

*From protest to challenge: A documentary history of African politics in South Africa 1882-1990, Vol. 1, Protest and hope, 1882-1934*

(Auckland Park, Jacana, 2014, 584 pp., bibl, 2 maps, index. ISBN: 978-1-77009-880-0)

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*From protest to challenge* is a useful collection of documents providing insight into the struggle of the South African black, including coloured and Indian, community to obtain equality with their white compatriots in South Africa. It is a deceptive read; which, to be honest, depends on your approach to the book. I tend to read books cover to cover without flicking through to see what is coming, so I was quite taken aback when the main narrative came to an end after 87 pages. The remainder of the book consists of the documents referred to in the first part, a useful chronology, bibliography and index. It is a revised and updated edition of a series first published between 1972 and 1977. New themes have been added to that of the first edition such as religious separation, African workers and their allies, postwar concerns, resistance and repression and the formation of the Communist Party. In addition, the latest edition contains 99 documents as opposed to 51 in the first, but unlike the first edition where the documents are interspersed between the main sections of the book, in the latest edition they are all collated at the end thereby making it a little more cumbersome for flicking to a document if you want to follow a point up as you are reading, but easier to search if you only require the primary material.

Martin Legassick<sup>4</sup> noted in a review of the first edition that the material had been collected from South Africa during field visits in the early 1960s. This explains why most of the documents in the collection are from government archives and published sources. This results in a specific slant of the material and is the reason why I could not quite shake the feeling that this was another

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<sup>4</sup> M Legassick, "Review article: Records of protest and challenge", *Journal of African History*, 20(3), 1979, p. 451.

“white” history of the struggle, raising the question “How would a ‘black’ history read?” and in particular, “How would a South African black history read?” Asking these questions is not to devalue the quality and content of the book, but rather to challenge how historians and others determine which documents to include and how these shape our reading of the past. This is particularly pertinent for the period covered by this volume, namely 1882 to 1934. These are important years in South Africa’s history and this first volume provides the context for those dealing with the later years of struggle. Specifically, it was a time when few were literate and those who were tended to write and think in English; a point identified by the compilers and supported by the inclusion of numerous documents by the emerging black political leaders of the day.

For scholars of the history of these years, the names appearing in the text are well-known: Sol Plaatje, John Tengo Jabavu, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Charles and John Dube, Isaac Wauchope, Abdullah Abdurahman and Gandhi amongst others. So are the events around which the documents are drawn: The Anglo-Boer or South African War of 1899-1902, Union in 1910, the 1913 Land Act and voting rights. The book provides some insight into the development of the various political parties, although not surprisingly most attention is given to the dominant African National Congress and its links with the Communist Party. The interplay between the different parties is addressed as are relations with white liberals. In the essays which contextualize the primary material, various quotes from the documents are used to emphasise points and tempt the reader to engage with the documents. To some extent this negates the need for including the documents, however, their inclusion, despite some having been shortened, allows the reader to see the quote in context and to confirm the interpretation or draw their own conclusions.

In the Preface to the Second Edition, the compilers set out why and how they came to produce the book addressing to some extent the questions and points raised above. Recognising the link between South Africa’s struggles around equality with that in the United States places this book in a unique position for those interested in examining the interconnectedness of thinking and the exchange of ideas. Although this is not a dominant feature of the book, the astute scholar will be able to draw appropriate conclusions. Similarly, a comparison of the two editions of *From protest to challenge* can provide historians with some insight into how accounts develop as new material becomes available. It does not appear that any documents from the

first edition were left out of the second edition but rather additions made, thus allowing the scholar to create their own impressions where texts might seem to contradict or conflict with each other.

To conclude: Despite the feeling that this was a “history done to us”, the 99 documents provide an incredibly valuable source for those unable to access South African archives. The sign of any good book is that it stimulates thinking and this book achieved that as its structure and contents made me reflect on my own prejudice as an historian of Africa.