

BOOK REVIEW

(by A Wessels)

NEW DICTIONARY OF SOUTH AFRICAN BIOGRAPHY,

volume 2 (edited by Nelly E Sonderling; foreword by Kader Asmal). Pretoria: Vista University, 1999. ISBN 1-86828-133-7 (296 pages). Price: R120.00

In 1968 the first volume of the **Dictionary of South African biography (DSAB)** was published - in separate English and Afrikaans versions. Volume V, the last of the **DSAB**, was published by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1987. This was followed in 1995 by volume 1 of the **New dictionary of South African biography (NDSAB)**, also published by the HSRC. The change of name (and new format) signified a new approach: while it would complement the former series, the **NDSAB** would strive to correct obvious imbalances. This approach has also been followed in compiling volume 2, which is published by Vista University.

Since the old **DSAB** first appeared in 1968 South Africa has experienced extraordinary changes. The country has moved from being restrictive and oppressive to being a truly democratic state. The emphasis of the dictionary has shifted from portraying personalities (mainly men) who were prominent in the former white-dominated South Africa, to giving credit to men and women from all sectors of the population who, in their various ways, have contributed to the process of change in the country. By reading the articles in the dictionary it becomes clear how the complexities of the South African society have impacted on individuals and how, in turn, these individuals have helped to transform society through their achievements.

Just as volume 1, volume 2 of the **NDSAB** aims to acknowledge otherwise undistinguished persons who merit attention because they have helped to shape history or a culture. Consequently the dignity of persons belonging to communities that were sometimes deliberately ignored in the past, are restored, and unsung heroes are rescued from oblivion and restored as role models for future endeavours. Volume 2 contains elements of oral history since it records the achievements of certain individuals about whom very little has been written, for instance, taxi industry leader James Sojane.

Volume 2 of the **NDSAB** includes articles on 125 persons, in comparison to the more than 150 that were included in volume 1, and the approximately 4500 published in the **DSAB** volumes I to V. The cut-off date for the dates of death of personalities that feature in volume 2 is 1995. Amongst the well-known people who have been included

are Raymond Dart, Chris Hani, Uys Krige, Percy Qoboza, Joe Slovo and Oliver Tambo. Articles on nineteen women have been included, including Helen Joseph and Joey Scheepers. The great variety of biographies also includes journalists George Manuel and George Heard, composers such as Todd Matshikaza, writers such as SV Petersen and Bloke Modisane, professional and community leaders such as William Nkomo and AM Rajab, social scientists such as Hansi Pollak, citizens who made a difference in their communities such as the Ribero couple, Pieter van der Bijl and Abram Tiro, educationalists such as Reginald Cingo and Cassim Lakhi, the mathematician and astronomer Arthur Bleksley, businessmen such as Tod Brown, the missionary René Cuénod, and military personalities such as Pat Pattle and JP Verster. At long last articles on people such as BS Dayal, HA Fagan, Chief Kgolane, Chief Lebogo (Malaboch), Nat Nakasa and Pixley Seme - that would already have been included in the **DSAB** - have been published, confirming that the **NDSAB** is indeed a democratic successor to the **DSAB**, recording for posterity the role played by many hitherto unacclaimed people who helped in shaping the South African society.

As far as possible, each article is accompanied by a photograph of the particular person. As in the past a wide variety of people have made contributions to this volume. The nearly 80 authors include many professional historians and other academics, but also politicians such as Mangosuthu Buthelezi. An improvement over volume 1 is the fact that the name of the person who wrote the particular article, is indicated at the end of the article, but it is a pity that - unlike to volume 1 - the list of authors does not include an accompanying list of the articles (or single article) written by them.

In future the edition(s) should also give a better indication of the first name of all the people about whom articles have been written. Instead of having separate indexes for volume 1 and volume 2 of the **NDSAB** and a separate cumulative index for the **DSAB** volumes I to V, there should in future be one single cumulative index for all the volumes of the **DSAB** and **NDSAB**. Hopefully the next volume of the **NDSAB** will have the same layout and cover design as volume 2, as should be the case with volume 1 should it be reprinted in due course.

Most of the articles in volume 2 are about two pages in length. Although always a controversial matter, there are those people who - relatively speaking - played a more important role in society than others, and consequently deserve longer articles. Ideally those persons who would probably have been included in the proposed **DSAB VI**, etc., should also as soon as possible be included in the **NDSAB**, for example Jongumobovu Maqoma, Mary Kingsley, Fritz Duquesne, and Vice-Adm. GW Hallifax.

The publication of volume 2 of the **NDSAB** under the auspices of the Vista University's Department of History is of great significance, as it is the first time that a biographic dictionary has found a home at a South African university. Prof. JS Mohlamme

(head of the Department of History, Vista University, and editor-in-chief of the **NDSAB**), Ms Nelly Sonderling (editor of volume 2), and everybody else who were involved in producing volume 2 of the **NDSAB**, deserve credit and are congratulated with this excellent publication. They have succeeded in producing a reference book that informs and serves as an educational and research aid, but that is at the same time an interesting and absorbing book to read; and to consult again and again. Everybody who are interested in the history of South Africa, are looking forward to the next volume of the **NDSAB**.

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