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**AN AUSTRALIAN HISTORIAN AT THE DAWN OF APARTHEID:
FRED ALEXANDER IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1949-50**

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This article examines a little-known aspect of Australia's relations with South Africa via a case study of the visit of eminent Australian historian Fred Alexander (1899-1996) to South Africa in 1949-50; a time of the dawn of the apartheid system and the 'changing of the guard' in Australian politics. In so doing it throws new light on intellectual contacts between the two countries, the response of historians to the onset of apartheid, and the nature of Australian historiography.

Australia's dealings with Africa in general, and South Africa in particular, are more complex than many assume. They comprise a wide range of contacts from military involvement and conflict over apartheid to migration and cultural and economic interaction.¹ Such relations, Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant argue, developed on an *ad hoc* basis. However, they are incorrect to state that Australia 'lacks a history of involvement in the continent'.² Scholars have focused on diplomatic and economic, but neglected intellectual, ties.³ This essay analyses the involvement of Australian historians in these relations, focusing on the significance of the visit of the distinguished Australian historian Fred Alexander to South Africa in 1949-50.

Australia and South Africa: Historical Relations

The West Coast of Australia looks out towards Africa across the Indian Ocean that physically separates yet at the same time connects the two lands. Historical ties, aided by interlocking sea-routes, spun a loose yet at times compelling web of socio-political linkages between peoples. Some of the earliest known European contacts with Australia had African connections. Willem De Vlaming in 1696 was accompanied to the West Coast by two 'blacks ... taken with us at the Cape'. He likened the *mia mia*'s of Swan River Aborigines to the housing of Cape Khoikoi. The destination of the convicts that landed at Sydney in 1788 could well have been Africa, as Britain toyed with the idea of locating the penal colony in West Africa.⁴ Explorers such as John Forrest and Ernest Giles even compared their exploits with those of the 'discoverers' of Africa⁵.

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1. See Deryck Schreuder and Peter Limb, 'Australia and Africa: Historical Relations', in Schreuder and Jim Angels (eds.), *Australia's New Horizons*, Sydney, forthcoming.
 2. Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the Wider World of the 1990s*, 2nd ed., Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 284.
 3. See Donald Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1983. An exception is Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner, and Sarah Nuttall (eds.), *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, Routledge, London, 1996.

Isolated European settler societies in South Africa and Australia had features in common: traditions as British colonies; origins as garrison outposts; pastoral-led growth; and ability to attract overseas labour and capital.⁶ Both were Southern Hemisphere societies 'whose environments, indigenous peoples and thus historical experiences of colonialism were markedly different from imperial expansion in northern "new worlds"'.⁷ Because, more recently, trade with Asia has dwarfed that with Africa, there has been a tendency among Australian writers to minimise the 'African connection'. Nevertheless, appreciation of historical and cultural ties aids the understanding of the significance of Australia-Africa relations.

Visits to Australia of ships from Europe via South Africa helped break down settler isolation. When the infant colonies of New South Wales and the Swan River Colony foundered, they were succoured by food imports from the Cape.⁸ Donald Denoon notes that ties born of a pre-Suez shipping route soon atrophied,⁹ yet connections lingered. Before 1914 trade in timber and livestock between Western Australia and South African ports aided the integration of the colony into the capitalist world economy.¹⁰ In depressions of the 1890s, 1900s and 1930s workers from both countries sought employment by crossing the Indian Ocean.¹¹

The British Empire legacy engendered common approaches and a degree of contact between colonies.¹² In the nineteenth century, they shared British law, culture, manufactures, and administrators.¹³ The

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4. Willem De Vlaming, *The Explorations, 1696-97, of Australia* edited by Willem Robert, Philo Press, Amsterdam, 1972, p. 61; Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia. Volume 1*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 47-50.
 5. Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 42-43.
 6. Denoon, *op. cit.*
 7. 'Introduction' to Darian-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
 8. Conrad Lighton, *Sisters of the South*, 2nd ed., Timmins, Cape Town, 1958; Frank Crowley, *A Short History of Western Australia*, 2nd ed., Macmillan, Melbourne, 1969, p. 13.
 9. D. Denoon, 'South Africa-Australian Relations', in G. Davison, J. Hirst, S. Macintyre (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 597.
 10. Andrew Pope, 'The View West: The Indian Ocean Trading World and Western Australia to 1914', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 16, 1995, pp. 147-62.
 11. In 1930, 250 people migrated to South Africa on the *Euripides*, some seeking work oblivious that in South Africa all labouring was undertaken by blacks: *West Australian*, 15 April 1930.

zeal with which Australian colonies embraced British colonial wars led inexorably to military contacts. Forces that in 1895 invaded the Transvaal at the behest of Cecil Rhodes included an Australian Brigade.¹⁴ In the South African War (1899-1902) Australian troop involvement was substantial, and included many Australians working in South Africa, and a group of Aboriginal trackers.¹⁵ Other expressions of 'colonial solidarity' took place. In 1904, many Australian parliamentarians expressed outrage at plans to deploy Chinese indentured labour in the Transvaal.¹⁶ Prime Minister Alfred Deakin in 1906 protested against 'interference' when Britain sought to prevent the execution of black fighters of the Bambata Rebellion in Natal.¹⁷

From the perspective of indigenous peoples, colonialism was disastrous: dispossession; high mortality; exploitation. Conquest engendered comparable patterns of resistance, even if its scale in the two countries often was different.¹⁸ Settlers adopted similar historico-legal fictions of *terra nullius* and their constructions of 'Aboriginality' were rooted in common colonialist discourses.¹⁹ Paternalistic, discriminatory policies on land, labour, and education were alike. Blacks were denied land and citizenship rights, herded into reserves, paid minimal wages and subject to draconian segregation and legal prohibitions on inter-marriage and free movement.²⁰ Indigenous women of both lands were victims of gross sexual and labour exploitation. They were used as agents of settler control against black males but also resisted white

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12. P. G. Edwards, *Prime Ministers and Diplomats: The Making of Australian Foreign Policy 1901-1949*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 190.
 13. Sir George Grey was Governor of South Australia (1841-5) and the Cape Colony (1854-61). Richard Bourke (Cape, NSW) and Sir Henry Barkly (Cape, Victoria) served in similar capacities. Sir Frederick Broome was Colonial Secretary of Natal (1875) and Governor of WA (1883).
 14. Brian Kennedy, *A Tale of Two Mining Cities: Johannesburg and Broken Hill 1885-1925*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1984. p. 6.
 15. D. Huggonson, 'The Black Trackers of Bloemfontein', *Land Rights News*, February 1990.
 16. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 16 March 1904, pp.552-85.
 17. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*. House of Representatives, 8 June 1906, p. 65.
 18. Sekai Holland, 'Australia, Rhodesia and South Africa: A Comparison', in F. Stevens (ed.), *Racism: the Australian Experience*, vol. 3, ANZ Book Co., Sydney, 1971, pp. 187-212.
 19. B. Scates, "'We Are Not ... Aboriginal ... We Are Australian": William Lane, Racism and the Construction of Aboriginality', *Labour History*, no.72, 1997, p. 37.

rule.²¹ In contrast, white women were part of a 'civilizing mission'. Lady Barker lived in Natal and Western Australia. Her memoirs typify the stereotypes held by many colonists. Afrikaners (of whom she had met only one) were 'always extremely dirty,' and 'behind the rest of the civilised world'. Her Zulu servants were 'good-tempered and docile'.²² Stereotyping also was apparent in prison administration. Rottnest Island (WA) and Robben Island (South Africa) both functioned as penal isles that brutally incarcerated anti-colonial fighters who were forced to work in quarries yet at times engineered remarkable escapes.²³

Before 1960, when South Africa became a republic, there were other similarities: a common head of state; the Westminster system; Dominion status.²⁴ There were differences. Australian nationalism was slower to cut the umbilical cord to Britain, a tendency attributed by Fred Alexander to Australia's greater ethnic homogeneity and isolation that encouraged persistence of Anglophone feeling.²⁵ Britain used both states to expand its Empire.²⁶ By the 1920s they were effectively sub-imperialisms, answerable to the League of Nations for administration of New Guinea and South West Africa (Namibia) respectively. Like South African rulers, Australian leaders, such as Robert Menzies and H. V. Evatt, remained aloof from African nationalists in the Commonwealth. In his memoirs, Menzies maintains that many Africans

20. From 1937 to 1954 Aborigines in Perth were forced to carry pass-books akin to those used under apartheid: A.J. Connolly, *White City: A Critical Legal History of the Prohibited Area Proclamation and Pass System in the Perth Area 1927-54*, LLB (Hons.), UWA, 1991, pp. 35, 54.

21. See L. Ryan, 'Indigenous Women as Agents: A Comparison of the Lives of Three Indigenous Women Agents in Colonial Society', paper 58, ANZAAS Congress 1988.

22. Lady Broome, *Colonial Memories*, Smith, London, 1904, pp. 63, 211; G. Whitlock, 'A "White-Souled State": Across the "South" with Lady Barker', in Darian-Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-80.

23. Peter Limb, "'Of Deeds Most Foul and Vile": A Short Comparative History of Robben and Rottnest Penal Islands', *AfSAAP Review* vol. 20, no. 1, 1998, pp. 15-9. David Stuurman, who escaped from Robben Island in 1820, was recaptured and sentenced to transportation to NSW.

24. T.B. Millar, *Australia in Peace and War: External Relations since 1788*, 2nd ed., ANU Press, Canberra, 1991, p. 295.

25. FA, *Australia since Federation: A Narrative and Critical Analysis*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1972, p. 79; FA, 'Inter-Imperial Consultation', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 10, 1938, pp. 5-17, p. 12.

26. Luke Trainor, *British Imperialism and Australian Nationalism: Manipulation, Conflict and Compromise in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 179.

lacked 'the capacity to vote'.²⁷ According to a colleague, he had 'no brotherly feeling towards coloured people'.²⁸ By 1960, Australia was seen by Britain as still implacably opposed to, if resigned to accept, decolonisation'.²⁹

In this period, there was strong Australian bipartisan support for *white* South Africa, based on legal doctrines of non-interference in domestic affairs and support for the 'White Australia' policy. Liberal governments broadly supported South Africa from 1949 to 1960. In 1952, Australia defended Pretoria at the United Nations during massive internal defiance campaigns. The Australian Foreign Minister conceded privately that in 1957 he had made 'as good a plug as I could for South Africa'.³⁰ After Menzies refused to condemn the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, South African Prime Minister Verwoerd informed him that he was the 'best friend South Africa has'.³¹ There was a common fear of blacks. In 1953, apartheid leader Malan stated in Parliament that 'if ever India knocks on the door of Australia we will prove that we are a friend of Australia'. South Africa even attempted to construct a 'sisters of the Southern Hemisphere' axis.³² Menzies, who maintained close personal contact with South African ambassadors, torpedoed attempts by more liberal ministers to strengthen measures against South Africa in 1961, and in 1963 overrode departmental advice against allowing the establishment of a South African military attaché.³³ This then was the political context in which Australian academics of the period of the onset of apartheid operated.

Australian Historians and South Africa

Before examining the writings of Australian historians on South

27. R.G. Menzies, *Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events*, Penguin, 1969, pp. 190-1.
28. Garfield Barwick, *A Radical Tory*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 190.
29. David Goldsworthy, 'Menzies, Britain and the Commonwealth: The Old Order Changeth', in Frank Cain (ed.), *Menzies in War and Peace*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, pp. 99-115, p. 107.
30. R.G. Casey, *Australian Foreign Minister: Diaries, 1951-60*, Collins, London, 1972, p. 276.
31. Menzies, *Afternoon Light*, pp. 192-202, citing H. Verwoerd to Menzies, 24 April 1961.
32. South Africa. Assembly. Debates, 11 April 1953, column 1327; J. Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, pp. 101, 230.
33. R. Porter, *Paul Hasluck: a Political Biography*, University of WA Press, Perth, 1993, p. 273; D. Tothill, 'Menzies and the South Africans' in Cain, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-34.

Africa, it is germane to consider the broader intellectual framework. Both countries inherited a British education system that was adapted to colonial requirements. A few examples will suffice. At the turn of the century, the Western Australian Superintendent of Education, motivated by white demands to exclude Aborigines from schools, deemed it vital to obtain a copy of a Cape Town Supreme Court judgement upholding the expulsion of 'coloured' children from 'white' schools.³⁴ Kingsley Fairbridge, born in South Africa in 1885, migrated to Pinjarra where in 1912 he founded the Fairbridge Farm School for disadvantaged British children.³⁵ Scientific and literary contacts also developed in a settler cocoon. There was considerable scientific cooperation, frequently based on close personal ties.³⁶ Imaginative representations of the two societies often emphasised common themes of landscape or colonialism.³⁷ In a recent re-assessment, Donald Denoon depicts intellectual contacts as one-way; Australians wrote on South Africa, not vice versa.³⁸ There are exceptions. In 1941, historian C. W. de Kiewiet contrasted Australia's strategic access to cheap grazing land with South Africa's reliance on cheap black labour. In the 1980s, Arthur Davey made a detailed critique of the 'Breaker' Morant legend. More recently, ex-Ambassador David Tothill has analysed diplomatic relations.³⁹ Other intellectual connections include the Rhodes Trust of the University of Oxford, whose beneficiaries included Australian historian Sir Keith Hancock.⁴⁰ Another is the Round Table movement that sought to encourage fidelity to Empire among Dominion intellectuals. Through his membership of the Round Table, Hancock met South African leader Jan Smuts.⁴¹

Given such contacts, it is not surprising that some Australian historians became interested in South Africa. G. A. Wood, Professor of His-

34. A. Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia 1900-40*, University of WA Press, Perth, 1988, p. 141.

35. *Kingsley Fairbridge: His Life and Verse*, Books of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, 1974.

36. P. Vale, *South African-Australian Relations and the Politics of Perception*, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, 1983, p. 5.

37. S. Nuttall, 'Flatness and Fantasy: Representations of the Land in Two Recent South African Novels', in Darian-Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-30, pp. 225, 228.

38. Denoon, 'South African-Australian Relations'.

39. C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic*, Oxford University Press, London, 1941, p. 96; A. Davey (ed.), *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers*, Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1987; D. Tothill, *South African-Australian Diplomatic Relations 1945-1961*, PhD thesis, University of South Africa, 1995.

tory at Sydney University, campaigned strongly against the Boer War.⁴² G. C. Henderson of Adelaide University did research in South Africa for a book on Sir George Grey, and later sought to rationalise the holdings of archival papers deposited in Australia and South Africa to better reflect their place of origin.⁴³ Hancock took a more sustained interest, becoming the first Australian historian to become an authority on African affairs. His masterful *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs* (1937) took him to West and South Africa where he investigated history, economics, and politics.⁴⁴ In 1954, Hancock accepted a British mission to evaluate the future of colonial rule in Uganda. He helped defuse, by his sensitivity to African viewpoints, an impasse between colonial and Buganda rulers in such a way as to avoid recourse to a 'Rhodesian' style of governance.⁴⁵ He began to grapple with complex questions of Eurocentrism and the need to view African cultures in their own light.

Hancock's extensive writings on South Africa have prompted historians Saul Dubow and Shula Marks to regard this corpus as his 'most sustained and significant historiographical endeavour'. They compare him with Smuts, pointing to the two men's common views on the Commonwealth and nationalism, but conclude that both 'failed to comprehend that their ethnocentrism, rooted in the white dominions of South Africa and Australia, amounted to a patriotism of race'. Hancock was little influenced by rising African nationalism, and barely critical of white territorial conquest. He did stress the complexity of ethnic relations in South Africa and the depth of humanity of some black leaders.⁴⁶ Later, in 1979, more sensitive to issues of race and

40. B. Magubane, *The Round Table Movement: Its Influence on the Historiography of Imperialism*, Sapes Press, Harare, 1994, p. 16; N. Etherington, *Theories of Imperialism*, Croom Helm, London, 1984, pp. 205-6; C. Newbury, 'Cecil Rhodes and the South African Connection: "A Great Imperial University?"', in F. Madden and D.K. Fieldhouse (eds.), *Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth*, Croom Helm, London, 1982, pp. 75-96.

41. L. Foster, *High Hopes: The Men and Motives of the Australian Round Table*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1986.

42. Letter of G.A. Wood, 13 February 1902, in Greenwood, *op. cit.*, p. 41; Brian Fletcher, 'History as a Moral Force: George Arnold Wood at Sydney University, 1891-1928', in Stuart Macintyre and Julian Thomas (eds.), *The Discovery of Australian History 1890-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 10-27.

43. Elizabeth Kwann, 'G. C. Henderson: Advocate of "Systematic and Scientific" Research in Australian History', in *ibid.*, pp. 28-48, pp. 34, 48. *Sir George Grey* was published in 1907.

44. W.K. Hancock, *A Survey of Commonwealth Affairs*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 1937.

class, he urged young historians to investigate not so much themes such as Australia in the Boer War, but rather 'Australian reinforcements of the ideology and leadership of white labour in South Africa'.⁴⁷

Fred Alexander and South Africa

Another Australian historian developed a close interest in South Africa. Frederick Alexander was born in Blackflat, Victoria, in 1899. He was educated at Melbourne High School and the University of Melbourne, from whence he graduated in 1920. In 1924, he obtained a Masters degree at Balliol College, Oxford, winning the Herbertson Prize in History. Among his Balliol colleagues was Hancock. In the same year, Alexander was appointed Assistant Lecturer in the Department of History and Economics at the University of Western Australia (UWA).⁴⁸ A prolific public intellectual and community leader, he became a titan of the Perth cultural scene: foundation Professor of History at UWA (1948-65); founder of the Festival of Perth (1953); Director of Adult Education (1941-54); Chair of the WA Branch of the League of Nations Union (1927-39); and Chair of Library Board of WA (1954-1982). The WA State Library is named in his honour.

At UWA Alexander taught chiefly British Empire and European history, combining this core curriculum with insights into contemporary events. In his lectures of the 1920s, he paid particular attention to problems of Dominion status, including South African attitudes which, he stressed, were 'very complicated by the presence of the Dutch and nationalist element'.⁴⁹ In 1925, in a UWA Extension Lecture

45. Hancock, *Country and Calling*, Faber, London, 1954, pp. 174-75; Hancock, *Professing History*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976, p. 196; D. Fieldhouse, 'Keith Hancock and Imperial Economic History: A Retrospect Forty Years On', in Madden, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-63; D.A. Low, 'The Buganda Mission, 1954', *Historical Studies*, vol. 13, no. 51, 1968, pp. 353-380.

46. Hancock, *Professing History*, chapter 3; Hancock, *Smuts*, Cambridge University Press, 1962-8; Saul Dubow and Shula Marks, 'Patriotism of Place and Race: Keith Hancock on South Africa', paper to conference on the Life of W.K. Hancock, Canberra, 1998; Hancock, *Survey*, vol. 1, pp. 189, 248, 284, vol. 2, pp. 153, 64.

47. Hancock, *Perspective in History*, Dept. of Economic History, ANU, Canberra 1982, p. 95.

48. FA, 'Curriculum Vitae' 1950, Biographical notes, in FA Papers, UWA Archives (hereafter UWAA) series 24 consignment 336/1; Brian de Garis, 'The Department of History in the University of WA 1913-65', *Studies in Western Australian History*, 6, 1988, pp. 1-21 [who neglects Alexander's African interests]; FA, 'Hancock: Some Reminiscences', *Historical Studies*, vol. 13, no. 51, 1968, pp. 291-99.

in rural Katanning, he stressed that the new Afrikaner Nationalist 'Pact' government was diverging from the pro-Imperial policy followed by Australia.⁵⁰ In the thirties he wrote and lectured on changes in Commonwealth relations, especially on the 1931 Statute of Westminster and 1937 Imperial Conference.⁵¹ In 1934, he published *From Empire to Commonwealth*, a textbook for schools that dealt extensively with (white) South African history. It was replete with colonial stereotypes such as the myth of an 'empty land' before European settlement, and missionary 'zealots' whose mission stations became places of refuge for 'lazy Hottentots'. Nevertheless, the focus of the book indicates an intellectual interest in the region by Australian academics. It contrasted the drawn out negotiations over Australian federation with the more centralised and much 'closer union' of the South African colonies in 1910. Australia, with its 'dying race' of Aborigines had, in comparison with South Africa, 'no native troubles'. Alexander also predicted problems in realising the policies of segregation then gathering momentum among South African whites.⁵² He continued to write on South Africa and by 1939 was convinced that its path was now 'very different' to that of Australia.⁵³

Alexander was very much a product of his Melbourne and Oxford days, steeped in the traditions of Australian culture and British historiography. Yet he was receptive to other trends. As he taught chiefly 'non-Australian history' until late in his career,⁵⁴ he was likely to absorb comparative and Commonwealth, as well as Australian, historiographical trends. He claimed to have given most of his leisure in the ten years before World War II 'to the attempt to increase public knowl-

49. [FA], 'The Problem of Dominion Status since the Peace', UWA History Dept. 'History 'B' concluding lecture Division II, term III, 192[5?], UWAA 337 file 4/5/1-9.

50. UWA History Dept. lecture notes, 1925, 1950?, UWAA 337/4/5/1-9, 337 6/11-20. South African history was taught as early as 1918 at UWA: course notes 2 July 1918, UWAA 337/2/19.

51. UWA. History Dept. Synopsis History IIB, UWAA 337 file 6/11-20.

52. FA and H.B. Feilman, *From Empire to Commonwealth: The Story of the British Empire from its Origins to the Present Day*, Beers-Carrolls, Perth, 1934, pp. 71-8, 252-4. Suggested reading was similarly stereotyped, consisting chiefly of pro-Imperial fiction and popular settler accounts.

53. FA, 'Inter-Imperial Consultation', typescript [ca.1939], UWAA 337 4/4/1-11

54. FA, *Australia since Federation*, p. v. It 'was rare at any time' for WA historians 'to link local history with a wider international perspective': G.C. Bolton, 'Western Australia Reflects on its Past', in C.T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, UWA Press, 1981, pp.677-91.

edge, and to stimulate informal discussion among West Australians, of international affairs'.⁵⁵ This obsession inclined him to an activist stance and a sort of cosmopolitanism. He sought to build public awareness of world affairs through his role in the League of Nations Union and later in the United Nations Association of Australia and the Australian Institute of International Affairs.⁵⁶ He spoke at public meetings in Perth and rural towns against the 1935-36 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. In this regard, he was somewhat ahead of public opinion. In 1923 Australia had opposed the admittance of Ethiopia to the League of Nations on the white supremacist basis that the independent kingdom was not 'civilized' enough and lest, in the words of Joseph Cook, it should 'question Australia as to the treatment of the natives of New Guinea'. During the Italian invasion, Australia was a strong advocate of appeasement, although newspapers such as *The Age* and *The West Australian* (for which Alexander regularly wrote) condemned Italy.⁵⁷ Travel overseas further broadened Alexander's views. In 1932-33, as a Rhodes Travelling Fellow in Europe, he visited Nazi Germany and France,⁵⁸ and attended the League of Nations. In 1939-40 he was a Rockefeller Fellow in the United States where he served as Personal Ministerial Assistant in the Australian Legation. In 1950, he was a Carnegie Travelling Fellow in the United States.⁵⁹

The least-known overseas project of Alexander at this time is the four months he spent in South Africa as a Carnegie Fellow, from 2 December 1949 to 15 April 1950. Before he left he gathered background material through correspondence with leading scholars, such as the American political scientist Gwendolen Carter.⁶⁰ He took copious notes from authoritative works, such as the history by C. W. de

55. FA, *Adult Education and Community Activity in Australia before, during, and after the War*, address at Trinity Hall 23 August 1944, Adult Education Board, Perth, 1944, p.6, ts., UWA. Library. Alexander Papers, MS42.

56. See Brian de Garis, *op. cit.*

57. D. Carmichael, *Australia and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-6*, MA, University of Queensland, 1972, pp.17, 52, 179; M. Steadman, 'The League of Nations Union in Perth: Internationalism in Isolation', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 6, 1988, pp.22-38; E. M. Andrews, *Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia: Reactions to the European Crises 1935-39*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1970, chapter 2; *West Australian*, 7, 12 November 1935.

58. In France he met the socialist Léon Blum: FA, 'André Siegfried, *Le Canada, Les deux races* (Paris, 1906): An Historical Revision', ANZAAS paper 1959, ms. in Alexander Papers, MS42.

59. In this period he was influenced by Turner and wrote *Moving Frontiers: An American Theme and its Application to Australian History*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1947.

Kiewiet, and read widely on topics ranging from the Afrikaner Broederbond to labour relations. The victory of the Afrikaner Nationalists under D. F. Malan the year before had focused his attention more closely on South Africa and his public lectures began to pay more attention to the country. In a UWA Summer School address of January 1949 on changing patterns of the British Commonwealth, he repeatedly referred to South African examples of centrifugal tendencies. The prospect of a republic in South Africa was mooted, and its rallying to the British Empire in World War II was contrasted with rumours of Afrikaner sympathy with Nazism. He noted how poorly informed Australians were on South Africa; the 'few points of contact' with 'people who live under conditions at once similar to yet very different' from Australia. He told listeners that the Union Jack, capable of evoking common cause among Australians, might suggest to others 'a period of national subordination' as a reminder of 'the humiliation of a Bloemfontein' -- a reference to the British victory over Afrikaners in 1902. His choice of symbols, as in earlier works, thus remained those of white, not black, Africans.⁶¹ But his close monitoring of events enabled him to include a discussion of the rise of apartheid in an article of September 1949 for *The Herald Yearbook*.⁶² Soon, however, he would be face to face with the phenomenon and compelled to consider black views.

In South Africa, Alexander traveled widely and met with English South African and Afrikaner leaders, including Field-Marshal Smuts, Prime Minister Malan, the liberal Helen Suzman, and others. He also met black leaders. In the Orange Free State he spent an hour discussing black politics with the recently elected President of the African National Congress (ANC), Dr. James Moroka. At the black college of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape he held talks with another ANC leader, Professor Z. K. Matthews, and in Durban met Indian political leaders.⁶³

In several lectures, Alexander compared Australia with South Africa. Speaking in April 1950 in Cape Town, he stressed the remarkable simi-

60. 'Notes from Dr. Gwendolen Carter', UWAA 336/1. Carter, with some knowledge of Australia, compared the 'clear thinking' of liberal Afrikaner de Villiers Graaff with Kim Beazley Senior.

61. FA, 'Australia and the New Pattern of the British Commonwealth', address to 21st Summer School, UWA, 6 January 1949, Alexander Papers, MS42.

62. FA, 'The British Commonwealth 1949/50', ms. copy in UWAA 337 file 6/11-6/20.

63. H. Suzman to FA, 3 April 1950, UWAA 337/4/4/1-22; FA, *On Campus and Off*, UWA Press, Perth, 1987, pp. 66-74, 104-6. Alexander recounted his meeting with Moroka to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians: FA, 'Australia's Role in the Contemporary Commonwealth', *Medical Journal of Australia*, January 1952; FA to Stirling, 17 February 1950, UWAA, 336/1.

larity in both countries of the revolutions caused by mineral discoveries and how settlers had 'developed the land in defiance of the ideas of the authorities'. The greatest contrast, he argued, was the relative homogeneity of Australia's population that had spawned 'a distinct Australian nationalism'.⁶⁴ Later, in his farewell speech, broadcast on South African radio, he deplored the habit of both Boer and British South African politicians of 'flog[ging] into continuous activity political, racial and cultural differences', in contrast to Australia where, he claimed, economics predominated.⁶⁵ At the end of the trip he also visited Rhodesia where he stayed at Government House. In Salisbury he delivered a lecture critical of the excessive parochialism of South Africans; their obsession with 'the minutiae of Afrikaner history', a practice amounting to 'antiquarianism disguised as history'.⁶⁶

Despite these abrasive ideas, Alexander was able to interact with Afrikaners. The empiricism that permeated contemporary historiography in Anglo-Australian universities lent his approach an objectivity⁶⁷ that was to aid his rapport with Afrikaners. He very 'deliberately set out to try to get to know the Afrikaner point of view',⁶⁸ seeking first to 'soak' himself in Afrikaner culture in Cape Town before imposing himself on Afrikaner 'farmers ... to get them to discuss matters ... directly and realistically'. In this quest he was encouraged by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, T. B. Davie, who urged him to visit 'poor whites' such as the woodcutters of rural Knysna.⁶⁹ Alexander was alert to what he heard about the recent growth of bilingualism in the press and judiciary, and the rise of Afrikaner linguistic nationalism.⁷⁰ Neither was he above playing off English versus Afri-

64. 'Australian Parallels with Union', *Cape Times*, 5 April 1950.

65. FA, 'An Australian Looks at the Union', 10 April 1950, ts. of SABC talk, UWAA 337/7/1-14.

66. *Rhodesia Herald*, 9 March 1950; FA, 'An Australian Historian's Tentative Impressions of Current Trends in the Union of South Africa', lecture to Rhodesia National Affairs Association 10 March 1950, UWAA 337/7/1-4. FA, *Canadians and Foreign Policy*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1960, p. 98, criticises the 'pathetic if not tragic preoccupations of some Afrikaner historians at Stellenbosch with the most minute details' of the Boer War and the Great Trek.

67. Alexander would later justify, in a different context, the combination of 'subjective experiences with the fruits of others more objective scholarship': FA, *Australia since Federation*, p. v. See also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

68. FA to Menzies, 14 April 1950, UWAA 336/1.

69. FA to T.B. Davie, 2 September 1949, Davie to FA, 19 August 1949, FA to G. Carter, 13 January 1950, UWAA 336/1.

kaner South Africans, each of whom appeared to enjoy his comments directed at the other.⁷¹ The white English Natalian, he wrote, 'is every whit as racially minded as the Afrikaner and just about as sensitive to anything that smacks of criticism'.⁷² His occasional boldness in criticising state policy was forgiven by the authorities. They waived on his behalf the rules against broadcasts on contemporary politics, insisting merely that he change a single phrase in an address so that it might refer instead to the government's *alleged* policy to deprive 'coloureds' of the vote.⁷³ This official tolerance of criticism, at a time of rising state suppression of dissent, was induced partly by Alexander's careful diplomacy. He made a point of personally contacting cabinet ministers and, on the advice of Australian High Commissioner Alfred Stirling, who himself had learnt Afrikaans and written on Afrikaans literature,⁷⁴ openly expressed interest in Afrikaner culture. Stirling urged him to attend the Voortrekker Memorial inauguration and opened doors for him to the administration. Prime Minister Malan told Stirling that he was most interested in Alexander's visit and pleased that he would be based part of his time in the bastion of Afrikanerdom, Stellenbosch.⁷⁵ These gambits succeeded. Alexander was invited to give a public lecture at Stellenbosch University, which had a certain interest in Australia occasioned by the presence there since the 1920s of Australian academics. He later was invited back to deliver an address before the Principal.⁷⁶

Setting sail for England on the Orient Line, Alexander continued to record his impressions of South Africa. He wrote (on the ship's stationery) lecture notes dealing with South Africa's 'native' policy and problems of white settler societies.⁷⁷ At Chatham House in London he

70. FA to G. Carter, 13 January 1950, UWAA 336/1.

71. FA to Mr Shepardson 25 May 1950, UWAA 336/1.

72. FA to G.A. Currie (UWA Vice-Chancellor), aerogram, ca. February 1950, UWAA 336/1.

73. Talks Supervisor, South African Broadcasting Corporation to FA, 1 April 1950, UWAA 336/1.

74. Stirling 'now speaks very good Afrikaans and has established very warm relations with Afrikaner artists and others': FA to G. Carter 13 January 1950. Menzies concurred with the high estimation of Stirling's qualities: Menzies to FA 6 May 1950: both in UWAA 336/1.

75. Stirling to FA, 2 September, 17 October 1949, Davie to FA, 19 August 1949, UWAA 336/1.

76. FA to G.A. Currie, January 1950, FA to Professor H.B. Thom 7 October 1949, H.B. Thom to FA 5 February 1950, A. Stirling to FA, 2 September 1949, UWAA 336/1.

77. See handwritten notes on 'British Colonial Policy', in UWAA 337, file 4/3/1-2.

addressed the Royal Institute of International Affairs on the topic of South African politics. In response to a question about Australia's right to criticise South African racial policies, he compared the University of Western Australia's much greater tolerance of 'non-white' students with the restrictive racial policies of apartheid.⁷⁸

At this time Alexander sent a series of articles to the Australian press. In one he remarked upon the eagerness of South Africans to express their concern at 'the marked deterioration in race relationships' to 'an Australian who obviously stood "above the battle" and had little to live down beyond the persistent success of his compatriots in test cricket'. White South Africans, despite their differing political persuasions, in private mostly agreed with the need for some sort of segregation. Many doubted whether extreme apartheid would ever work. Political party organisation, he estimated, lay somewhere between Australian and United States systems, and was moving more towards an American model of obsession with securing office. They gave artificial prominence to 'racial, cultural and religious differences' though deeper economic forces were advancing urbanisation and threatening the environment in a rush for mineral riches and high returns from crops. In these dispatches Alexander drew attention to how a visitor to South Africa soon learns that the Boer War is still a vital issue, and that the term 'concentration camp' means quite different things to an Australian than to a South African. He noted astutely, despite the rather over-optimistic impression of some trade union leaders (with whom he spoke) that the attitudes of white employees to black workers were improving, that this was the case only among a minority of whites.⁷⁹ Trade unionism in South Africa, he argued elsewhere, was undergoing marked changes, with a majority of white employees now Afrikaner-speaking, and many unions under attack from government.⁸⁰ This interest in class issues (his files from the trip include a considerable number of press and academic reports on black worker rights and unions) dates back to his earlier involvement in the Workers Educational Association.⁸¹

Unlike his contemporary, Keith Hancock, Alexander was more sensitive to the growing signs of assertive African nationalism. Whilst exaggerating the power of Pan Africanism among ANC members he

78. FA, 'South Africa Today: an Australian View', transcript of a talk to the Royal Institute of International Affairs 20 June 1950, UWAA, 337/7/1-4.

79. FA, 'As a West Australian Sees South Africa', *West Australian*, 22 April and 3 May 1950. Alexander also contrasted the operation of the Parliaments of the two countries: FA, 'The Zoo Train', ABC recording, 12 January 1950, transcript, ABC Archives, Sydney.

80. FA, 'Trade Union Trends in South Africa', ABC talk, 20 April 1950, ABC Archives, Sydney.

was aware of its growing prominence. He observed that ANC leaders 'may for the time being discourage sporadic strikes or riots', but perceived their ties to a popular base and was convinced that the 'doctrine now being preached - and spread by migrant labourers back to the kraals in the native reserves - would seem to be one of developing an African national State'. Writing at the height of the Cold War (legislation to ban the Communist Party would soon be introduced in both countries) he discounted reports of external communist influence among blacks who were, he claimed, attracted to communism 'merely because it was a revolutionary programme of action'. He also encountered what in the 1980s became known as the 'Packing for Perth' syndrome: he was amazed that so many whites speculated about which country 'would offer the most acceptable refuge' if white rule should be threatened.⁸²

Whilst Alexander was overseas the incumbent Australian Labor Party government was defeated at the polls. From South Africa he kept up a correspondence with Menzies, an acquaintance from his Melbourne student days, and with Menzies' minister Paul Hasluck and the ALP's Kim Beazley Senior, both of whom had been junior colleagues in the UWA History Department. Alexander, ever the objective historian and diplomat, congratulated Menzies and commiserated with Beazley. He told Menzies that 'Australia's reputation now stands very high in the Union'.⁸³ To Gwendolen Carter he confided that the swing to Menzies had been much larger than he had expected, and pointed to the significance of the Catholic vote, citing the vote against Labor in Leederville, then the 'most Catholic suburb in Perth'. Ironically, given Menzies' continued support for white South Africa, Alexander was amazed to be told by a South African Nationalist Party Senator and others that the 1949 Liberal victory in Australia was a 'retrograde step ... a swing back to "Imperialism"'⁸⁴ - a clear reference to Menzies' Empire loyalty.

The contemporary impact of Alexander's visit may have been greater than posterity has chronicled. Recordings of his impressions of South Africa made before he left the country were broadcast on the

81. It could also be linked to claims that Australian history is the epitome of a 'proletarian' current rooted in its convict past. Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the US, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia*, Harcourt, New York, 1964, p.3, in a now largely discredited work, depicts Boer South Africa as representative of 'bourgeois', and British South Africa and Australia as representative of 'radical', traditions.

82. FA, 'As a West Australian Sees South Africa'.

83. FA to Menzies, 14, 29 April 1950, P. Hasluck to FA, 1 February 1950, K. Beazley to FA, 30 December 1949, UWAA, 336/1.

84. FA to Carter, 13 January 1950, UWAA 336/1.

ABC.⁸⁵ Upon his return to Australia, he continued this interest, returning to themes of constitutional change and racial segregation in South Africa in further radio talks in late 1950 and 1952.⁸⁶ The 1952 defiance campaigns particularly caught his imagination. In a broadcast he sought to explain to Australian listeners the intensity of black resistance led by the ANC, and how non-violent protests could easily turn to riots in crowded and harshly policed black townships. His use of terms such as 'primitive Bantu' to refer to the 'vast majority' of South African blacks betrays a lingering paternalistic discourse. Yet, he was appreciative of, and sensitive to, ANC political aims and tactics in the face of apartheid. The defiance campaign was a 'tribute both to the organization of the ANC and to the readiness of so many of the rank-and-file of its supporters to resist by peaceful means'. With the Cold War continuing, he felt obliged to expose what he saw as communist attempts to exploit black protests. But he discounted claims of serious communist infiltration of the ANC. Wary of rising anti-white African nationalism, he contrasted the concomitant increasing paranoia of white settlers in Africa with white Australians who, inhabiting a country with 'only a handful of non-Europeans', could afford to be 'dispassionate and detached' in their 'criticism of native policies elsewhere'.⁸⁷ Alexander also continued to write on South Africa. At a 1951 UWA Adult Education Summer School on 'War and Peace', he observed that even in South Africa there was growing recognition of economic interdependence. He pointed to the retardation of a distinctively South African nationalism due to the persistence of Afrikaner-British South African rivalry but also (presciently) predicted that, if present trends continued, then South Africa would become a republic within a few years.⁸⁸ In 1953, he published a book on Commonwealth history.⁸⁹ In

85. B.H. Molesworth (ABC Sydney) to FA 11 November 1949, FA to Molesworth 12 January 1950, UWAA 336/1. On Christmas Eve 1949 Alexander sent three discs to Sydney: 'First Impressions of Cape Town', 'Picnic Politics' and 'With the Voortrekkers'. He considered 'a cricket commentary with a difference' on sport and politics: FA to Molesworth, 24 December 1949, 12 January 1950. The talks, recorded on shellac, have disintegrated: personal communication with Geoff Harris, ABC archivist, 19 November, 17 December 1998.

86. FA, [untitled], ('World Affairs' series), ABC National Broadcast 30 December 1950, recorded at Perth 21 December 1950, FA, 'The South African Scene', ('World Affairs') 30 March 1952, FA, 'The South African Crisis', 1 May 1952, ts., all in ABC Archives, Sydney.

87. FA, 'Recent Developments in S. Africa' ('World Affairs') 16 November 1952, ABC Archives.

88. FA, 'War and Peace', UWA. Adult Education Board, 6 January 1951, UWAA 327, item 4

89. FA, *The Commonwealth Story*, London, 1953.

1957, he urged Australian academics to protest against apartheid and to recognise the danger of a loss of university autonomy in Australia similar to what had happened to universities under apartheid.⁹⁰

In these works, Alexander was more concerned with issues of good governance than with black liberation. However, his South African experiences gave him insights into the nascent black political Renaissance. They also suggested further readings, some of which, such as Eddie Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* (1948), were more attuned to rising black movements.⁹¹ Personal contacts appear to have been significant in this regard. In retrospect, his meetings with black leaders (some of whom would soon be charged with treason) were remarkable for a time when no African colonies had gained independence and when the idea of black power had not been aired in Australia. Whilst raised on a heritage that privileged the history of European 'great men' over histories of indigenous peoples, he was also influenced by the recent independence of India, the significance of which he referred to in 1949 when chiding Menzies on his pro-British foreign policy.⁹² By 1950, the White Man's Club of the British Empire was no more. Alexander's views moved with the times. His willingness to meet on equal terms with both blacks and Afrikaners, each in their own way 'enemies' of British hegemony in the region, and his attention to issues of class and African nationalism, marks him, like Hancock, as a transitional figure in Australian historiography between traditions of Empire and more independent approaches. Australian nationalism still influenced him. On more than one occasion he compared the failings of South African ethnic nationalisms with a 'superior' Australian nationalism based on economic rationalism. His South African writings also indicate a willingness to mix economics and other social sciences with history. This probably was due to the influence of economic historian Edward Shann, who first employed him at UWA,⁹³ and also to the wider tendencies towards such a rapprochement in Anglo-American historiography,⁹⁴ as well as his interest in world affairs. Contemporary history is always a difficult task for an historian to write,⁹⁵ but he had already confronted this in his 1943 study of Australia's role in World War II⁹⁶

90. FA, 'Australians and Academic Apartheid in South Africa' *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 29, 1957, pp. 41-50.

91. Helen Suzman to FA, 3 April 1950, UWAA 337/4/4/1-22

92. FA to R.G. Menzies, 29 April 1949, UWAA 336/1. He also alerted Menzies to a growing trend among Young Liberals that he knew 'towards a more positive, progressive' foreign policy.

93. See Brian de Garis, *op. cit.*

94. See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press, 1997, p. 34.

and in earlier works on North American and European political history. In this connection, it is unfortunate that he never found the time to accept an offer by Oxford University Press to publish a 40,000 word impressionistic analysis of South Africa.⁹⁷

However, Alexander neither engaged with South African history from an Africanist perspective nor succeeded in stimulating substantial Australian research on Africa. His use of Afrikaner, rather than black, personalities and symbols (Smuts and the Voortrekker Monument) to illustrate diversity in the British Commonwealth in a 1951 address suggesting he had not completely renounced the Eurocentrism permeating his 1934 *From Empire to Commonwealth*.⁹⁸ A sense of sympathy with oppressed blacks did not extend to taking up the challenge to help write their hidden history. He was not alone in such views. It was not until later in the decade that the first rumblings of a new, Afrocentric, African history emerged in Europe and independent Africa. Notwithstanding these attitudes, Fred Alexander's African sojourn provides an interesting insight into a little-known aspect of Australian intellectual history, and his writings show a depth of analysis unusual given contemporary white attitudes to black peoples.

Conclusion

Alexander retired in 1966 and took little further part in discourses or debates on South Africa. Other Australians now intervened. Geoffrey Blainey, for instance, wrote a seminal article on the Jameson Raid,⁹⁹ and various academics became involved in the nascent Australian anti-apartheid movement.¹⁰⁰ By the late 1960s, as Australia's policies on immigration and indigenous affairs shifted, so its support for South Africa declined.¹⁰¹ Australia made quiet diplomatic protests

95. See E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Present as History: Writing the History of One's Own Times*, University of London, The Creighton Lecture, 1993.

96. FA, 'Australia's War Effort', in *The British Commonwealth at War*, Knopf, New York, 1943, pp. 365-93.

97. FA to C.A. Badger, Director of Council for Adult Education, 13 April 1950, UWAA 336/1.

98. FA, 'The Commonwealth Story', Opening Address to Refresher Course for Secondary School Teachers, UWA 20-1 April 1951, UWAA 337/4/4/1.

99. Geoffrey Blainey, 'Lost Causes of the Jameson Raid', *Economic History Review*, vol. 18, 1965, pp. 350-66.

100. See C. Jennett, 'Signals to South Africa: the Australian Anti-Apartheid Movement', in C. Jennett and R. Stewart (eds.) *Politics of the Future: the Role of Social Movement*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1989, pp.98-155.

that, after 1973, became more strident and bipartisan. By the 1980s, many academics expressed strong views on apartheid and sanctions.

Australians, Alexander mused in 1950, had 'hitherto taken little advantage' of an 'atmosphere of friendly respect' to them present in South Africa.¹⁰² Contacts remained muted for the next four decades due to politics. Australia's relations with South Africa nevertheless have remained the most intense of its ties with African countries. The twentieth century began with Australians galloping to war for the British Empire on the South African veldt and with Australian Federation. It is ending with fresh attempts at political organisation in Southern Africa and with memories of recent Australian military involvement in Africa (Namibia, Somalia, Rwanda). As the millennium beckons, Australian-South African relations take on new hues. Exchanges between universities, markedly reduced in the period of sanctions, have grown since the first South African free elections in 1994. Trade is again buoyant after the long winter of apartheid. A recent government report on Southern Africa calls on Australia to assist political reform, enhance trade and cultural exchange, and encourage greater public awareness of Africa to counter stereotypes rooted in history that continue to loom in the Australian imagination.¹⁰³ These are important goals to realise given the recent resurgence in Australia of ethnic-based chauvinism and in South Africa of xenophobia. In this context, historians can help counter prejudice by interpreting the broad vistas and values of a country's history, as Alexander sought to do. Yet, the measured mildness of his critique of trends apparent at the dawn of apartheid seems in retrospect quite inadequate, suggesting that sometimes the striving of historians to balance 'objectivity' with principle can be a precarious activity.

101. J. Clark, "'The Wind of Change" in Australia: Aborigines and the International Politics of Race, 1960-1972', *International History Review*, v. 20 no. 1, 1998, pp.89-117.

102. FA, 'Guest of Honour', broadcast on ABC 10 December 1950, ts., ABC Archives, Sydney.

103. *Australia's Relations with Southern Africa*, AGPS, Canberra, 1996.