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Heather Hughes. *The First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC.* Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2011. Illustrations. xxiii + 312 pp. $35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-77009-813-8.

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Founding Father: John Langalibalele Dube of South Africa

On the back cover of Heather Hughes's new biography of John Langalibalele Dube, the first president of the African National Congress (ANC) founded in South Africa in 1912, the historian Andre Odendaal praises her "exquisite narrative about a complex personality and a formative period in South Africa's past ... that unfolds as smoothly as a silk scroll." The praise is well-deserved; Hughes has a talent for crafting memorable turns of phrase. To the question Odendaal poses: "where are the studies of John Dube's many equally impressive peers and the many local and regional organizations that gave rise to the oldest political party on the African continent?" he knows the answer. He wrote the book–*Vukani Bantu: Beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912* (1984)–that has informed many subsequent biographical studies, including Tim Couzens's *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (1986); this reviewer's *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D. D. T. Jabavu of South Africa, 1885-1959* (1997); and Steven Gish's *Alfred B. Xuma: African, American, South African* (2000). A central problem is the absence or near absence of personal papers, or where personal papers have survived, as in the case of the Z. K. Matthews collection at the University of South Africa, a very careful editing of those papers by Matthews before he donated them. Dube's papers disappeared on his death in 1946. It makes all the more impressive the story Hughes has reconstructed of this remarkable man.

Hughes places her narrative in the context of earlier analyses: for example, in his PhD dissertation, Manning Marable thought Dube's personal ambition derailed his broader political agenda;[1] while in *Time Longer Than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (1964), Eddie Roux "dismissed the middle-aged Dube as a 'traitor"' (p. xxi). R. Hunt Davis cast Dube as a disciple of Booker T. Washington,[2] and Shula Marks concluded that Dube retreated into local politics when he proved unable to navigate the radicalism that emerged after World War One (*The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal* [1986]). Though conscious of Dube's limitations, Hughes has "read and interpreted the evidence a bit differently, arguing that there were both radical and conservative elements in Dube's make-up all the way through his life and that each was more, or less, pronounced in different situations and at different times" (p. xxi). Like Marable, Davis, and Marks, Hughes is also careful to acknowledge the limits of biography as a literary and historical form.

Even in the absence of personal papers, Hughes devotes a third of her book to Dube's first thirty years, in an effort to define and explain his political style. He was the second son of James Dube, who grew up on Daniel and Lucy Lindley's small mission station in rural Natal. The elder Dube's widowed mother had sought refuge there in 1849 when the newly installed Qadi chief insisted she remarry, in part to assert his own objections to the spread of Christianity. She refused. In the late 1850s her son James married another Christian convert. In 1870, he was ordained a minister of the American Zulu Mission (AZM). A year later, John Langalibalele Dube was born at Inanda.

The handsome, charismatic, and talented James Dube was a popular preacher. He died suddenly in 1877 when John was six. John's mother ensured that her children stayed in school and out of the way of the 1879 Zulu war with the British, in which many Qadi, long incorporated in the Zulu kingdom but not always comfortable there, reluctantly fought. The Zulu lost, and the British who had claimed the Natal colony in 1842 solidified their control.

In 1881, John Dube enrolled at Adams College on Natal's south coast. The discipline was strict and the food poor: Dube was punished more than once for join-

ing other boys to protest. In 1886, following yet another protest, he acquired a mentor, the AZM missionary William Wilcox, who encouraged Dube to embrace Christian forgiveness. It was a true conversion experience and, Hughes argues, a turning point in the young Dube's life. Wilcox had graduated from Oberlin College in the American Midwest, and Dube was drawn as much to his intellectual openness as to his religious insights. In British Natal, the young Dube turned away from English close-mindedness and sailed for the United States in 1887. He enrolled at Oberlin and supported himself with odd jobs, including a stint as a Pullman porter. He also honed his skills as an orator, recasting himself as a Zulu, and lecturing about Zulu history and Christian conversion. When he fell ill in late 1891 he returned to South Africa without a degree. He spent 1893 working at Adams College and then returned to Inanda, frustrated to find himself back where he had started.

Dube quickly regrouped. In 1894 he married Nokutela Mdima, a teacher and a talented singer who joined him in building a church in rural Incwadi on land owned by the Qadi chiefdom. Within a year, they had twenty-seven converts and one hundred children seeking a mission education. In 1896, Nokutela accompanied him back to the United States, this time to New York City. Hughes paints a rich picture of black New York in the late 1890s, of church life, of the limitations and discrimination faced by African Americans and Africans, and of the intellectual trends the Dubes encountered. The range of thinkers was considerable, including the journalist James Edward Bruce, who sought to historicize the African American experience; W. E. B. Du Bois, the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard (in sociology) in 1895; and Washington, a leading proponent of industrial education for African Americans.

On this second trip, Dube earned a degree from the Union Missionary Training Institute and also met the sponsors who made up the American Committee that provided the initial funding for John and Nokutela's vision of an African school run by Africans and independent of missionary oversight or government interference. In essence, Dube became a "race man," increasingly critical of the negative impact of white settlers in South Africa. Americans seemed more willing to support his educational vision, especially those aspects borrowed from Washington, even as Washington appeared to some to accommodate white racism by limiting black ambition.

The school that came to be known as Ohlange opened in 1901 as the Zulu Christian Industrial School. The Dubes imagined it would draw students from across southern Africa. What they created was nevertheless innovative: boys and girls studied together, and boys cleaned, gardened, and cooked. As Hughes observes, paraphrasing an American missionary: "boys gave up their liberty to go to school, whereas girls found it" (p. 95). The school was also radical in its insistence on what African students could achieve: arithmetic, English, and Latin were all on the curriculum. There were no white teachers or administrators, no missionaries and no government officials. To help raise funds for the school, Nokutela Dube started a touring choir, and with her husband, published a book of Zulu songs.

The song book, Hughes asserts, "was the first compilation of secular, non-traditional Zulu songs ever to appear" (p. 98). What Hughes means by non-traditional is not clear, but neither does she suggest that the songs, about "marriage, dancing [and] love," were necessarily "modern." Hughes uses "traditional" to describe non-Christian, predominantly rural Africans, though she notes that some of these Africans invested in the "modern" wagon trade in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. She also uses "traditional" to describe the classical Greek and Latin education pursued by students at Oberlin College. Part of this tension over terminology can be explained by Hughes's need to adapt what began as a scholarly monograph to the requirements of a popular press. The notes are limited–though Hughes packs a lot of information into the space allotted– and there is no bibliography. One imagines that Hughes's discussion of "tradition," "modernism," and "modernization" might also have succumbed to the demands of space and audience.

Dube's next step in defining what a modern African could and should be came with the launch of his newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal* (Sun of Natal) in 1903. Its subtitle, *Ipepa la Bantu* (The black people's paper) again reflected his desire to define an African world beyond the Natal colony. In his editorials, Dube counseled readers to embrace Christianity, start a business, buy land, and significantly, "petition for rights of citizenship" (p. 104). Funding his first business–the school–remained a constant struggle. In 1905, Dube acquired the support of Marshall Campbell, a prominent politician and Natal sugar baron who favored assimilation rather than segregation. Campbell made regular cash donations to Ohlange until his death in 1917.

In 1906, Dube's supportive commentaries in *Ilanga lase Natal* on the tax rebellion led by Bhambatha Zondi brought him to the attention of British colonial authorities. Forced to retract statements considered incendiary

by officials, Dube nevertheless argued in testimony before the 1907 Native Affairs Commission that the poor behavior and oppressive attitudes of whites threatened "the very survival of the African people" (p. 131). This further complicated his fundraising efforts for Ohlange, and Dube wrote to Washington–whose endorsement he was keen to have–to assure him that he was not a "political agitator" and did have white supporters, like Campbell (p. 132). It is persuasive evidence of Hughes's assertion that Dube was by turns–and even in the same moment–radical and conservative. Dube was also clearly a pragmatist, willing to reinterpret the circumstances depending on his intended audience, a lesson perhaps learned from Washington.

The Bhambatha rebellion introduced Dube to a national audience at the moment that a union of the two British colonies (the Cape and Natal) and the two occupied former Afrikaner republics (the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) was being considered. Campbell "urged him to stay out of politics because it would harm Ohlange and his educational work," advice Dube chose to ignore (p. 144). He attended the first meeting of the South African Native Convention in 1909 and then went to England on what he assured Campbell was a fundraising trip for Ohlange but was really an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the British parliament not to ratify the South Africa Act.

When Dube returned to the newly created Union of South Africa in 1910, black intellectuals–including a growing number of lawyers (a second wave of professionals that followed the first generation dominated by ministers of religion)–were organizing what would become the African National Congress. Dube did not attend the 1912 meeting at which he was elected the first president of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), in part because he "was afraid of losing vital support for Ohlange" and in part because "he may have hoped that election *in absentia* would be treated in certain quarters as greatness thrust upon him, rather than actively sought" (p. 163). With other SANNC members, he vigorously opposed the 1913 Natives Land Act before its passage and then traveled to Britain in 1914 to protest its effects as part of the famous delegation that included Thomas Mapikela, Walter Rubusana, Saul Msane, and Solomon Plaatje.

It was in London that things started to fall apart. Dube went home, abandoning his fellow delegates without enough money to return themselves. Dube returned to scandal. The great sadness in John and Nokutela's marriage had been their inability to have children. In November 1914, a young student at Ohlange gave birth to John's child. The baby died shortly thereafter; the effects of Dube's adultery were longer lasting. Though public discussion of the scandal was muted, he lost valuable black and white supporters. In 1916, Ohlange, struggling financially, hired two white teachers, whose salaries were paid by the government. In 1917, Ohlange's major white supporter, Campbell, died, as did Dube's estranged wife, Nokutela. Hughes is right to lament the virtual disappearance of Nokutela from the historical record, but if the absence of papers is a problem for prominent African men of John Dube's generation, it is even more the case for women. Also in 1917, John was forced out as president of the SANNC, in part because he appeared to be willing to trade citizenship rights in return for greater access to segregated land. It seems clear, however, that his personal indiscretions also played a role in his ouster.

In 1920, Dube remarried. With his second wife Angelina, he had six children. He continued to fundraise for Ohlange, and railed against the lack of African support. In 1921, the Chief Native Commissioner stepped in to save Ohlange, which ironically fit the government's model of segregated education. Dube was able to persuade his new supporters to keep the administrators and most of the staff African. He relocated *Ilanga lase Natal*'s offices to Durban, and changed its tone to attract advertisers. He drew closer to the Zulu royal family and–as Marks highlighted in her study *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa*–began participating actively in local politics. He also got involved in a feud with Clements Kadalie and A. W. G. Champion of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, whose populist organizing threatened Dube's own preference for control and order. In the mid-1930s, he reentered the national fray, speaking out again on Africans' need for more land, as a new bill threatened to restrict access still further. For younger members of the ANC, however, Dube's "soft approach" to the proposed legislation was alarming (p. 247). For Dube, their outspokenness was distressing, especially as he found his political voice increasingly marginalized.

It is a familiar story, one that Hughes has told with exceptional grace. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the young John Dube set out–with the aid of an equally talented wife Nokutela Mdima–to redeem the African people through innovative and African-centered Christian education. Political activism flowed logically from that first goal, and then, as a new generation of educated Africans emerged, its members became increasingly critical of the pragmatism of the older generation Dube represented. For this reviewer, the questions more

interesting than Odendaal's query about the absence of biographies are whether any society, including the still new, post-1994 South African state, wants to know that its founding fathers (and mothers), while often heroic and farsighted, also abandoned their friends, cheated on their spouses, and made questionable choices, political and otherwise. For some of the answers we can turn to the interpretations offered by the new South Africa's talented memoirists, humorists, journalists, and political commentators–among them Fred Khumalo (*Touch My Blood: The Early Years* [2006] and *Zuma: The Biography of Jacob Zuma* [2007]); Jacob Dlamini (*Native Nostalgia* [2010]); Ndumiso Ngcobo (*Some of My Best Friends Are White* [2007] and *Is it Coz I'm Black?* [2008]); and William Mervin Gumede (*Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* [2005]).

Notes

[1]. Manning Marable, "African Nationalist: The Life of John Langalibalele Dube" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1976).

[2]. R. Hunt Davis, "John L. Dube: A South African Exponent of Booker T. Washington," *Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1975-76): 497-528.

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