Review


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Heather Hughes’ biography of the first president of the African National Congress (then known as the South African Native National Congress), founder of the Zulu Christian Industrial School (commonly known as Ohlange High School) and Ilanga laseNatali (now known as Ilanga) newspaper – all institutions still in existence today – provides the reader with a rich and yet complex story of a ‘historically significant’ figure in the annals of South African history. In some ways within African politics, the period from 1900 to 1915 belongs to John Langalibalele Dube. His work cut across various fields, key among them are education, media, politics (both local and national), and the world of letters. But it was in the institutions that he helped found that his impact on SA has been largely felt. So, it is no wonder that his influence in the South African political landscape has been quite visible and contested over the years. Interestingly, it might be precisely this significant presence of the figure of John Dube in the national life of South Africa that has meant that few scholars dared to grapple with the meaning of his work. Hughes suggests that it is partly because of the dearth or non-existence of a John Dube archive.

*First President* begins with a rather sad story of the disposal (possible internment) of Dube’s personal collection comprising diaries and letters when he died on February 11, 1946. The identity of a hand that saw to the safekeeping or destruction of Dube’s personal records and artifacts remains a mystery to this day. I do not share the author’s view that this ‘incident should remain shrouded in mystery’. For, when I read the opening page of Hughes’ biography of John Dube a few questions came to mind. First, what
does the narration of this story by members of the Dube family do to their own sense of who they are, when they know that someone out there might be in possession of the artifacts of their father, grandfather or great grandfather? Second, how does one come to terms with a (double) family loss (personal artifacts) that has a potential to impact on matters of inheritance across generations?

Notwithstanding the damage this particular act did on how historians and biographers reconstruct the life of John Dube, Hughes succeeds in giving a balanced account of Dube’s life. The first three chapters of the book introduce the reader to personalities who laid a foundation for John Dube that had a profound impact on his life in the twentieth century. Hughes moves from the politics of the Zulu kingdom under kings Shaka and Dingane to a somewhat precarious settler politics of the colony of Natal in the early 1840s. Her account of these events are quite important because it was this unstable politics that provided space to James Dube and the Qadi rulers to reimagine their lives anew in the colony of Natal. James Dube provided a firm foundation for his son not only in material terms such as ensuring that he received education but also by anchoring John in the history and current events of the time. James Dube’s naming of his son Langalibalele, after a well-known leader of the Hlubi people, was to be of seminal importance to John’s firm belief in pragmatic politics in the twentieth century. Such an approach to politics also saw John Dube drawing from what remained of the strength of the Zulu royal house.

Chapter 4 takes the reader to the activities of John and Nokutela in the United States of America. It was during their travels to various towns and cities that the young Dube family consolidated its vision of what they wanted to initiate once they return home. While John Dube’s public speaking skills were key to them raising money for the institutions they established in South Africa, Hughes suggests that Nokutela’s music talent and skills were definitive. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 deal with John Dube’s work back in South Africa which included the founding of Ilanga newspaper and the establishment of the Zulu Christian Industrial School. It was in the first decade of the twentieth century that Dube used Ilanga laseNatali newspaper to comment on Natal politics especially on the 1906 poll tax and the 1908 Natal’s Native Administration bills. Dube’s role in raising Africans’ concerns and the form that their protests took reflected the conditions at the time. Hughes suggests that, ‘while we now think of this kind of petitioning as a polite and largely ineffectual method of politics, this was certainly not the case at the time’. It
is also in this part of the book that Hughes details Dube’s collaboration with Angelina, his second wife. In a significant way, Hughes’ biography of Dube highlights the two key women in John Dube’s long political career.

The last three chapters cover the period of John Dube’s life at the time when it seemed his energy and vision were fading. The late 1920s saw the rise of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union better known as ICU under the leadership of George Champion (Umahlathi Amnyama), Great Depression and the tightening of segregationist laws introduced by General JBM Hertzog. All these pressures called for Dube’s attention at the time when his own health showed signs of strain. I found Hughes’s handling of Dube’s leadership at this time refreshing. For a long time, a narrative that suggests that Dube’s leadership at this time was provincial and pro-capital has been left unchallenged (Roux 1967). Hughes shows that even at the time when Dube’s health was failing, he chaired key portfolios in the national Executive of the African National Congress both under Pixley Seme and ZR Mahabane’s leadership. Seeing Dube’s continued work within Congress and partly to keep him within the movement, Alfred Xuma invited Dube to be an honourary life president of the ANC in 1943.

*First President* points to areas that need further research. The story of the activities and life of Nokutela Dube needs to be told and so does that of Angelina. While the biography gives details on Dube’s meetings with chiefs, middle and upper classes both in South Africa and abroad, the same cannot be said about John Dube’s interactions with the working class in Natal.

**Reference**