

Personally I found the descriptions of her early life and student days the most captivating part of this memoir and of less interest, Lewsen's detailed accounts of historical and current local and international political issues which seem to dominate a substantial part of the book. Allowing for the fact that it was intended for private circulation, I would like to have learnt more about the circumstances and people who influenced her development as an historian and writer, as well as her and Jack's love of music, interest in art and their non-political friends.

Lewsen tells the fascinating story of her life in a lucid and unpretentious style, and her autobiography is a welcome addition to this literary genre.