

**R.L. Watson: *The Slave Question: Liberty and Property in South Africa.* Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg. 274 pp. ISBN 0819552216**

**This book is more than just another investigation of slavery at the Cape: it is about the link between an inconspicuous anti-slavery movement at the Cape in the 1820s and 1830s and the failure of early South African liberalism.**

**Apparently targeting an American readership, Watson constructs his stimulating arguments regarding the human rights problem and antislavery activity at the Cape in three parts stretching over eleven chapters. His arguments, based on information extracted from recent works of history and his own reading of early 19th century Cape newspapers, petitions, memorials, and related government correspondence, centres around the fear felt by Cape residents towards a forceful antislavery movement that would undermine the fundamental rights of property.**

The first part of the book introduces this fear by way of a critical discussion of slavery's position in the social order in the colony. This is followed by a splendid analysis of the debate on the natural rights of liberty and property in relation to the slave question over four chapters in the second part. A significant notion introduced here is the view held by slaveowners that the amelioration regulations were an intrusion into their private affairs, and thus a violation of the colonists' basic rights. The process of amelioration culminated in Emancipation, an issue dealt with in the chapter about the Great Trek in which the responses of two Cape regions are contrasted. The less dramatic reaction of slaveowners in the Western Cape, Watson attributes to their economic interdependence with the colonial metropole. But the remote frontierfolk's response to it he ascribes to their strong views on the right to a proper and 'natural' social order.

The third and final part of the book has more of a comparative approach to the general topic. In its first chapter the inability of religious organisations operating in the colony to involve themselves more vigorously in antislavery activity is contrasted with that of the abolitionist movement in the USA. This is followed by a chapter in which Enlightenment philosophy regarding property rights and liberty is discussed to highlight the contradictory views held at the Cape which in the end led to an affirmation of the right of property over freedom.

The book concludes with a lengthy chapter comparing the American experience of abolitionism with the attitude of Cape residents to the antislavery movement. Its purpose probably is to contrast the respected American tradition of liberalism with the despicable systematic racial oppression in South Africa.

*The Slave Question* is indeed a valuable contribution; and not only to the American understanding of a South African historical problem. To the South African reader the book also presents a much needed additional liberal perspective on a problematic aspect of colonial mentality in British Cape society. However, one finds Watson's explanation of an early nineteenth century Cape colonial problem as if it was a general South African phenomenon of the time somewhat annoying. Colonial Cape society of the nineteenth century, which represent the regional focus of the book, was but a segment of what was to become the South African state in this century. Also, one should not become oblivious to the fact that the defeat of liberalism in South Africa has many more complex roots than suggested here.

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