

Review

Kevin Shillington (2020) *Patrick van Rensburg: rebel, visionary and radical educationist. A Biography*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Seán Morrow

Sean.morrow46@gmail.com

A personal anecdote: I was a young high school teacher in Zambia's Western Province in the mid 1970s. As a form teacher one of my responsibilities was to take my class once a week to cultivate vegetables in the school garden. To set an example I toiled and sweated; I joked; I cajoled; I berated. One week, while the students poked their hoes listlessly at the soil, I'd had enough: 'what the hell is going on, 4C?', I demanded. 'Sir', said Lubinda, pitying my naivety, 'we did not come here to dig'.

Lubinda had put his finger on the fundamental and abiding tension between academic and practical education in schooling in Africa and elsewhere. To take just two examples that long precede Patrick van Rensburg, the subject of this excellent biography: Dr Robert Laws, the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland missionary to northern Malawi made the case pithily for academic education in the 1920s. 'To discard', he said, 'or even lessen the literary training would be to block the way for advancement of native leaders and means the reduction of the natives to a class of helots' (McCracken 1977:223). Many differed, including, at much the same time, the authors of the Phelps-Stokes Commission reports, whose advocacy of 'educational adaptation' was highly influential, particularly in British colonies and dominions in Africa (Jones 1922, 1925).

I mention these examples to note that Patrick van Rensburg, a self-made educationist who professedly developed his educational philosophy of Education with Production as he went along, was in fact in a long and ambivalent tradition with both 'progressive' and 'conservative' aspects

on each side of the debate. Shillington's book can leave the reader in no doubt that van Rensburg's moment of opportunity, which enabled him to create Swaneng Hill School in Serowe in the early and mid-1960s when Bechuanaland was becoming Botswana, was specific and unrepeatable. He was indeed 'at heart, an incurable romantic' (28). Though his vision of how Africans *ought* to behave was supported by Scandinavian and other donors then and thereafter, and by a succession of idealistic young volunteers from western countries, and he became an authority on Education with Production, it is impossible not to feel that these donors from the liberal West also wanted to believe that African education could be what it could not. One can ponder the extent to which such donors and volunteers were projecting onto Africa an artisanal, rural utopia far from what was possible in their home countries, and which tended to be viewed by many, in Botswana and elsewhere in Africa, as limiting, restrictive and backward-looking. Certainly many, though not all, members of the Botswana cabinet and officials of the Botswana Department of Education, were sceptical about and even hostile to the experiment at Serowe, tolerating it because it ran on the basis of grants from abroad rather than from the resources of an impoverished state not yet enriched by the diamonds and other minerals that underpin modern Botswana's economy. For many in the Botswana political and administrative elite, the London Missionary Society's Tiger Kloof Educational Institution was the model to which they aspired.

It is hardly surprising that van Rensburg met with suspicion and even opposition from many in the governing class in Botswana, since his educational aim was precisely that of inhibiting the rise of such an elite. It is indeed remarkable that he obtained as much sympathy and support as he did from people like Quett Masire (president of Botswana from 1980 to 1998).

Undoubtedly, Education with Production and its kindred brigade project are the main justifications for a biography of van Rensburg. Shillington, however, with admirable critical empathy, outlines van Rensburg's difficult childhood and youth, with an absent mother and doubts about his paternity, and, while avoiding clumsy psychologising, enables the reader to understand how this background illuminates his adult achievements and weaknesses. He describes van Rensburg's turbulent and kaleidoscopic progression from Natal Anglophone to Afrikaner; from South African diplomat to anti-apartheid activist; from exile to educational and developmental militant. In many respects, though he was the darling of one section of progressive

educationists, and though there were some generally short-lived attempts to implement his vision as in Zimbabwe after 1980, his life after the 1960s was a dying fall. His career was rounded off by his return after a thirty-year exile to a liberated South Africa that outside small sections of academia paid very little attention to his message, and by a final return to Botswana where he was shown respect and kindness but where, also, his message by now had little or no purchase. He died in 2017.

Van Rensburg's lasting reputation rests on his school at Serowe, on the brigades and on his campaigns for Education with Production. Shillington's biography puts these activities in context and paints an intriguing picture of this driven, obsessive, restless and, in a non-monetary sense, ambitious man, capable of inspiring friendship and loyalty, but difficult to live with even when his typically high-octane activity was punctuated by the parties into which he threw himself with equally frenetic intensity. This is a kindly but clear-eyed book, alive to the contradictions of his subject's often quixotic career, to his tumultuous personal life and to the educational and political questions that his life raises and that are by no means resolved today.

References

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