

Book Reviews and Notices

INSIDE INDIAN INDENTURE : A SOUTH AFRICAN STORY 1860 – 1914

by ASHWIN DESAI and GOOLAM VAHED

Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2010, ix, 438 pages, maps, illustrations, R290.

The following excerpt from the Preface is instructive in outlining the contents and nature of the work: ‘... [it] seeks to go beyond the numbers, trespassing directly into the lives of the indentured themselves. It explores the terrain of the everyday by focusing on the development of religious and cultural expressions, the leisure activities, the way power relations played themselves out on the plantations and beyond, inspecting weapons of resistance and forms of collaboration that were developed in times of conflict with the colonial overlords’ [pp. vi – vii].

Drawing primarily on the hundreds of boxes of records compiled by the office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants and his predecessor, the Coolie Immigration Agent, sociologist Ashwin Desai and historian Goolam Vahed have provided a poignant

insight into the trials and tribulations of indentured Indian immigration.

One has to concur with the general thrust of the endorsements this work has received from the academic community. It is a work of immense dimension and detail related with passion and empathy. It leaves no stone unturned and succeeds in promoting a graphic understanding of the experiences of those who left India to begin new lives in colonial Natal.

Replete with numerous photographs and copies of historical documents, the stories, as they term them, begin with recruitment in India and conditions there, then progress through the voyages to Natal, arrival, dispersal, problems in communication, treatment of women, rations, wages, work and living conditions. Vivid anecdotal accounts underpin the essentially humanitarian emphasis of the study. The odyssey of relocating to a foreign

land, the insecurity brought on by loss of family, the stringent physical demands of colonial employers, abuse and coercion and the inherent social prejudice towards non-whites combine to deliver an often harrowing picture of indentured life. This is given further credibility by the reference to suicide rates. In 1906 the average for Indians was 661 per million compared to 39 per million in India [p. 165].

Although upon the expiry of BEIC rule in India, Queen Victoria had pledged in 1858 that her Indian subjects would enjoy 'the same obligations of duty' from Britain as all her other subjects within the Empire, under indenture that was not the case. Indentured immigrants were specifically subject to legislation such as Law 14 of 1859, Law 2 of 1870 and Law 25 of 1891. Even once they had completed their indenture contracts and were free, or had paid their own way to immigrate to Natal, Indians did not experience the full benefits of Lord Salisbury's 1875 declaration that their rights and privileges were to be the same 'as any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies'. Desai and Vahed exhaustively expose and condemn that contradiction and the colonial application of double standards.

However, in pursuing that moralistic line the authors fail to strike a balance between the need for basic order and co-operation on the part of the indentured labourers, and instances of non-compliance, shirking and defiance. In the latter part of chapter eight the authors seem intent on dignifying malingering, the feigning of illness and damage to property as 'weapons of the weak' and ascribing some sort of virtue to such conduct.

Similarly, desertion and other non-conformist behaviour earn a credit in the form of the label 'fighting for redress' and 'acts of resistance'. They admit [p. 167] that there is 'difficulty in quantifying indentured protest and resistance', yet seem content to resort to generalisation by referring to employers of indentured labour as 'oppressors' [p. 166] and to indenture itself as 'oppression' [p. 168]. In this context, their reference in the Preface to 'weapons of resistance' and to 'conflict with the colonial overlords' is extravagant. It suggests that some kind of undeclared cold war prevailed between the indentured and their employers – which was not the case.

Successive inquiries into the indenture system to some extent catalogued its faults and failings, although these were never properly addressed. Desai and Vahed provide evidence of the harrowing conditions which millions faced in India and which motivated many to opt for indenture as an escape. But the impression conveyed in subsequent chapters that by indenturing immigrants had exchanged one form of oppression for another is unfortunate and inaccurate. Whatever their grievances – and they were considerable – only 23% of those who immigrated to Natal returned to India.

Housing – 'coolie lines', as their rows of wretched hovels were called – and sanitation remained appalling throughout the indenture period [pp. 119–120]. Where grievances were concerned, access to the Protector or to magistrates was often restricted by *sirdars* and employers. But if, as Desai and Vahed opine, the purpose of the Protector was 'less to protect' the indentured than to 'project the

impartiality of the state' [p. 95], that is not borne out by the praise they direct at Protector J.A. Polkinghorne for his diligence in exposing the human rights abuses perpetrated by Charles Reynolds [pp. 137–145]. Moreover, the mass of evidence in the Protector's files in itself serves to indicate that whatever the vagaries and the limitations of his efficacy, the office of the Protector, a product of colonialism, was not deaf to the plight of the indentured.

Some added international perspective on the treatment of indentured Indians would have provided balance. As late as 1880 there was no Protector on the French island of Reunion when indentured immigration was suspended following complaints of human rights abuses there. Complaints far worse than those which emanated from Natal in 1871 were a matter of record in Mauritius, Jamaica and Demerara (British Guiana), yet the stream of emigration to those places was not halted, as was the case in Natal in 1872. By the late 1870s numbers of old immigrants were returning to Natal and inducing their friends to emigrate as well, as *Natal Mercury* editor John Robinson noted in 1878 in a paper entitled *Glimpses of Natal*. As a rule, he wrote, immigrants 'give glowing accounts of the country ... and of their treatment by the Government and the colonists'.

Also lacking is an overall recognition of the fact that nowhere in the annals of colonial Natal was there ever a plan or a prospectus for wholesale settlement by Indians. Yet, neither by accident or design, that is what occurred. The white colonial mindset never came around to perceiving Indians as fellow colonists but rather saw them either as

aliens or merely as labourers. Desai and Vahed touch on that briefly with their reference to editorial comments in the *Witness* and the *Mercury* during the Anglo-Boer War, but it is a perspective that merits greater emphasis. [Despite aid provided by Indian volunteers, the *Witness* warned that services rendered by Indians should not blind colonists to the Indian question. The *Mercury* reminded its readers that Indians were 'not all that is desirable as inhabitants of Natal' (p. 336)].

Whilst on several occasions Durban's leading citizens did express the desire to segregate Indians residentially and commercially from whites [p. 350], it needs to be stated that no such legislation which resulted in apartheid-type segregation was passed during the period under review. Whilst the authors refer to letters in the colonial press decrying the 'coolie curse' and criticising Indian traders and the competitive edge they posed to small white shop-owners, they omit to mention that the less affluent among the white community were loyal customers of Indian traders because they found their merchandise more affordable. In this regard it is a trifle odd that the authors refer to correspondence from the *Mercury* of 15 January, 1923 to substantiate discussion of antipathy towards Indian traders in 1905 [p. 350].

Two minor errors, probably typographical: the name of the historian Leonard Thompson is incorrectly spelled and the publication date of Anthony Hocking's book *Renishaw – the story of the Crookes Brothers* should read 1992, not 1912.

The labour needs of fewer than 50 sugar planters resulted in the decision to import indentured labour on the

premise that sugar would form the basis of Natal's economy. Writing to the Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Lytton, in 1859, Natal's Lieutenant-Governor John Scott referred to the indentured immigration scheme as 'an experiment' which he envisaged as being on a small scale. In 1860 an

experiment in Indian immigration commenced which had a capacity and an impact far beyond anything originally envisaged. Desai and Vahed have provided a comprehensive and compelling account of that impact.

DUNCAN DU BOIS

VIEWS IN COLONIAL NATAL

by NIGEL HUGHES. With a foreword by Antony Wiley

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Although some five years separate the publication of this book and the appearance of this review, it is desirable that *Natalia* should comment on Nigel Hughes's second major work of this kind and not merely note its existence. As a contribution to the literature on the history and culture of this region its value is at least twofold. Firstly, it offers nearly 50 excellent large and annotated reproductions of Cathcart Methven's paintings, almost all of them depicting scenes in Natal and providing scrupulously accurate pictorial evidence of how the land, the seashore and, perhaps most interestingly, human settlements looked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (It is worth noting here that several of Methven's paintings were included in Hughes's earlier volume to which this book is a companion, *The Paintings of the Bay of Natal*, and these are not reproduced a second time.) Secondly, it provides a catalogue, with many smaller illustrations, of the South African works of a prolific and very competent amateur artist. In fact, the publication is intended as a select catalogue *raisonné*

of Methven's southern African paintings. This has implications for its thrust and scope. It is not intended as a biography of Methven, nor as a critical appraisal of his art, but as a comprehensive, methodically ordered register of his works.

There is, however, a substantial biographical note recording Methven's Scottish origins, his coming to Durban in 1888 as Harbour Engineer and his dismissal seven years later after a dispute with Harry Escombe, who was then Attorney-General, over the best way to deal with the perennially problematic sandbar at the harbour mouth. There followed his successful practice as a consultant marine and civil engineer and government surveyor. (Amongst other things, Methven identified the Mhlatuzi Lagoon or Richard's Bay as the most promising site for the region's second harbour.)

A man of many talents and impressive initiative and energy, Methven also practised architecture, being a founder member of the Natal Institute of Architects and serving as its president more than once, while

as an amateur musician he gave the inaugural recital on Durban's Town Hall organ, the specifications for which he had helped prepare. This same mix of amateur enthusiasm for the arts with a commitment to serving the community is evident also in his contribution to painting, where, besides his own output, he is credited with initiating the formation of the Durban Municipal Art Gallery and with being an active member, and several times president, of the Natal Society of Artists (now the KwaZulu-Natal Society of Artists).

Naturally this biographical note focuses particularly on Methven's own painting, a lifelong interest that became his chief occupation after his retirement in 1920. Nigel Hughes notes three solo exhibitions being held between 1921 and 1925, in Durban, Pietermaritzburg and, shortly before his death, in Johannesburg. As remarked earlier, Hughes does not set out to offer a critical appraisal of Methven's work, and he makes relatively little reference to contemporary or later critiques. He does report that this style of painting had fallen out of fashion by the 1920s, so that the Durban art critics dismissed Methven's first solo exhibition as 'Victorian' (a judgment with which Methven was quietly pleased, for he had great respect for Victorian painters). Nigel Hughes also remarks that Methven's watercolours were more highly regarded than his oil paintings. The examples illustrated certainly show a greater freedom than the meticulously-observed oils.

The watercolour paintings, which Methven was producing in numbers from the time of his arrival in Durban, are no doubt amongst the works most difficult to trace, and Hughes concedes

that he may not have been able to locate and identify every painting made by Methven in South Africa. He has deliberately left out unsigned works of dubious provenance, as well as pencil sketches and Scottish and European scenes. The catalogue does, however, include 144 paintings which Methven is known to have made, of which 84 were photographed before the book was published.

Amongst Hughes's aims is the stimulation of interest in Methven as man and as artist, and no doubt more paintings may be unearthed as a result of his efforts. Indeed, very little has been published about Cathcart William Methven, and there is certainly scope for further examination of his contribution to the engineering works, the architecture, and the cultural life of his adoptive home.

This reviewer does regret that Hughes has not done more to locate Methven the painter in the context of the art of his times. Considering, however, that by the time of his first exhibition, Picasso and Braque in Europe were moving beyond Cubism, and contemporary landscape painters in South Africa included Hugo Naude, Bertha Everard and the young J.H. Pierneef, it is unlikely that today's art historians will greatly revise the opinion of the Durban critics of the 1920s. It may well be that Methven will continue to stand on the fringes of South African art, respected as a careful recorder of the scenes of his times but not regarded as a particularly significant artist, but this does not diminish either the immediate appeal of his paintings nor the value and appeal of this book.

Through his diligent tracing, cataloguing and reproduction of

Methven's paintings, Nigel Hughes has put together a key resource for any art historian seeking to study Methven's work further. He has given coherence and fresh life to the pictorial record which Methven left behind him, which might otherwise have

become increasingly dispersed and less accessible to the ordinary person with an interest in the art and history of the region. Above all, perhaps, he has created a book that is a beautiful artefact in its own right.

MORAY COMRIE