

## A study in leading the way

**H. Hughes, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC***

Jacana Media, Auckland Park, 2011

312 pp

ISBN 978-1-77009-813-8

R225.00

The year 2012 marks an important halting point for many South Africans, as they reflect on the achievements of Africa's oldest surviving political party, the African National Congress (ANC), as part of its centenary celebrations. It should also be a time to reconsider what defines South Africans as a nation. In order for South Africans to move forward as a nation, it is important for them to realise that the heritage of the ANC is also the heritage of each and every South African, regardless of their party political

affiliation. It is against this background that Heather Hughes's biography, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC*, should be evaluated.

Studying the life of John Dube is a challenging undertaking as explained by the author in the introduction to this book. In fact, the rare publication of a work on a person as influential as John Dube speaks volumes about the legacy of inequality from which modern-day South Africa has emerged. But despite these challenges, the author has succeeded in compiling a well-balanced biography of the life and work of John Dube. Tracing the various influences instrumental in shaping his character, important insights are not only gained into Dube's life, but also of a wide variety of subjects relating to South Africa's transition from a rural, more "traditional" society to a country faced with the challenges of industrialisation and modernisation. Dube's cultural background, together with his experiences in the United States of America where he was educated, was to have a lasting impact on the rest of his adult life, specifically his contact with the many influential oppressed black intellectuals of the time. These themes form an important part of Hughes's study.

John Dube was in many ways a towering figure on the South African political landscape. When considering his many achievements in the fields of education, politics, publication and cultural activism, amongst others, one is left with a deep sense of admiration for his contributions towards the betterment of the lives of the people of South Africa. In the years that Dube was active in public life, South Africa, and thus black South Africans, faced many unique challenges. Key to these was a continuing conflict arising between a traditional way of life and modernisation. Throughout his career, John Dube revealed a very moderate approach to the challenges of preserving his own cultural traditions while at the same time adapting to the inevitable changes brought about by the worldwide industrial revolution, together with the discovery of South Africa's precious mineral wealth which transformed the development of South Africa and Africa as a whole. On this aspect of Dube's life, the author is able to conclude that he "... thought it entirely possible to harmonise old and new codes of life, although the precise mix proved elusive" (p 256).

As an educator, Dube's contribution can be described as mammoth. Key to his personal development was the Christian faith; he remained a follower throughout his life, and this formed an integral part of his capacity as an educator. Yet despite the influential role of missionaries and the Christian faith on his development, Dube's vision was one of endorsing and celebrating his cultural heritage, becoming the first author to complete a novel in the Zulu language. For Dube, conversion to Christianity was by no means an end to one's traditional way of life. His cultural heritage was far too valuable a commodity to be set aside.

This moderate approach that Dube revealed towards cultural issues, preserving his heritage while at the same time embracing new approaches to life, also influenced his approach to politics. While he was a man who often displayed a very critical stance towards colonial authorities in campaigning for the rights of the oppressed, he was also known to call for soul searching amongst those to whom he gave a voice. Yet Dube was able to maintain good relations with influential figures throughout his life. This he could do by working within the parameters of the Union administration.

As South Africans take stock of their legacy, they are confronted with an ever-changing environment, resulting in new challenges facing the country on a regular basis.

Many of these challenges are rooted in South Africa's divided past. It is for this reason that Heather Hugh's biography is such a timely book. It is written in very digestible language, and succeeds well in making the legacy of John Dube accessible to all those interested in this towering historical figure. This study is a timely reminder to South Africans of where they came from. Dube's life is testament to one who was a servant to his country and his people, often under very challenging conditions. As a means of building South Africa's collective heritage, this work is also of great value and the author is to be congratulated with this very timely and valuable contribution – a contribution which certainly broadens one's horizons.

During his lifetime, Dube considered himself to be a moderate leader. But this study of Dube's life is by no means a propaganda tool for the moderate political outlook. While Dube's life is being described as a "... mix of defiance and compliance, radicalism and moderation, broadness and narrowness of vision ..." (p 259), Hughes is able to draw the conclusion that

at the end of the day, Dube was a pragmatist rather than an ideologue. While he was animated by a powerful vision of redemption and representation, his chosen means of realising it was to get on with the practicalities: hence the founding of a newspaper, a school, various cooperative schemes, business leagues and assumption of political leadership (p 261).

Although the political landscape facing South Africans today is rather different to that of Dube's lifetime, South Africans are still dependent on pragmatists to show them the way forward. This makes *First President: A life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* a highly relevant work to all South Africans.

*Barend van der Merwe*  
*Free State Provincial Archives Repository*  
*Bloemfontein*