

### **British Identity and Britishness in Natal Province**

**Paul S. Thompson, *The British Civic Culture of Natal, South Africa, 1902 – 1961***

Brevitas, Howick, 1999

148 pp

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With his vast experience and knowledge of separatism in Natal during the first half of the twentieth century, Paul Thompson was an extremely suitable historian to conduct an empirical study on British civic culture in Natal Province. He defined civic culture as the totality of symbols and rituals that sustained the authority and identity of the local English-speaking white minority in Natal during the evolving years of regional unity in South Africa after 1910.

This book is a follow-up of the author's pioneer academic study on separatism in Natal during the first half of the previous century, published in 1990. Thompson

empirically established the transformation of local British civic culture from the initial stage of close links to the Imperial connection to a final phase of a particularly accommodating South Africanised mentality and culture.

The book is well-researched, but some critical questions remain. Firstly, it seems ambiguous that the author maintains that “it was essential” that the English-speaking community in Natal cultivated the connection with the British Empire in order “to preserve itself in a land full of blacks” (p 1). It was only from their point of view that they thought it to be essential.

Afrikaner Nationalism is often mentioned (e.g. pp 30, 41, 55, 70), but needs to be explained and argued more fully. Similarly very little is said about the black Zulu majority population at the time. How did they influence and perceive British civic culture?

The last chapter, on schools, sport and Britishness, seems out of place, given the title of the book. The book is about civic culture. Thompson even had to admit that schools and sports are more social than civic (p 3). Perhaps the Appendix (pp 120-148) on Natal and national politics, would be better as a final chapter and the last chapter as an appendix.

Though the book is well-researched and has many footnotes, a bibliography would have been a useful addition. Nevertheless, this publication deserves its place in the historiography of twentieth century South African regional history. It will serve as a valuable supplement to the earlier cultural histories of Alan F. Hattersley (*Portrait of a Colony*), as well as Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb (*A History of Natal*).

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