



A Tribute to Martin Legassic

Noor Nieftagodien

To cite this article: Noor Nieftagodien (2006) A Tribute to Martin Legassic, South African Historical Journal, 56:1, 9-13, DOI: [10.1080/02582470609464960](https://doi.org/10.1080/02582470609464960)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02582470609464960>



Published online: 30 Mar 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 26



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

A Tribute to Martin Legassick

NOOR NIEFTAGODIEN
University of the Witwatersrand

In considering what would be an appropriate way to pay tribute to Martin Legassick, I thought it might be useful to recount some of my most important encounters with him over the past 25 years. In so doing, I hope to begin to convey my deep admiration for Martin as an esteemed comrade, friend and fellow academic.

I first encountered Martin vicariously as one of the pioneers of radical history. It was during the school boycotts of the early 1980s that I was first exposed to Martin's historical writings in the 'people's history' or 'alternative history' classes. As young participants in this mounting mass movement, we were fortunate to be given the opportunity by our political mentors to engage some of the critical texts of radical historians. We were excited to know that such a formidable challenge to the dreary, pro-apartheid textbooks actually existed. These alternative texts included the writings of Eddie Roux, Steve Biko, Neville Alexander, Harold Wolpe and of course Martin Legassick.

These were formative experiences that etched the indelible impression in my mind that history should principally be characterised by its critical interrogation, unsettling of hegemonic views and, above all else, uncovering the role of ordinary people in shaping history and their societies. History was hugely popular at the time, because it was correctly perceived as a central plank in the ideological war being waged against apartheid and capitalism. Every activist was a budding 'alternative' historian, inspired by radical historians such as Martin.

My next encounter with Martin was somewhat more academic, although no less radical. As an undergraduate history student at the University of Cape Town, which had also been influenced by revisionist history, we were exposed in a more systematic manner to the Marxist ideas of the revisionist historians. Their scathing critique of the liberal analysis of apartheid vindicated our endorsement of Marxism. The seminal articles by Legassick and Wolpe demonstrating the relationship between apartheid and capitalism were read, debated and often quoted in undergraduate essays. They also found their way into the reading groups of activists grappling with the challenges posed by struggle against apartheid.

It was also at this time when some comrades, who seemed to revere Martin's analyses and arguments, also began to spread rumours about his political work in London. Stories about his criticism of the 'movement' and suspension from the

African National Congress (ANC) were circulated with the objective of tarnishing his political work. Ironically, those who aimed to inflict malice in spreading these stories attempted to draw a sharp distinction between Martin's position as an academic and political activist. Especially sinister were their efforts to cast aspersions on Martin's reputation by resorting to racist labelling: he, Dave Hemson, Rob Petersen and Paula Ensor were dismissed as a disenchanted group of whites. This also happened to be one of my first experiences of the workings of the Stalinist school of falsification. Fortunately, every allegation manufactured by the ANC/South African Communist Party (SACP) leadership in exile was effectively rebutted in the famous 'Red Pamphlet'.

Perhaps more significantly, we began to receive the theoretical journal, *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, the journal of the Marxist Workers' Tendency (MWT) of the ANC, which gave us the opportunity to read first-hand what these groups were doing. *Inqaba* was filled with insightful articles on South African and world perspectives, international struggles of the working class and theoretical articles explaining the basics of Marxism. To my surprise, however, unknown people such as Richard Monroe, Paul Storey and Basil Hendricks, among others, penned these articles.

At the end of 1985, the MWT made contact with a group of youth activists in Cape Town, led by Zackie Achmat, and including Mike Abrahams, myself and several other leading Cape Youth Congress activists. After some discussion and a visit by a leading member of the international Trotskyist group, the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), to which the MWT was affiliated, we decided to join the MWT of the ANC. In the late 1980s, the British chapter of the CWI, the Militant Tendency, led the anti-poll tax struggles which led to Margaret Thatcher's downfall. In July 1986, I travelled to London to meet this group for discussions. On my arrival I was taken to Richard Monroe's flat and immediately discovered that Richard Monroe was in fact the renowned Martin Legassick.

I have two very distinct memories of Martin during that visit. The first was when he took a group of young activists on what can only be described as a whirlwind tour of London. We galloped through the centre of London for about five hours, at the end of which I was none the wiser about this famous city. Martin seemed almost impatient about having to act as a tour guide to a group of impressionable youngsters. There were obviously far more pressing matters on his agenda.

The reasons for Martin's almost frenetic activity soon became clear. Over the next five weeks or so I spent a considerable amount of time in discussions with Martin and other comrades of the MWT, who were enthralled by reports of the struggles in South Africa. Martin was a leading member of the editorial committee of *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, where his theoretical insights and encyclopaedic knowledge helped to create one of the most important theoretical journals of the liberation movement. It was also in the writing and editing processes that Martin proved far more patient than others. He was always meticulous, rebuking errors

and lazy writing, but always took the time to assist younger comrades to improve their contributions to the journal.

Martin has always been a prolific writer, and apart from his general role as an editor of the journal, he wrote numerous critical articles, including the popular *Lessons of the 1950s* and influential pieces on the nature of the South African crisis and the character of the Stalinist bureaucracy. He also intervened in debates on workerism and populism; these interventions, among others, made *Inqaba ya Basebenzi* and later *Congress Militant* (the paper of the MWT of the ANC) among the most sought-after publications in the liberation movement. Martin's contribution to these publications combined theoretical insight with tireless editorial and lay-out work. In the 1990s, he helped many youth and workers to write about and analyse their experiences for *Congress Militant*.

After his return from exile, Martin was appointed professor of history at the University of the Western Cape. At the same time, he continued to play a leading role in building the MWT of the ANC. In particular, he became heavily involved in the struggles of workers and residents living in the poorest areas of Cape Town. This activity continued and perhaps even increased after 1994, when communities in Khayelitsha and elsewhere were faced with evictions and a lack of housing provision, and were generally let down by the unfulfilled promises of the ANC government.

After the 1994 elections many socialist activists either threw in their lot with the ANC government or withdrew from political activity. A certain disillusionment descended on those who hoped and struggled for a more fundamental transformation of society than that which was achieved during South Africa's transition. In these trying times, Martin retained an unwavering commitment to the struggle of the working class, and continued to organise and educate a new layer of worker and youth activists.

However, the new national and international situation of the 1990s threw many of the forces of the left into crisis. The CWI and the MWT, which had for decades avoided the debilitating splits that characterised other Trotskyist organisations, confronted serious internal divisions for the first time. In South Africa, a number of comrades with whom Martin had collaborated since the 1970s left the organisation. These were exceedingly difficult times for him. In the late 1990s, Martin and several other comrades raised some disagreements on perspectives and method with the leadership of the CWI, which led to an acrimonious debate and eventually our resignation from that organisation. Erstwhile comrades shamefully tried to smear Martin's name by referring to him as an aged white academic who was out of touch with the black working class.

The most effective retort to this deliberate slur came from a textile shop steward, who preferred working with Martin because 'he is honest, hard-working and dedicated to the working class'. In fact, since the late 1990s, Martin has played a key role in the anti-eviction struggles in Khayelitsha, and has also assisted in organising dockworkers. Further, he has for years run political training workshops

with township youth. He also continued to produce the newspaper *Socialist Alternative*, which was by now written mainly by workers and youth.

At the same time, Martin's academic work flourished, and he was approached by Ben Magubane (who he knew from their involvement in the first anti-apartheid campaign at the University of California in the 1960s) to be the lead historian in the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), which had been established to write the history of the struggle between 1960 and 1994. Essop Pahad, an old political rival of Martin's who was responsible for SADET in the president's office, was allegedly not very pleased with Martin's involvement in this officially sanctioned project. However, Magubane persuaded Pahad of the necessity to have one of the country's leading revisionist historians involved in this large exercise to rewrite the country's history. Martin immediately made his mark by arguing for the project to alter its focus from 'the road to negotiations' to 'the road to democracy', which allowed space for varied and competing interpretations of the anti-apartheid struggles. More particularly, room was created for recording and interpreting the contributions of all the main liberation movements.

The first volume of the SADET series, which focuses on the 1960s, correctly highlights the role played by the collective editorial board in its production. However, Martin played a pivotal role in every phase of the project, from conceptualising the volume to editing many of the chapters. Moreover, he meticulously criticised those who held on to erroneous and anachronistic notions about the character of the apartheid state and the armed struggle, and insisted that assertions be backed up by evidence and be based on sound theory. Despite the central role he played in the first volume, Martin was typically entirely prepared to allow the collective to take the credit for the final product.

In reflecting on Martin's numerous and varied contributions to political struggles and academia, it is hard not to marvel at a career dedicated to excellence and commitment to liberation. But we may be in danger of celebrating an illustrious career for what it has achieved, and not sufficiently focusing on what it stands for and means for the future. Before his untimely death Edward Said, and more recently Terry Eagleton, lamented the decline of the intellectual, by which they meant critical thinkers who eschew the false divide between theory and praxis. Under the whip of political reaction that emanated from the seemingly ineluctable march of neoliberal globalisation, too many intellectuals have retreated into the comforts of academia. Locally, Dale McKinley has criticised the growing tendency among intellectuals to become the apologists and spin-doctors of the new powers.

Martin has stood firm against this trend and, in the best traditions of Marxism, continues to embody the unity of theory and praxis. He remains a beacon of hope for those who believe in and struggle for an emancipatory movement. When my son, Élan, heard that Martin was retiring, he was more than a little surprised. 'But', he insisted, 'Martin is always so busy, he must be too young to retire.' One can only hope that my son's generation will be as inspired as my generation has been by Martin's dedication and ideas. Therein lies the possibility of a new generation of intellectuals committed to socialism.

After working closely with Martin for about two decades, I also cannot imagine him retiring, and I hope we will continue to benefit from his invaluable contributions. Martin is almost certainly an average tour guide (although there are rumours that he has even begun to excel in this when taking visitors around Cape Town), but he definitely is a remarkable intellectual and an exemplary revolutionary.