

**Daphne M. Wilson: *Against the Odds: The Struggle of the Cape African Night Schools 1945-1967.***  
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This is a book about a fraught educational journey for those involved in Adult Basic Education in the early years of the apartheid regime. It is a heroic tale in minor key. It captures many of the central angst of white liberals in South Africa concerning their place and contribution to the struggle against apartheid, and their place in history. It is also the chronicle of a personal journey and a dedication to the field of Adult Education by the author, whose name is almost synonymous with the Cape Non-European Night Schools Association (CNENSA) about which she writes.

In a context where Adult Basic Education had hardly begun to feature on the educational landscape, the Night Schools Movement represented a significant initiative located within the impending liberalisation of United Party policy signalled by the Fagan, De Villiers, and Eybers Commissions. Yet the major part of the history of the Night Schools as described in this

publication relates to the struggle to keep the initiative alive in a political context that was overtly hostile to the expansion of education for blacks on the terms envisaged by CNENSA. The gradual emergence of apartheid education policies during the fifties weakened the movement and first limited its ability to function effectively, and then tragically drove it out of existence.

The history of the night schools is divided into three eras. Phase 1 deals with the origins of the movement from the earliest initiatives in Retreat during 1945 to the early fifties. The major figure that dominates this period is Oliver Kuys. Phase 2 is concerned with the years of greatest growth and success during the mid fifties, when attendance at the schools rose to nearly six hundred. The names of Ronald Segal and Raymond Ackerman are significant here. The final phase, from 1958 to 1967, in which the author was herself a key actor, tells of the gradual decline of the Movement under the combined effect of the implementation of the Group Areas Act, the harassment of teachers, and the withdrawal of vital government subsidies to the organisation.

The vast majority of the students who came to the night schools were recent male migrants who had flocked to the urban areas in the post-War years in search of employment. The challenges of teaching literacy to adults in these conditions, and the attempts to develop appropriate teaching materials to meet the needs of the time indicate a fascinating area of educational endeavour that would merit further investigation. The work of Eddie Roux is noted as central to this development in the early years. The other significant aspect of the task of the Night Schools was to assist small numbers of students to pass formal school examinations. In a context where only 164 Africans had obtained a matriculation certificate by 1945, the demand for education of this kind by adults was acute. Classes were offered at all stages of the primary and high school. In 1954 there were a total of 66 students in the high school classes at Langa Senior, Retreat and Windermere. Two of the students obtained their matriculation certificates in that year.

The teachers and organisers, drawn predominantly from the Liberal Party, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the staff and faculty of the University of Cape Town, as well as from the limited corps of African teachers in the townships of Cape Town, made up an interesting group. It is particularly interesting to note how many of the teachers were of Jewish extraction. It is significant to note that many of the teachers noted by the author emigrated during the dark years of apartheid, and that organisations involved in their turn came to be the victims of the apartheid government.

The author, who is writing in the capacity of researcher and autobiographer, is much concerned to defend the

“apolitical” liberal stance of CNENSA and the defence of a apolitical/objective stance by the organisers, in the light of subsequent Freirian critiques relating to the paternalistic and “domesticating” nature of education in the colonial context, though she fortunately reserves these considerations for the final chapter, and allows the “story” of the Night Schools to be told in its own right. She is quite clearly correct in asserting that any brave and heroic attempt to turn the Night Schools into places for disseminating anti-apartheid politics would have led to their abrupt closure by the new government, intent on stifling all forms of “liberal” education for blacks. Yet it would have enriched the book immensely to have been allowed into the debates on these issues at the time rather than treating them as a closed box. The actual politics within the CNENSA never really emerges with any sharpness and clarity, and this would have added immeasurably to the richness of the book. This is also perhaps a task for a future researcher!

As one who had taught in the Windermere school during a short stay at UCT in 1965 the book provided a fascinating read, and raised a host of problems about the need to understand independent educational endeavours without falling into the tempting pitfalls of hindsight for readers steeped in the political assumptions of an age of mass resistance.

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