

# Book Reviews and Notices

## THE PAUL THOMPSON NATAL (BAMBATHA) UPRISING TRILOGY

- *An Historical Atlas of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906* (Pietermaritzburg, 2001)
- *Bambatha at Mpanza: The Making of a Rebel* (Pietermaritzburg, 2004)
- *Incident at Trewirgie: First Shots of the Zulu Rebellion 1906* (Pietermaritzburg, 2005)

Paul Thompson, until recently a professor of history on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and currently an honorary research associate at the same institution, needs little introduction for anyone interested in regional military history and the genesis of English social and political identity in KwaZulu-Natal. His monographs and books on aspects of the Anglo-Zulu War (such as *War Comes to Umvoti: the Natal-Zululand Border 1878–79* and the renowned *Illustrated Guide to the Anglo-Zulu War*, co-authored with John Laband), as well as such titles as *Natalians First: Separatism in South Africa 1909–1961*, bear eloquent testimony to his contribution to scholarship. His repeated quests to unravel relatively obscure threads within major fields of study, such as the Anglo-Zulu War that continues to spit out one glossy publication after the next, and his meticulous and dogged investigation of those themes, probably constitutes the most cogent aspect of his legacy as an historian. It is regrettable that, with the exception of *Natalians First* and the *Field Guide*, publishers have denied his work the wider audience it deserves. Perhaps his subject matter and measured approach that does not pander to politically expedient conclusions and a racy style, count against him.

In recent years Thompson has shifted his attention to an episode in KwaZulu-Natal, and indeed South African, history, that has for long remained relatively obscure — the Natal (or Bambatha) Uprising of 1906, when the settler colonial government of Natal suppressed, with unrelenting determination, a protest by Black inhabitants ignited by the now infamous poll tax. Not anymore. Suddenly, it would appear, as the centenary year of the Uprising unwinds, this crucial event has gripped local interest and attracted the attention of politicians and an array of stakeholders and representatives, from descendants of the chiefdoms affected to the latter-day SANDF Reserve Force regiments whose predecessors took the field a hundred years ago.

The focus of much of this attention has understandably, in the light of the dramatic changes in the country's political and social landscape, been on the liberation component of this episode. Politicians in particular, as well as historians such as Jeff Guy (*The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion*), have focused on the socio-economic and political ramifications of the causes and conduct of the protest movement within a framework of what is now popularly considered as a core episode in the struggle of Black people in the last years of the colonial period in South Africa. Guy's series of supplements in the *Witness* can be viewed in this context. Public commemorative functions at Mpanza outside Greytown on 8 April, and in Richmond on 22 April, by way of further illustration, gathered this protest and liberation focus into energetic packages of ceremony and song.

Thompson's trilogy of titles on the Uprising has, in contrast to the energetic wave of public and political commemoration, passed relatively unnoticed. All three works failed to interest a publisher, even being overlooked by his institution's own publishing house, the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. Undeterred, Thompson forged ahead to publish his works privately, to the considerable benefit of those historians and general readers who have been fortunate to secure copies. This writer has, for example, relied heavily on his exhaustive research in the compilation of exhibition material for Uprising Centenary exhibitions in the Richmond, Byrne & District and Greytown Museums, as well as at Nkandla.

The *Historical Atlas of the Zulu Rebellion* continues the Laband and Thompson Anglo-Zulu War *Illustrated Guide* tradition, and fulfils an essential need for a thorough cartographic guide to the key events, principally military, of the Uprising as it unfolded, accompanied by a concise, abbreviated commentary, with deliberate minimum of social and political entanglement. Thompson in his foreword anticipated that the familiar histories of the event, such as James Stuart's *History of the Zulu Rebellion* (1913) and Shula Marks' *Reluctant Rebellion* (1970) would be dusted off as the centenary of the Uprising approached, and that new work would emerge. In the end it was his research that would emerge, largely unheralded, to fulfil the latter hopeful prediction. The Natal Uprising is militarily a far more confusing event to grapple with than, say, the Anglo-Zulu or Anglo-Boer Wars with their more prevalent big set-piece engagements, because it was more of a guerrilla war. The military forces of the colony of Natal, divided into several columns, scoured the rugged terrain from Nkandla to Maphumulo with numerous drives in an effort to track and destroy the poll tax protesters or insurgents. Thompson has masterfully unpacked the chronology of these operations, interspersed as they were by numerous one-sided skirmishes, as well as the more familiar major clashes such as Bobe Ridge on 5 May 1906, Mpukunyoni (28 May) and the best known of all — Mome Gorge on 10 June.

The *Atlas* was not a hurried effort to cash in on the forthcoming Centenary. In fact, Thompson's thorough research is evident in the fact that an aspect of this project-in-progress was presented at a University of Natal History Workshop as early as October 1993. Draft copies were also distributed for comment. The core of the *Atlas* is obviously the maps, and Thompson collaborated, as was the case with the *Anglo-Zulu War Guide*, with the expert cartographic team from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Considering that concerted research, with a strong emphasis on primary source material, is the hallmark of Thompson's trade, it is a boon to researchers to find a detailed bibliographical

essay at the end of the book. This aid to fellow practitioners is continued in *Bambatha at Mpanza* and *Incident at Trewirgie*.

In the prevailing climate of commemoration that affirms the presentation of the settler regime as villains and the protesters of 1906 as heroes, Thompson's second book, *Bambatha at Mpanza: the Making of a Rebel*, has not been greeted with acclaim by those who grant the enigmatic Amazondi *inkosi* heroic status and place him in the pantheon of struggle icons. The background to this considerable popular resistance to Thompson's portrait of Bambatha kaMancinza lies in the popular perception that has emerged over the past century of the larger-than-life military leader who stood at the vanguard of resistance to oppressive White colonial rule, and whose name was indelibly linked to the Uprising. Thompson's typically painstaking research, much of it original material sourced from the historical goldmine that is the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, paints a less inspiring picture of a contentious figure whose struggle against the Natal Government was as much a climax to years of dispute with his colonial overlords as it was a campaign against the poll tax, that he, in fact, agreed to pay.

Bambatha's story is recounted in exhaustive detail, accompanied by meticulous end-notes, focusing closely on his troubled history up to 1906, his efforts to seek support from Dinuzulu, heir apparent to the Zulu throne, the skirmish at Mpanza on 4 April (where Thompson's expertise in unravelling the military threads of a story is showcased), and his eventual flight to Nkandla. While Thompson may be criticised for not emphasising sufficiently the position of Bambatha at the receiving end of uncompromising colonial rule, his work provides an essential counterpoint to the populist imagery that is reluctant to appreciate the flaws in his motives and the limitations of his own participation and success. However, at the same time the book is too narrow in focus for the historian to depend on it alone for sufficient coverage of the Uprising as a whole. For the general reader, though, Thompson presents an engrossing tale of one of South African history's most colourful personalities. He even offers an abridged version of the story of this unusual and misunderstood man in *Natalia* 33 of December 2003.

*Incident at Trewirgie* rounds off Thompson's trilogy by travelling back to the genesis of the Uprising, in February 1906, and taking the reader on another meticulously crafted adventure, synthesised from a wealth of recorded evidence, this time through the events surrounding a skirmish on an isolated farm that set in motion the first phase of the Uprising. Once again, the pattern is repeated of a detailed narrative, beginning and ending with the controversial executions of the 12 protesters convicted by court martial in Richmond of complicity in the skirmish at *Trewirgie* on 8 February in which two Natal policemen lost their lives. Once again, too, in this work Thompson provides a counterpoint to the often simplistic and emotive rhetoric that commemoration of this event, unrelated directly to Bambatha himself, has prompted. Stephen Coan summed up his approach well when, in a review in the *Witness* of 5 October 2005, he wrote of a 'sober (and sobering) view of this unfortunate affair'.

In all three books considered here Thompson might be accused of failing to empathise sufficiently with the broad canvas of White colonial rule in Natal and its deleterious impact on Black traditional society that established the fertile ground for protest. Other historians, such as Marks, Lambert, Carton and Guy, have, however, filled in much of that essential detail. Thompson's strength has been to chronicle, explain and map the sweep of events, large and small, that constituted the protest itself and the Natal

Government's response to it, and to focus in on an individual (Bambatha) and events (Mpanza and *Trewirgie*) that have become synonymous with that noteworthy episode in South African history. His work is undoubtedly essential to the specialist, and, allowing for taste and personal bias, engaging to the general reader. The absence of a mainstream publisher has, as mentioned above, hindered the availability of these titles, whose production credentials have also suffered a bit. The lack of indexes, for example, is noticeable. On balance, though, it must be said that it is a great pity that these works have not received the attention they merit, individually or in what would have been an excellent combined package.

MARK COGHLAN

### LOST CITY OF THE KALAHARI

by Alan Paton. Introduced and edited by Hermann Wittenberg. Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 60pp. illus. R145.

In 2003, in the course of researching Paton's unpublished pre-1948 writings, Hermann Wittenberg travelled from Cape Town to the Alan Paton Centre in Pietermaritzburg. There among the Paton papers he discovered a forgotten account of a 1956 expedition to find the so-called 'Lost City of the Kalahari'. Paton was persuaded to participate in this venture by the enthusiasm of a young man he had given a lift to on the Pietermaritzburg-Durban road. Reg Ibbetson, whose belief in the existence of the lost city persisted even when the expedition ended in failure, found six other men, including Alan Paton, who were prepared to go with him on this unusual adventure, which many would have called a wild goose chase. They were joined for a short time by Terry Spencer, a photographer from the American magazine *Life*. (One wonders if *Life* would have taken any interest in the expedition if Paton, now a world-famous author, had not been involved.)

Paton was always an enthusiastic traveller, especially to parts of the African continent he did not know, and so one might expect him to be attracted by the prospect of a month in the remote Kalahari. Wittenberg in his introduction speculates that Paton, who in 1956 had been elected chairman of the Liberal Party, may also have wanted a temporary escape from 'the intense work demands and increasingly depressing political scenario in which he was embroiled'. It was a time when the Afrikaner Nationalist government of South Africa was getting well and truly into its stride, and its opponents had good reason to feel depressed and disheartened.

It seems clear that Paton, like one or two other members of the party, did not really expect they would find any 'lost city'. His main aim was to see the Kalahari, and especially the fabled Aha Mountains, which in his imagination 'rose, out of a land of rock and sand and stone, unbelievably austere, waterless, plantless, lifeless'. The fact that they turned out to be 'a number of low hills' may have been disappointing, but the whole Kalahari experience lived up to his expectations.

Another aspect that Wittenberg discusses is the strange fact that although Paton wrote an account of the expedition, he never published it, nor, apparently, did he ever speak much about the whole episode, or mention it in his autobiography. There is a version of his account that looks as though he was preparing it as a magazine article, but it never appeared anywhere. *Lost City of the Kalahari* seems to be the only thing

Paton ever produced in the genre of ‘travel writing’, and it now sees the light of day nearly fifty years later, and seventeen years after his death. One of the most likely and interesting reasons Wittenberg advances for the silence is one involving Paton’s friend, contemporary and fellow Kalahari explorer, Laurens van der Post.

*Lost City of the Kalahari* itself is a short piece — only twenty-one pages of print — and covers the expedition’s planning and arrangements, his companions, the discomforts and problems of the journey, including the frequent breakdowns of their very unreliable lorry, and above all the Kalahari itself, its landscapes and its human and animal inhabitants. One detects a certain austerity in Paton responding to that of the arid land they travelled through. Surprisingly he reveals an instinctive aversion — he actually uses the word ‘revulsion’ — to the life, and even the appearance, of primitive, ‘wild’ Bushmen, as compared to other people they encountered — the Nama, the Herero, the so-called ‘white coloureds’ from the Cape and even the ‘tame’ Bushmen, ‘sleek and clean’, who had given up their nomadic ways and worked as cattlemen for the Hereros. As Wittenberg points out, this view changed somewhat over the years, and in his first autobiographical work *Towards the Mountain*, though not in the context of the expedition, Paton on p.47 expresses a greater appreciation of the Bushman culture and way of life than he felt in 1956.

At a time when bird-watching was far less of an established pastime than it is today, Paton was obviously as keen as any present-day enthusiast, and is careful to record the names of the many species of birds he saw, some for the first time.

The illustrations in the book include a few pages of Paton’s diary written on the trip, some typed planning documents and lists, sketch maps and photographs. A few of the latter are from Gallo Images where Terry Spencer’s pictures were eventually lodged, and there are seven pages of colour stills from an 8 mm film made by Harold Pole, one of the expedition members. Harold Pole’s son Brian, the youngest member of the party, was interviewed by Wittenberg; and only a few weeks before Paton’s death in 1988 his grandson Mark Pole had shown Alan Paton the film, and recorded a few of his comments about this rarely-referred-to episode in his life.

While one cannot call *Lost City of the Kalahari* a major literary discovery, it is an interesting addition to the corpus of Paton’s published works, and Hermann Wittenberg has found in it some interesting elements that add to what we already know of Paton’s life and work.

JOHN DEANE