

Review

Allison Drew (2007/2009) *Between Empire and Revolution: a life of Sidney Bunting 1873-1936*. Hidden Histories Series. London: Pickering & Chatto; Pretoria: UNISA Press

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The first white activists to reach out beyond the racially bounded minority and agitate for revolutionary change are legitimately to be seen as key ancestors for some kind of non-racial society, however vaguely defined, in South Africa. One small wave of such activists came from the immigrant British workers already imbued with the ethos of the emerging Labour Party. A second arrived on these shores from the Baltic, Jews associated with anti-Czarist revolutionary formations in the old Russia and thereafter sympathisers with the new Soviet Union. An older wave of writers such as Edward Roux and the Simons memorialised their passions, quarrels and organisational forays. More recently, their memory has been revived by sympathetic historians, notably in Jonathan Hyslop's biography of JT Bain as well as Jeremy Krikler's study of the 1922 Rand revolt. Alison Drew, an American historian based in England, who has written extensively on the early and alternative Left in South Africa, now adds to this a biography of Sidney Bunting, associated particularly with the early days of the Communist Party of South Africa.

Bunting does not fit either target group of early white secular dissenters at all even though he supported the Labour Party for a time (remaining friendly with Colonel Frederick Creswell, early champion of white labour and segregation) and although he eventually married Rebecca Notlowitz, an articulate Jewish immigrant from Lithuania trained as a midwife, who believed in Bunting and shared his enthusiasm for the early Communist Party. Bunting himself however came from an upper middle class London family of

Dissenters who interested themselves in diffuse causes, was a good classical musician and a dedicated classics graduate who held a first class degree from Oxford University. Like a number of other family members, he sought his fortune in the empire and partnered a wattle estate in rural Natal, successful in the 1920s, with a first cousin. This became a silent partnership in time, giving Bunting an income in dividends while the cousin became suitably horrified at his relation's political notoriety in white South Africa.

Drew writes well, is often fascinated with detail that appears in old documents and she has been so successful in recreating Bunting's bourgeois origins, connection and life from his family papers that they at times threaten to dominate this biography. Of the Communist Party years, there are no remarkable revelations but we do see in some human detail his slogging months of campaigning for parliament unsuccessfully in a caravan through the rural Tembuland constituency in 1929 and the phase of backbiting and personal rivalry that pulled the little party apart and virtually killed it in the early 1930s. The hostility of the early ANC and the eastern Cape black establishment to radical social ideas is etched more strongly than has generally been done.

As is well-known, much of the disputes of the time centred on the slightly eccentric slogan of the Native Republic, imported from Moscow where Bunting twice went as a delegate. Bunting was a kind of figure in the middle, with loose ties to a white labour movement that had very recently appeared willing to take on the South African state very menacingly but increasingly fed up with mainstream white racial values and convinced of the central importance of organising oppressed blacks, especially workers. He always had an uprightness and a certain independence of mind which comes out in observations that were not entirely politically correct and of course the educational credentials that must have made party members from poor backgrounds uncomfortable. The best-known black party pioneers, such as Moses Kotane, James La Guma and Albert Nzula, disliked him but Gana Makabeni, who was at his side as translator and guide through the Tembuland wanderings, remained a loyal friend to the end.

The shifts in Bunting's life almost entirely occurred in early middle age during the second decade of the twentieth century and the absence of reflections of any depth on them gives this vivid and thoughtful biography a certain opacity and perhaps even imbalance. It surprises us with a whiff of nostalgia for late Victorian middle class life in Bloomsbury and an interest in British taste in classical music of the day that does not fit what Damascus

would unveil in the harsh sunlight of the South African Reef. But Bunting never apparently dilated on his conversion on the road to Damascus. In his last years, unable to sustain his solicitor's practice and with wattle prices poor, he made a living as a travelling musician and then caretaker with his wife of a new upmarket block of flats on the edge of Hillbrow. His funeral in 1936 was hijacked as a kind of commemorative event in the reconstruction of the Communist movement under its emerging new Popular Front auspices.