



P.S. THOMPSON. *Natalians first: separatism in South Africa 1909-1961*. Southern Book Publishers: Johannesburg, 1990. 231 pp. R45,00 (exclusive).

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This book by Dr Paul Thompson of the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) is the first detailed account published of that peculiarly Natal phenomenon of white separatist politics for the period 1910-1961. It centres around the wishes of Natalians to keep intact as much of their British connections as possible or alternatively to 'go it alone'.

Thompson has effectively traced this stance through a series of leagues, groups, associations, parties, commandos, and fronts. In between he deals with other important (for Natalians) issues such as the struggle for greater power for the provincial council system, the language issue, status within the British Empire, the fight over a new South African flag and attempts at gaining home rule. It is also the story of the setbacks, failures, quarrels and disagreements among the separatists themselves.

Throughout Thompson has tried to show how separatism manifested in such organisations as the Federal League (organised in response to the perceived dangers of Hertzogism after 1913) and the Democratic Reform League in the 1920s (one of whose aims was to promote the decentralisation and greater autonomy of the provinces.) In the 1930s the Natal separatists changed their approach to the idea of home rule rather than outright secession from the Union and so was born the idea of devolution. Accordingly a Devolution League was formed to propagate the idea. But throughout this period the Natal separatists were divided among themselves about home rule, and between devolution and federation, although most of them supported some kind of imperial link (with Great Britain).

The formation of the first Natal political party to actively propagate the idea of separatism, the Dominion Party (largely made up of those Natalians rejecting the South African Party's fusion with the National Party in 1934), did not go very far in uniting white Natalians. Dominion Party co-operation with the government during the Second World War had led to its energies being submerged in the war effort and a consequent lessening of support for separatism. However, the 'Natal Stand', embodying that particular Natal 'consciousness' articulated so forcefully by the Zululand politician George Heaton-Nicholls, refused to lie down and play dead and during the 1950s there was again a revival of Natal separatist ideas through the Natal branch of the Torch Commando. This led to the launching of the Federal Party which in fact brought a subtle change in the 'Natal Stand' since the party emphasised the constitutional reconstruction of the Union. This new party was committed to a federal union and self-determinism for Natal. But the Federal Party failed dismally in the 1953 elections and for the latter part of the 1950s turned their attention towards supporting the Anti-Republican League (with help from the secretive 'Horticulturalists'). The Natal separatists arguably won their greatest 'victory' in ensuring that Natal overwhelmingly rejected a republic in the referendum held on 5 October 1960. But this was not enough to stop the formation of a republic or to secure a new deal for Natalians. According to Thompson the reality of an Afrikaner Nationalist republic finally killed English Natal's ideals of separatism. However, he adds that 'Economic bogeys aside, Natal could have survived very well, thank you, as a separate part of the British Empire.'

Thompson has produced a detailed and well-researched account of a neglected piece of South African political history. But it has been neglected precisely because its influence on the national scene was minimal since it concentrated on a narrow parochial Natal stance which more often than not presented a shifting and often fragmented opposition. However, he

does go a long way in explaining the peculiar (to outsiders) behaviour of the English inhabitants of Natal and their clinging to the idea of a separate identity in what has jokingly been called the 'last outpost of the British Empire'.

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