

SOME RANDOM COMMENTS ON KAS MAINE

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1. GENERAL

This is a major piece of scholarly work but also much more than that. It is a literary experience - written with a compelling economy of formulation and simple analytical lucidity. That is one of many reasons why it makes a slice of South African history accessible in an absolutely refreshing and special way. At a time in our transition when cliché merchants and slogan vendors have a field day in obscuring our past and clouding our future with "airport blockbusters" riddled with self-serving anecdotes and superficial generalisations about "the new South Africa", "rainbow nation" and "ubuntu", the story of Kas Maine is like a refreshing bucket of ice cold water in the face. It inexorably draws our attention back to the social, economic and political forces that shaped the daily lives of the vast majority of ordinary people in this country.

2. WHO WAS KAS MAINE?

- (a) He was born in 1894 and died in 1985.
- (i) Judged in the politically correct idiom of current fashionability, he was " a small time dagga peddler (p89); an implimpi or informer who payed "the system" (pp 205, 546); an employer of child labour (pp229, 300); an adulterer (p236); a cad who abandoned his mistress and their two children (p264); unbearably authoritarian and chauvinist (pp280, 383, 289, 522); cruel and amoral (pp282, 302); a child beater (pp282, 302, 458); anti-intellectual/education (pp309, 474) and a wife beater (p415).

- (ii) But at the same time, he was also a self-taught : horse trainer (p311), farmers blacksmith (p 282); cobbler (p54); a very successful livestock agent (p574), tailor (p188); and a renowned herbalist and traditional healer. This apart from being what throughout the manuscript is made abundantly clear, a maize and general crop farmer, without peer who bought his 5th tractor at the age of 86 and just before he died at the age of 91 never stopped believing there was always one more season for another harvest (p 594).
- (b) Kas Maine and his family lived through what is arguably the most uncharitable, repressive period of our history for a black family, i.e. the first 85 years of this century. Through 57 years of his adult life, he together with his family, relentlessly without let up or rest for a week, or even a day, fought for their collective survival and succeeded somehow. He did not (could not) stand back and reflect on the consequences of : colonial expansion and the disintegration of tribal life and traditional culture; the rapid industrialisation which followed the discovery of diamonds and gold; the consequent capitalist and technological transformation of agriculture; the racist manipulation of political, economic and social power that structured the fabric of every day life. All of this he experienced as unremitting and continual body blows to the survival of his family and himself. Kas Maine never moaned, he simply worked - every day and very often at night. With an ingenuity and entrepreneurial skill that defies explanation, he adjusted to these forces, explored them, reshaped them to improve his own efficiency in looking after the current crop and improving his survival capacity between harvests. It is with exceptional skill that Van Onselen keeps the tension between Kas Maine's extraordinary individuality and the social forces he had to contend with, without underplaying the significance of either. Very often it is superb analyses parading as a novel.
- (c) Kas Maine's values were shaped and born out of his daily struggle. (Mindful of the reference to Meinecke in the preface, that behind the search for causalities "lies the search for values", it is often difficult to distinguish between the values of Van

Onselen and Kas Maine.) He, Kas Maine, was pragmatic and conservative (p 138); had a well developed distaste for smart alecks and "clever people" (p190) and avoided ideological prescription (p 209). He was instrumental rather than consummatry in judging people and ideas. Fiercely loyal and devoted to his family (wives, Leetwane and Lebitsa in particular, and children Mmusetsi, Bodule, Nthakwane, Matlakala, Morwese, Thakone), he was equally incapable of showing love and affection and extraordinarily clumsy and even counter productive when he tried. He believed in traditional family values but in his behaviour felt he had failed to keep them together and that he somehow alienated those he most cared for. Van Onselen sums all this up much better :

"The Maine's story is one of great complexity and infinite subtlety, filled with ambiguities, complexities, ironies and paradoxes that always chase but never quite catch the fleeting spectre of wisdom. Kas Maine was simultaneously a very ordinary man and an extraordinary countryman" (p16)

3. THE SHARECROPPING WORLD

- (a) This world is vividly captured in anecdotes and experiences which reveal the contradictions and paradoxes which embraced the interaction between black and white. They tried to come to terms with, and very often failed to understand them, as the forces of modernity attacked the structures of traditional life and mangled and reshaped them to its own imperatives. There were good and bad landlords, good and bad tenants, poor whites who begged food from black workers (p 84). Stereotypes about Koolie-traders, Jewish middlemen and rich Kaffirs and racist Boers were undermined and confirmed in daily interactions.
- (b) The highpoint for Kas was the extraordinary harvest at Sewefontein - more than a thousand bags of grain for himself. There were many low points - more often than not, when the family had to pull up stakes yet again, and move into the next landlord's farm to start all over. As Kas put it : "You tamed the land and they got rid of you" (p462). Some

black landlords, (very few), did the same : "Motsenyane was a shit. A rich black man will trample a black tenant underfoot just as readily as a rich white man" (p484). (One wonders what kind of rich black man Kas would have made given all his tough attributes. As Van Onselen puts it : "Kas was confined to the middle ground : too skilled and wealthy to be a subsistence farmer, too black and too poor to become a capitalist") (p517)

- (c) Kas Maine was not a total exception as an extraordinary competent sharecropper. Throughout reference is made to other very talented crop farmers : Andries Malebo, Aaran Modise, Thomas Mosoen, David Mogabe, Saul Ngagakane, Sefudi Ramohano (p427). The stark lunacy of apartheid comes clearly into focus when one realises again how much natural talent it systematically sought out and destroyed.,
- (d) Kas went through his fair share of ploughs : Canadian Chief (p82), Two Share Dutchman (p112), Canadian Wonder (p155) and Canadian Tramp (p358) as well as five tractors and a few motorcars and a truck. Those and other farming implements served as his school of apprenticeship when he became a self taught mechanic in repairing them for the varied demands of sharecropping.
- (e) Through out his sharecropping odyssey Kas Maine was only incidentally touched by the political activists of the day, although he felt the impact of their activities in many other indirect ways : Solomon Plaatjie, Abe Bailey, Clemens Kadake, Mangope, Verwoerd, etc. It is striking that the major political events of the last 20 years were evidently not part of the social discourse of the Maine family and their network, e.g. June 16th, 1976, Biko, Mandela, strikes, States of Emergency, armed struggle, Vorster, Botha, and various repressive clampdowns. The "Freedom Fighters"; of Rhodesia are only of relevance because of the magic potion they took (p581). (Perhaps this needs some kind of explanation.)

4. MAJOR UNDERLYING PROPOSITIONS

- (a) In the language of the trade, this is a classical case study of the struggle between modernity and traditionalism - "old and new forces contesting to shape the interactions between black or white" (p3). "The troubled relationship of black and white cannot fully be understood by focusing on what tore them apart and ignoring what held them together" (p4). It is a study of socio-economic and political transformation under the impact of technological and capitalist innovation.
- (b) Modernity attacked the most basic of human activity - physical and economic survival. The beginning of sharecropping was to be found in the relationship between landless blacks and property owning whites. (Pp6,8,9). At the same time, as this relationship evolved its own dynamic "the traditional way of life" for both black and white, began to crumble. For Kas and the Maine family - "the inability to hold the children on the land (p430), daughters became domestic servants (Matlakala becomes Miriam, Nthatwana becomes Rebecca (p143); Bodule leaves with Dikeledi for town, Mosela and Morwesi become drunken misfits, Mmusetsi leaves to return much later, mindless and paralysed. As for Kas Maine, he doggedly and with singleminded purpose absorbed all of these adversities, and continued to pursue "the better life" of the land.
- (c) There is a tension here between Van Onselen and the character of Kas Maine. (i) The reference to Guiseppe de Lampedusa in the epilogue highlights part of it. "I belong to an unlucky generation, swinging between the old world and the new, and I find myself ill at ease in both." (p4). Kas Maine would never have said something like this; he would have got on facing the challenge of survival. This kind of nostalgia belongs to the luxury of intellectual reflection. (I suffer from it too!). There is a hint of this nostalgia already present in the Introduction : "Contemporary South African values evoke hope and despair in equal measures." (p3) Again this is Van Onselen speaking not Kas Maine. Because he admires (loves?) Kas Maine so much and the region in which he lived and died, he believes that "the Highveld will largely be responsible for shaping an authentic South African identity" (p3) I do not live comfortably with an old world-new world dichotomy, nor do I know what "an authentic South African identity" is, or could be. The dichotomy smacks of a futile anti-modernity romanticism and the quest for authenticity makes the

search for the Holy grail a light hearted frolic of an expedition by comparison. I suggest we take our cue from Kas and Robert Louis Stevenson in "Travels with a Donkey Through the Cevennes" : "When the present is so exacting who can bother to think about the future." In short, try to understand and learn from the past, anticipate the future by avoiding the past mistakes, but work in the present and try to make the best of it. "All of life is a trajectory from experienced past to unknown future, illuminated only during the receding instant we call the present, the moment of our actual conscious experience. Yet our present appears continuous with our past, grows out of it, is shaped by it, because of our capacity for memory. It is this which prevents the past from being lost, as unknowable as the future. It is memory which thus provides time with its arrow." (Steven Rose, "The Making of Memory:", Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1992.

6. THE NARRATOR

- (a) The above comments aside, Van Onselen has the abiding virtue of avoiding the Scylla of excessive voluntarism, (everything is possible and nothing is necessary), and the Charybdis of dull determinism, (everything is necessary and nothing is possible). The extraordinary individuality of Kas Maine is never sacrificed on the altar of the inevitable course of historical forces. Kas, sharing in the generic human condition of the contingency of birth and the inevitability of death never resigns. Right down to the age of 91 the future is open ended and laden with promise. "If you plant beans in October, you could be harvesting them by February" (p594). He completely lacks a sense of entitlement in exploring life's opportunities. (How we need cohorts of black and white Kas Maine's in this country today!)
- (b) A striking characteristic of Van Onselen's writing is his special attitude towards nature. it becomes a conscious role player in his analysis as he consistently ":anthropomorphizes" (pp142, 143, 149, 156, 189, 211, 327, 512, 56 etc. etc.)
- (i) "Apologetic sunshine" (ii), "the storm revelled" (iii), "soil is in winter slumber" (iv), "the Bloemhof Sun counter attacked" (v), "spring short on patience" (vi), "a

pan with a demented eye staring at the sun" (vii), "drought dangled a withered claw".

Generally speaking, this is quite effective and not offensive at all. It can serve to convey a more contemporary "feel" in empathising with Kas Maine's experience of life. However, there are some jarring analogies which I find difficult to reconcile with Kas Maine's world :

(i) 'Nature is a canny poker player', (ii) "the chilly Southerly breeze never ceased to practice scales up and down their vertebrae (p526), (iii) Nature was a bitch", (p 546) (oops ! watch out for the Valkyries from Beijing fellah!), (iv) the Lord has a logic of his own" (p506), (v) Nature's calendar turned by the hand of God not man" (p247)

This is Van Onselen, Ennis Road, Parkview speaking. The proximity to domestic life, St Columbus, Lurgan Road and Wits Unviersity intrudes too harshly into the domain of Kas Maine.

(c) Generally speaking, however, there is an entirely convincing balance between dispassionate comment, analytical intrusion and empathetic plausible speculation on Kas Maine's state of mind. There are many moments of pure evocative charm - Neang's death for example (p310)

7. THE RESEARCH

- (a) What can I say - this is simply awesome stuff. Ten years of thorough field research and a comprehensive supporting bibliography. Nothing of any relevance seems to have been unexplored. Thomas Nkadimeng deserves the historian's equivalent of the VC.
- (b) The basic information contained in this work is absolutely indispensable for any broad brush historian on South Africa. To the extent that such historians ignore this

information, the mounting scepticism with which their work is viewed, is more than justified.

8. FINALLY

Why did Van Onselen attempt such a monumental task. The clue can be found on p598 at the funeral of Kas Maine when "a tall white man made a silent promise" to give effect to Tacitus's instruction to the historian : "to ensure that merit is recorded and to confront evil deeds and words with the fear of posterity's denunciations". (p12)

Van Onselen, has not only kept his promise, but made us all a gift of extraordinary abundance.