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## Dialectical Dances: Exploring John Dube's Public Life

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### Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between biographical subject and author. By using the example of John Dube, it traces the changing fortunes of the 'the life' at the hands of various writers, during his life but more particularly after his death. It culminates with a discussion of the recently-published first full-length biography of Dube.

**Key words:** John Dube; biography; African National Congress

### Introduction

John Langalibalele Dube, the founding president of the South African Native National Congress one hundred years ago, has only recently become the subject of a full-length biography. Yet he has by no means been neglected in the historiography of twentieth-century African nationalism in South Africa. Several competing images of him emerge. One – perhaps the most striking – posits a clear trajectory to his public life: that he started out with a radical mission, upsetting colonial officials and missionaries in the process, but along the way made compromises and ended his career politically emasculated and a supporter of segregation. Another version, by contrast, stresses his consistency as a moderate voice; yet another finds his ambiguity, his multiple voices, most in evidence.

Eric Hobsbawm devised the notion of a 'dialectical dance' as a way of characterising those who, in times of profound change, had neither a vested interest in maintaining the status quo nor in completely overthrowing it.<sup>1</sup> At various times they danced between different ideologues and extremists; on balance, they tended to be politically moderate. Early twentieth-century South Africa was possibly such a setting: in the aftermath of the South African War, there were sharply competing ideas as to who should be included in and excluded from a state-building project that sought to consolidate the interests of a

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1. E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (New York: Mentor, 1962), 84–85.

modernising industrial economy, whose leaders were themselves divided into squabbling factions. Was someone like John Dube one of these dialectical dancers, balanced awkwardly as a moderate,<sup>2</sup> or else unable to hold a position, swayed by his own constituency as well as those keen to minimise his influence?

The notion of a dialectical dance simultaneously brings the relationship between subject and scholarship into focus: it may be the case that it is choreographed not so much *through* a public life as *outside* of it and/or *afterwards*, as different writers survey the evidence and come to their own various conclusions. Marks alluded to this phenomenon with specific reference to Dube: ‘On the whole, American scholars have heard the voice of Booker T. Washington, British liberals that of Victorian liberalism.’<sup>3</sup> The theme of this article, then, is the ways in which Dube’s public life has been understood and interpreted in the historical/biographical record. It draws inspiration from the work of Lucy Riall, who made a strong case for the need to understand how ‘a life’ is constructed in retrospect and over time, in her study of the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the sources that have been drawn upon, written sketches and more discursive treatments in which Dube is the clear subject are the most important. Reference is also made to selected historical texts which have shaped our image of him, despite the fact that he plays only a bit part in them. Discussion concentrates on published texts, although it should be noted that at least two of Dube’s contemporaries, G.G. Nxaba and R.R.R. Dhlomo, both had intentions of producing biographies and had begun to make sketch notes which survive in the archival record;<sup>5</sup> likewise, there are unpublished theses that have exerted an important influence and merit inclusion for this reason. In addition, reference is made to a certain amount of oral evidence, where this has had some influence in shaping perceptions about Dube’s life.

2. We should, however, note Campbell’s caution that ‘the dichotomy between “moderates” and “radicals” is grossly inadequate for disentangling the web of association’ within the African middle classes. He was referring specifically to the interwar years but the point holds more generally. J. Campbell, ‘T.D. Mveli Skota and the Making and Unmaking of a Black Elite’, paper presented at the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 1987, 20.
3. S. Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-century Natal*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), 69.
4. L. Riall, ‘The Shallow End of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 40, 3 (2010), 375–397.
5. G.G. Nxaba’s 11-page manuscript is in the American Board Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard. Although difficult to date, it was likely written before 1917, the year in which Dube’s first wife, Nokutela Mdimba, died. Nxaba was related to Dube through this marriage. Its focus is on the early years of Ohlange and the struggles of the staff under the Dubes’ leadership to establish the institution. It also recounts details of Dube’s family background to emphasise his prominence – for example, that his father James had once loaned the sum of £1,000 to a white man – and is the only known source to list all of John Dube’s siblings. R.R.R. Dhlomo edited *Ilanga* for nearly 30 years; in his retirement, he was attempting to write a biography of Dube, but struggling under difficult circumstances: ‘no typewriter, and by candle light’, as he told Tom Karis, who interviewed him in 1964 (University of KwaZulu-Natal Malherbe Library, Karis-Carter Microfilm Collection, Reel 9A, Dube section). Both Nxaba and Dhlomo wished to convey a sense of the adversity against which Dube had had to struggle (which they keenly felt themselves), as well as the considerable material accomplishments of his parents.

### The making of John Dube's reputation to 1946

By the time of his death in 1946, John Dube had acquired a towering reputation as a leader of his generation. He had of course enjoyed considerable prominence in public life, most notably as founder of Ohlange (1901) and *Ilanga* (1903), and then as inaugural president of the African National Congress (1912–1917), but three decades had passed since the last of these achievements. Moreover, half of his presidential incumbency has been marked by inactivity, and he had had to relinquish control of both Ohlange and *Ilanga* in the 1920s. While he had remained active at the helm of nationalist politics in Natal and Zululand, he had fallen out with detractors both within and outside Congress and his acceptance of a position on the Natives Representative Council in 1937 divided opinion. How, then, had his unrivalled stature been established?

The tireless efforts of his remarkable mentor, William Wilcox, are of some significance. Wilcox often enters the story of Dube's life as the missionary under whose auspices the young John Dube travelled to America to study in the late 1880s, but then as often departs from it, never to reappear. In fact the two men stayed closely in touch, collaborating on issues as diverse as orthography, mission station rents and the launch a self-help scheme (the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company). In 1909, in order to assist Dube with a fundraising mission abroad, Wilcox wrote an article for the *Missionary Review of the World*.<sup>6</sup> Entitled 'John L. Dube, the Booker Washington of the Zulus', it stressed Dube's Christian duty and achievements at Ohlange. Wilcox and his wife were forced to return to the States in 1918, penniless and defeated in their independent endeavours to set up self-help Christian communities in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Yet they never gave up their support for Dube. Wilcox produced another article on Dube's work in 1927, just months before he died. This time, Dube had been elevated: 'The story of John Dube, the Booker Washington of South Africa'. Again, it was written to assist his protégé on a mission abroad to raise funds for a trades building at Ohlange; again, it was certain to attract attention in one of the most widely-read Christian magazines of the time.<sup>8</sup>

Wilcox's 1927 article, written when its subject was 55, contains an outline biographical narrative, beginning with Dube's struggle with faith and conversion to Christianity at school; his pleading with Wilcox to be allowed to travel to America; the hardship he faced there in his attempts to be educated; his breakthrough as a public speaker and early success on the fundraising circuit; his return to Natal and founding of Ohlange and *Ilanga* and his fortitude in keeping them afloat, despite a severe lack of resources; his presidency of the African National Congress; and his continuing power as a public speaker before numerous influential audiences. The youthful episodes in this account,

6. In *Missionary Review of the World*, 32 (1909), 917–919.

7. The Wilcoxes' missionary endeavours in southern Africa are recounted in Cherif Keita's documentary, *Cemetery Stories: A Rebel Missionary in South Africa* (Carleton College, 2009).

8. W. Wilcox, 'The Story of John Dube, the Booker Washington of South Africa', *Congregationalist* 10 March 1937; University of KwaZulu-Natal Campbell Collections, Killie Campbell Cuttings Book 4, 131. By the time Dube took this trip, he had relinquished his total control of Ohlange but continued to support it in a number of ways.

presented in minutely-detailed direct speech, feature far more prominently than the later adult life.

'Well, John', I asked him, 'what troubles you?'  
'Nothing much', he replied, 'only I want to be a Christian, and you asked us all to come and have a talk with you.'<sup>9</sup>

Wilcox's own sense of achievement was intimately bound up with Dube's, particularly his role in setting the young man on the path that led to subsequent greatness. He thus presented his narrative as a heroic battle with, and eventual conquest of, darkness and adversity, and of fame well-earned. It is an account, moreover, that carries the stamp of great authority, given the closeness of the two men. Lastly, since it recounts Dube's early years in such detail, it has been one of the most important sources of information about this youthful period in his life ever since.

It is of interest that apart from the title, there is no other mention of Booker Washington in this article. By the time of his death in 1915, Washington had become a byword for responsible African American accommodation within the status quo. Dube had sought Washington's endorsement for his work in South Africa as early as 1898; this had finally been conferred in 1910. Although both Dube and Wilcox had tended to rub against the grain far more than Washington had ever done, they undoubtedly admired his achievements (and since both had been bitterly thwarted in their endeavours for want of cash, were perhaps even a little envious of the resources he was able to command). In any event, they were clearly prepared to ally themselves with his memory for present and future purposes.

Whoever penned Dube's entry just a few years later for *The African Yearly Register* (possibly the general editor himself, T.D. Mveli Skota, or another prolific contributor, H.I.E. Dhlomo)<sup>10</sup> did not refer to him in these terms at all. The *Register* is interesting as an example of how the biographical sketch can be used not merely to convey 'factoids' of information about the subject but also to present that subject as he (and in a few rare examples, she) was viewed by contemporaries. Manganyi saw the historical significance of the *Register* as the first attempt by black South Africans to exploit the biographical form for purposes of declaiming a new identity, 'part and parcel of the attempt at creating the New African'. This was an intellectual non-starter for him, because the concept of the 'New African' embraced the ideology of the coloniser and denied the possibility of what he called 'cultural improvisation'.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the only two editions of the *Register* that ever appeared, in 1930 and 1932, together sold 12,000 copies:<sup>12</sup> it was both popular and influential in its own time and has been an important source of information for scholars of modern southern African history ever since.

9. Wilcox, 'The Story of John Dube'. Two years previously, Wilcox had published his memoirs of his first attempts to establish mission work among the Tonga at Inhambane in the 1880s; it is couched in the same immediate style. See his *The Man from the African Jungle* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1925)
10. Couzens discusses the matter of authorship in his *The New African. A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 1.
11. N.C. Manganyi, 'Biography: The Black South African Connection', in A.M. Friedson, ed., *New Directions in Biography*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981), 55–57.
12. Campbell, 'T.D. Mveli Skota', 2.

In the *Register*, Dube's pre-eminence is established in several ways.<sup>13</sup> A double-page spread is devoted to him, consisting of a photograph on the left and text on the right. Of the nearly 300 entries in the 'living' section, 37 are accorded this honour of two-page spreads (in only one case, that of Mangena Mokone, this stretches to four), 23 of them from South Africa and neighbouring territories and the rest from other parts of Africa. The photograph shows a commanding close-up portrait of Dube, impeccably attired, sporting handle-bar moustaches, and looking confidently just past the camera, as if acknowledging an appreciative audience. In his bearing he is every bit the respected leader. The word 'founder' occurs three times in the opening paragraph: this is clearly a source of Dube's great stature, being the *originator* of so much that defined the African middle class: a newspaper, a school, and a political organisation. Importantly, all three were still in existence at the time of publication, unlike countless other efforts that had spluttered into life and failed for lack of resources, something of which Skota himself was all too aware.

The main part of the entry focuses on Dube's tenure as president of Congress, particularly on the delegation he led to Britain in 1914 to protest the passing of the Natives Land Act. In this version, the mission ended because of the declaration of war in August and statements by British politicians that they would continue to press for the rights of Africans – in other words, due to circumstances beyond the control of the delegation. The narrative continues that some time later (date unspecified), Dube resigned from the presidency, a careful formulation leaving his reputation intact. Several subsequent accounts claimed that he had been pushed, rather than had jumped (and it was an episode that Wilcox had misremembered in his contribution, declaring that Dube had served two terms in office).

The final paragraph begins by noting that he has continued to play a leading role in education and politics in Natal. His talents as an orator are recounted, as are his popularity 'with all sections of the community' and his fame among chiefs across the subcontinent. These last points indicate in the *Register's* discourse that Dube had played an important role in reducing ethnic and linguistic divisions and in fostering the nationalist (or even Pan-African) vision so vital to Skota. Interestingly, the description 'progressive' is not used in relation to Dube. Since it acts as 'the ideological touchstone or keyword of the whole book',<sup>14</sup> omission is possibly as suggestive as commission, indicating a certain ambivalence towards him.

### **The making of John Dube's reputation after 1946**

Some writers argue strongly that biography can properly be undertaken only after the death of the subject. This is not merely due to the important matter of defamation and the threat of legal proceedings that might prevent the publication of anything that could potentially be construed as slanderous while the subject is alive. It is also about perspective and the need to assess lasting influence, particularly in the case of well-known or

13. For Dube's entry, see T.D. Mwelil Skota, ed. and comp., *The African Yearly Register. Being an Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who's Who) of Black Folks in Africa* (Johannesburg: R.L. Esson and Co. and The Orange Press, 1932), 144–145.

14. Couzens, *The New African*, 7.

controversial figures.<sup>15</sup> If this last-mentioned point is any guide, then Dube's prospects in the following two decades were not promising. While he emerged a giant from the press coverage immediately after his death, what little was added to the published record thereafter served to question, rather than reinforce, the image of greatness that had been so carefully crafted through his life.

On his death in February 1946, Dube's achievements were extensively recounted in both print and funeral eulogy. However, an observation about funeral eulogy can equally apply to print recollection at the time of death, that it will tend by its very nature to "celebrate, commemorate, honour, dedicate, mourn" and thus *praise* the life of the deceased'.<sup>16</sup> Since this is a widely-accepted convention – whatever one feels about the life, this is not the appropriate time for any sort of dispassionate appraisal – the contribution of eulogy to the making of a posthumous legacy needs to be treated with great caution. In Dube's case, his supporters used the occasion for a concerted attempt at establishing a reputation of heroic, even epic, proportions.

Although most newspapers carried stories about Dube's passing, *Ilanga* (as one would expect) led the tributes, and several pages were given over to praise for his achievements, in editorials, letters, reports of speeches, songs and sonnets. It was not only the amount of space devoted to such praise, but also the prominence of the contributors that was important. Senator Edgar Brookes and H.I.E. Dhlomo headed a long list, Dhlomo setting the tone:

It is the practice in this country to judge the achievements of Africans in a condescending spirit by making a special tape-measure for the blackman. His work is assessed and valued not according to absolute standards but according to the theory that he belongs to a child race – and thus certain allowances and considerations have to be made for him. This attitude, this practice, has done much injury to African endeavour in art, music, and other spheres. The life and achievements of Dr Dube are above this.<sup>17</sup>

Dhlomo then turned to the theme of Dube's greatness, pointing to the many ways in which he had faced up to and conquered adversity, emerging stronger each time. Both Booker Washington and Dube had 'led their people out of the Egypt of oppression and despair' to the Canaan of 'Hope, Solidarity, Self Help, self-realisation and expression'. But whereas Washington had confined his achievements to education, Dube's could be measured across a broad terrain, as 'an educationist, a politician, a publicist, editor, artist'. The difficult task of unifying Africans, which Dube had tackled with great energy, was also something unknown to Washington. Dube was clearly the greater leader.<sup>18</sup>

The young Jordan Ngubane's contribution for *Inkundla yaBantu* in June 1946 probably helped to make Dube's life and work more accessible to his own generation. His assessment

15. On the effects of defamation laws, see P. Alexander, 'The Art of the Impossible: Problems of Literary Biography', lecture presented to Christ's College, Cambridge, November 2003. On this same issue as well as on that of perspective, see H. Lee, *Biography: A Very Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9–10.

16. D. Ochs, cited in A.D. Kunkel and M.R. Dennis, 'Grief Consolation in Eulogy Rhetoric: An Integrative Framework' in *Death Studies*, 27, 1 (2003), 3; emphasis added.

17. *Ilanga*, 23 February, 1946.

18. *Ibid.*

was mixed, even equivocal, already demonstrating a willingness to question the *Ilanga* image. While Dube had been considered a radical at the time of the Bhambatha Rebellion, Ngubane's verdict was definite: he 'was not a revolutionary or a radical. Even his style of writing and angle of approach were not remarkable for their aggressiveness. He wrote in somewhat plaintive and moderate tones in pleading the case of his people'. As his influence grew in white circles, continued Ngubane, so it waned in African ones; he had also been 'chased around' by the ICU. Yet he possessed qualities which made him an impressive figure: 'His enemies said he was stubborn and sometimes capricious. His friends admired his patience, ability to negotiate through difficult situations and his refusal to take defeat.' Above all, 'he was against racial nomination of any sort . . . whether we agree with him or not, he was a distinguished nation-builder'.<sup>19</sup> Here was Dube presented as the flawed hero.

Just two years later, a highly influential work appeared, Edward Roux's *Time Longer than Rope*.<sup>20</sup> Roux, who was active in leftwing politics, knew Dube and had taught at Ohlange, and in this sense he spoke with some authority. He pointed out that 'in his youth [Dube] appears to have been rather more of a radical' than when we encounter him in the heat of the Durban anti-pass protests of 1929. On this occasion, he is described as a 'good boy', watching the unfolding events from the safety his Chevrolet, the protesters taking no notice of him. Later in the narrative, Dube re-appears as a 'traitor' for allegedly supporting the Hertzog Bills. 'But who cared for Dube? He was known to be a Government man', Roux adds.<sup>21</sup> These were fleeting if memorable anecdotes, without serious analytical support or documentary evidence. Yet here was the earliest articulation of that perception that would reappear: Dube had been radical in his youth and had danced rather a long way rightwards through his political career.<sup>22</sup>

R.V. Selope Thema's 'How Congress Began', which appeared in *Drum* in 1953, failed to make any mention at all of Dube, choosing instead to focus on Pixley kaIsaka Seme, who had lately passed away. Given the title of the piece, this seems distinctly odd. Selope Thema had been closely involved in Dube's exit from the presidency in 1917, and may have had his own motives for airbrushing him from his recollections. Nevertheless, this article has been influential as an eyewitness account and has helped to boost Seme's reputation as having founded Congress almost single-handedly.

In *The African Patriots*, published in 1963, Mary Benson portrayed Dube (whom, like Roux and Thema, she knew) in a more charitable light, despite the fact that the ANC had recently embarked on an armed struggle from exile, and the old, 'polite' political methods of the early generation of nationalists were by then heavily under attack. She described Dube on the eve of his assumption of the Congress presidency as 'a determined and practical visionary' who had been moved by the Natal government's failure to provide schooling for Africans. His vision extended to the founding of *Ilanga* and a couple of years

19. J.K. Ngubane, 'Three Famous Journalists I Knew: John Langalibalele Dube', in *Inkundla yaBantu*, 9, 121, Second fortnight, June 1946.
20. E. Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope: The Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (London: Gollancz, 1948). This work was reissued by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1964. Page references are from the later edition.
21. Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, 100, 250 and 288.
22. An observation also noted by R. Hunt Davis in his 'John L. Dube: a South African Exponent of Booker T. Washington', *Journal of African Studies*, 2, 4 (1975/6), 511.



later he 'had courted arrest by protesting outspokenly against the execution of Zulus during the Bambata rebellion of 1906'. Anticipating a theme of later scholarship, Benson claimed that even in 1912, 'first and foremost Dube was a Zulu patriot . . . [this] was both a virtue and a disadvantage; however, for the time being the Native National Congress saw only his virtue'. By the 1920s, she continued, Dube had become a 'moderate', though with strong words against government policy.<sup>23</sup>

Benson's work was part of a wave of emerging Africanist scholarship, whose primary impetus was the achievement of statehood across the continent. Nationalism and the nature of resistance to colonial rule were prominent, linked themes in this literature<sup>24</sup> and served as the context for the first sustained evaluations of Dube's career, by Shula Marks in the United Kingdom and Manning Marable and R. Hunt Davis in America. Marks's *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906–8 Disturbances in Natal* was published in 1970; her interest in Dube's role was developed in an article in the new *Journal of Southern African Studies* and subsequently in a series of interlinked essays on African leadership in Natal.<sup>25</sup> Marable's doctoral thesis for the University of Maryland was submitted in 1976; it was never published, although shorter contributions, partially based on it, were.<sup>26</sup> Davis's study appeared as an article in another recently-established periodical, the *Journal of African Studies*, in 1975/6.<sup>27</sup> Marks's first article in part positioned itself against Davis's work, which in turn drew substantially on Marable's work in progress. Thus, although it was the last in this trilogy actually to appear, Marable's contribution is dealt with first.

Marable's thesis is notable for several reasons. As an African American, he brought an important 'subaltern' perspective to his work. In addition, he interviewed a number of people who had worked with and known Dube, such as Gideon Mvawkwendlu Sivetye and William Ireland. Although he was also constrained in the amount of research he was able to complete in South Africa, he concentrated his attention on hitherto-unexplored documentary sources in America (at least for this subject matter), and as a result those chapters tracing Dube's American years and connections are the strongest. His work had little to say about Dube's involvement in Congress, focusing as it did on his educational endeavours.

Marable stressed the formative influences of Booker Washington and a philosophy that involved subscribing to 'a pragmatic alliance with white paternalists'.<sup>28</sup> He then traced

23. M. Benson, *The African Patriots. The Story of the African National Congress of South Africa* (Chicago, New York and London: Encyclopaedia Britannica Press, 1963), 29 and 61.

24. Seminal contributions include G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent African. John Chilembwe and the Nyasaland Uprising of 1915* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958); T. Hodgkin, *African Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (London: Frederick Muller, 1956); B. Davidson, *Africa in Modern History: The Search for a New Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), and P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism and South Africa: The African National Congress 1912–1952* (London: C. Hurst, 1970).

25. S. Marks, 'The Ambiguities of Dependence: John L. Dube of Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1, 2 (1975), 162–180; Marks, 'The Ambiguities of Dependence'.

26. M. Marable, 'African Nationalist: The Life of John Langalibalele Dube' (Phd thesis, University of Maryland, 1976); M. Marable, 'A Black School in South Africa', *Negro History Bulletin*, 34, 4 (1974), 258–261; and M. Marable, 'Booker T. Washington and African Nationalism', *Phylon*, 35, 4 (1974), 398–406. It is of interest that this last-mentioned work was Marable's first exploration of biography, to which he returned much later: his biography of Malcolm X was published just days after his death in March 2011.

27. Davis, 'John L. Dube', 497–528.

28. Marable, 'Booker T. Washington', 401.

Dube's attempts to establish Ohlange and keep it running with the help of his American Committee and various other American philanthropists. His judgement of Dube's legacy was a harsh one: he was 'leader of the conservative Black nationalist movement . . . due in large measure to his own limited social vision and lack of independent economic funds'. In embracing a cautious, pro-capitalist ideology and rejecting Gandhian passive resistance, Dube encouraged his followers to accept segregation. Thus, 'the tactics of Natal's small Black middle class helped to create the anti-humane regime in Southern Africa'.<sup>29</sup> There had been redeeming features to Dube's early position – in America in the 1890s, his rhetoric had often been virulently anti-colonial, for example – but ultimately Dube sold out. Marable was thus adding weight to the 'Roux view'.

Davis, like Marable, saw Washington as a major influence on Dube. Indeed, his study was designed around two related questions, why such a passionate Washingtonian exponent came from Natal, and why that individual was John Dube. He saw parallels in the two men's lives and emphasised the American origins of the African National Congress, in part explaining in these terms what he considered its early moderation and responsibility. He argued strongly that Dube must be seen 'primarily as an educator whose political activities formed an extension of a social philosophy founded on education'. In contrast to Marable, Davis concluded that he 'demonstrated a remarkable consistency throughout his public life . . . that can best be understood when considered in the context of his conscious adoption of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, strategy and tactics'.<sup>30</sup> (It is worth noting that Peter Walshe was probably the first to query the contradiction in such an argument: 'although Dube was . . . an admirer of Washington, the very formation of Congress as a permanent organisation to defend African interests was more in keeping with Du Bois's methods'.<sup>31</sup>)

Marks's study of Dube was less concerned with positing an American connection than with situating Dube in the changing political economy of South Africa, something that neither Marable nor Davis had attempted. She introduced what became the influential concept of 'the ambiguities of dependence', in order to characterise what she saw as apparent contradictions not only in Dube's publicly-declared position, but in those of other twentieth-century Natal/Zululand leaders as well. As far as Dube was concerned, her verdict differed greatly from all the foregoing writers: he was remarkably consistent, not in his moderation and attachment to Washington but in demanding racial equality and pressing for African unity, both of these 'revolutionary' aspirations in the early twentieth century and sounding distinctly outspoken even in the 1940s.<sup>32</sup>

Yet his structural location as a 'powerless and dependant "intercalary leader" mediating between two unequal societies'<sup>33</sup> was what underlay his apparent shifts between defiance and acquiescence. Rejecting the somewhat literal reading of documentary evidence to be

29. Marable, 'African Nationalist', 183 and iii.

30. Davis, 'John L. Dube', 513 and 527. It may be noted that Davis also surveys a number of works discussing Dube.

31. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, 13. Recent scholars have cautioned against drawing too bold a distinction between what were often tendencies, rather than oppositions, in African American thought: see W.J. Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

32. Marks, 'The Ambiguities of Dependence', 166.

33. *Ibid.*, 167; she drew the concept of 'intercalary leader' from the work of Donovan Williams.

found in both Marable's and Davis's work, she instead presented a complex analysis of Dube's adherence to Washington's philosophy (in particular the need for industrial education), arguing that while this was engrained in his make-up, it was also a 'mask' he employed in order to push the bounds, striking out independently of state control at Ohlange and on *Ilanga lase Natal*. Nowhere was this more evident than in his assumption of the presidency of the South African Native National Congress, when in his acceptance address he spoke with 'two voices to his two different audiences', whites and Africans. To the former, he stressed his adherence to Washington and his cautious approach to change, while to the latter he stressed the urgency of political emancipation.<sup>34</sup>

In her later work, Marks explored further this idea of speaking to different audiences, relating it not only to Dube's politics but to the vested interests of different scholars, as noted above. She also added a further dimension, linking back to Mary Benson's observations: Dube's vacillation between a broadly-based *African* nationalism and a narrowly-based *Zulu* nationalism, a product of the increasingly restrictive policies of the state and his casting-about for modernising allies.<sup>35</sup> Her overall conclusion was that it was the world, rather than the individual, that had changed: Dube straddled two distinct eras of South African history, one rooted in a slow-paced agrarian past and the other in an aggressively industrialising one. Under such circumstances, 'his strategy and ideology were outflanked by the times'.<sup>36</sup> Marks's argument is that the structural ambiguity that Dube exhibited (as well as A.W.G. Champion, Solomon kaDinuzulu and M.G. Buthelezi, her other subjects) is located in society, rather than the individual. One can therefore observe that her concept of ambiguity and Hobsbawm's of 'dialectical dance' both share the sense of a tension between opposing positions – Marks uses the notion of a 'tightrope' to convey this – but with one difference: while Marks tends slightly toward privileging structure over agency, Hobsbawm tends toward privileging agency over structure.

The years from the mid-1980s were a period of considerable deceleration in Africanist scholarship, as the phase of optimism about independence gave way to a more sombre period of reflection on the 'failure of development'. It was also one which saw an intensification of the liberation struggle within South Africa and the onset of negotiations with the exiled ANC; Rassool's observation that 'there is always a struggle for control over the story of a life' holds for any act of biography, but is especially apt for these years, in two respects.<sup>37</sup> First, as Lodge noted, the early 1990s witnessed 'the birth of a new genre of iconographic literature devoted to the lives and achievements of great black South Africans', an important development in view of the fact that (book length) political biography in South Africa up to that point had remained almost exclusively white.<sup>38</sup> Brian Willan's detailed and insightful study of Solomon Plaatje, published in 1984, was then virtually the only exception.<sup>39</sup> Among those subjected to biographical treatment – sometimes only by way

34. Marks, 'The Ambiguities of Dependence', 175.

35. Marks, 'The Ambiguities of Dependence', 68–73.

36. Marks, 'The Ambiguities of Dependence', 165.

37. C.S. Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa' (Phd thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2004), 46.

38. T. Lodge, 'Paper Monuments: Political Biography in the New South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (1993), 249.

39. B. Willan, *Solomon Plaatje: A Biography* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984).

of a preface to collected speeches or writings – were Monty Naicker, Yusuf Dadoo, Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo. Notably, all were post-World War II leaders of the Congress Alliance: earlier generations of leadership were barely mentioned.

Yet when they were (and this is the second observation on Rassool's point), it was to claim them as emblems of a more recent struggle. In Dube's case, examples included the contributions of Herbert Mnguni and E.S. Reddy. Mnguni drew explicit lessons from Dube's life for the cause of Black Liberation (the need for education in preparation for taking control of the country, the need for a voice in the media, the need to be courageous in the face of oppression)<sup>40</sup>. E.S. Reddy wrote extensively on the role that Indian nationalists had played in the South African struggle. In one article, he argued that a 'close friendship and mutual respect' had developed between Dube and Gandhi during the latter's time in South Africa. He teased out the parallels in their lives, born within a couple of years of each other; travelling abroad to study; founding settlements, newspapers and political movements; and admiring Booker Washington. These parallels, in Reddy's work, supported something more:

There was frequent social contact between the inmates of the Phoenix Settlement and the Ohlange Institute, as well as the mission at Inanda. Zulus and whites used to attend Gandhiji's prayer meetings at Phoenix. He was often seen playing with Indian and Zulu children.<sup>41</sup>

Whatever its historical accuracy, Dube was being called upon as an ally in promoting the nonracialism that was so vital an ideological position at a time when the ANC was embarking on negotiations with the South African government.

Such political claims did not go uncontested. As the struggle between the United Democratic Front and Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's Inkatha movement intensified through the 1980s, especially in Natal, so Inkatha too made concerted efforts to claim Dube (and other early ANC leaders) as an ally. In many of his speeches, Buthelezi used Dube's life and achievements as a measure of his own, simultaneously claiming the 'old ANC' as Inkatha's forerunner. Nowhere was this clearer than on the occasion of Inkatha assuming ownership of *Ilanga* in 1987:

[*Ilanga's*] founder was the Revered Dr John Dube . . . The Black heroes of those times came together, and in 1912 established the African National Congress . . . Our John Dube was elected President in that historical event.

Right from the outset of Black politics in modern South Africa the heroes of our past set their eyes on gaining a rightful place for the sons and daughters of Africa in the land of their birth. The old ANC drew everybody together and committed itself to waging the struggle for liberation on every possible front . . . We must take that struggle everywhere, to every point. Black newspapers must follow that struggle wherever it goes. I struggle in the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly. I struggle in the KwaZulu/Natal Indaba. I struggle in the white universities. I struggle against the captains of industry . . .<sup>42</sup>

40. H.M. Mnguni, 'Dr John Langalibalele Dube', *Matatu*, 3/4, 2 (1988), 149–156.

41. E.S. Reddy, 'Mahatma Gandhi and John Dube', *The Leader*, 5 June 1992, and then as chapter 4 of E.S. Reddy, *Gandhiji's Vision of a Free South Africa* (New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House, 1995).

42. 'A Few Remarks Announcing Inkatha's take-over of *Ilanga*', address by Mangosuthu G. Buthelezi, Chief Minister of KwaZulu, President of Inkatha and Chairman, The South African Black Alliance, 15 April 1987. University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban: Natal Collection. A larger-scale attempt to situate Dube in a

### Images of Dube after 1994

As the party of which he was the inaugural president swept to power in 1994, Dube's reputation was bound to grow, alongside his visibility. In the historic elections of that year, Nelson Mandela chose to vote at Ohlange, a moment inscribed in his autobiography:

I voted at Ohlange High School in Inanda, a green and hilly township just north of Durban, for it was there that John Dube, the first president of the ANC, was buried. This African patriot had helped found the organisation in 1912, and casting my vote near his graveside brought history full circle, for the mission he began eighty-two years before was about to be achieved.

As I stood over his grave, on a rise above the small school below, I thought not of the present but of the past...<sup>43</sup>

John Dube's name began appearing everywhere: in speeches (for election victories, for Youth Day, at the inauguration of the African Union, in commemorations of the 90th anniversary of the ANC),<sup>44</sup> in the press<sup>45</sup> and as it mushroomed exponentially, on the internet. His cyber-presence became firmly established on sites as diverse as Wikipedia (where we are still thoughtfully warned that 'this article may require clean up...'), the ANC's John Dube page, Oberlin University (where a project was run to publicise this suddenly-famous alumnus), the Dictionary of African Christian Biography, South African History Online, the New African Movement and KwaZulu-Natal Literary Tourism, as he was brought into service to promote the development of a new form of cultural/heritage

tradition leading up to Inkatha can be found in E.D. Gasa, 'John L. Dube, his *Ilanga lase Natali* and the Natal African Administration, 1903–1910' (Phd thesis, University of Zululand, 1999). Gasa, who had earlier tried unsuccessfully to submit his work to the University of Natal, asserted that Dube was 'very instrumental in resuscitation by the Zulu royal family of traditional forms and active collaboration by all educated Africans in traditional and cultural activities, to which many present entities including Zulu Cultural Council or Inkatha owe their origin' (323). This contest to claim a legitimate pedigree of nationalist history for Inkatha was part of a wider one: see S. Klopper, "'He Is My King, but He Is Also My Child': Inkatha, the African National Congress and the Struggle for Control of Zulu Cultural Symbols', *Oxford Art Journal*, 19, 1 (1996), 53–66.

43. N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Johannesburg: Macdonald Purnell, 1994), 610.

44. See for example Mandela's Election Victory Speech, 4 May 1994, at [http://www.sas.upenn.edu/african\\_Studies/Articles\\_Gen/Election\\_Victory\\_15727.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/african_Studies/Articles_Gen/Election_Victory_15727.html); 'Letter from the President: African Union will see the Dawning of a Brighter Day', ANC Today 5 July 2002, at <http://lists.anc.org.za/pipermail/anc/2002/000056.html>; 'Speech by Popo Molefe on Youth Day' Issued by NorthWest Communication Service at <http://polity.org.za/html/govdocs/speeches/1995/sp0616a.html>; Palo Jordan, 'How an oak tree grew from a tiny acorn planted early last century (ANC 90th anniversary)', *Sunday Times* online edition, 6 January 2002 at <http://www.suntimes.co.za/2002/01/06/anc/anc01.asp>; all accessed 23 June 2003. (Of course over the period since 2003, internet addresses have changed and material has been rearranged or has disappeared. I have printouts as evidence for these examples.)

45. See for example T. Lodge, 'John Langalibalele Dube, a Pioneer Visionary', *Financial Mail Millennium Issue*, 17 December 1999, at <http://secure.financialmail.co.za/report/millennium/cc.htm>, accessed 21 January 2012; T. Masemola, 'The Man who "woke up" a Nation', *Natal Witness Archive*, at [http://www.pmb.history.co.za/portal/witnesshistory/custom\\_modules/TheWayWeWere/The%20man%20who%20woke%20up%20a%20nation.pdf](http://www.pmb.history.co.za/portal/witnesshistory/custom_modules/TheWayWeWere/The%20man%20who%20woke%20up%20a%20nation.pdf), accessed 21 January 2012. Profile: John Dube. *Metrobeat*, 49 (2003), 20.

tourism.<sup>46</sup> With the notable exception of the Oberlin material (which uses primary sources and relies heavily on Marable), the content of these sites is heavily derivative and makes little attempt at evaluation, preferring to present the ‘factual’ outlines of Dube’s life.

The new government also set about the task of creating its own canon of ‘great and good’ by instituting an awards system which included the Order of Luthuli, for contributions to the achievement of ‘democracy, human rights, nation building, justice and peace, and resolution of conflict’. In 2005, in the third batch of annual awards, Dube was posthumously awarded the Order of Luthuli in Gold.<sup>47</sup> His reinstatement as the heroic nation-builder seemed complete.

One scholarly treatment that appeared in 2001 paid no attention to any of this new-found celebrity status, choosing instead to focus on one incident in Dube’s life before he was famous: his attempt to become pastor of the Inanda Congregational Church in 1895, despite the fact that he was not ordained. Its intent was to show that alliances and divisions at Inanda were far more complex than along the expected ‘Christian-traditionalist’ lines; Dube had the backing of the local chief in his attempts to assert his authority, while his rival favoured the maintenance of white mission control.<sup>48</sup>

Whether treating Dube as a biographical subject or as a historical one (that is, as a representative of a class and/or race and an age), the writers and speakers discussed thus far have focused more or less exclusively on Dube’s public record. Yet Tom Lodge’s observation in the preface to his *Mandela: A Critical Life*, that ‘Mandela’s domestic or private life cannot easily be separated or compartmentalised from his political or public career’<sup>49</sup> surely has wider application than to this most charismatic of leaders; it certainly has particular relevance in the case of John Dube. However, it also masks the point that conventions in biography-writing have changed. (Marable, for example, noted certain details of Dube’s private life but dismissed them as entirely unimportant.) Lodge’s statement could only have been made in more recent times, as Hamilton makes clear:

In Western multicultural societies embracing new technologies such as the Internet, biographical curiosity and information drove or accompanied every advance in the 1990s, humanizing portraiture to an extent inconceivable a century before, when prominent people were depicted as matchstick men.<sup>50</sup>

46. For Wikipedia, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Langalibalele\\_Dube](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Langalibalele_Dube); for Oberlin, see <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Dube/Dube.htm>; for the entry in the Dictionary of African Christian Biography, see [http://www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/dube\\_john.html](http://www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/dube_john.html); for the ANC’s John Dube Page, see <http://www.anc.org.za/showpeople.php?p=31>; for Dube at The New African Movement, see Miranda Perry at <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/general/student-essays/perry.htm>, and for KwaZulu-Natal Literary Tourism see [http://www.literarytourism.co.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=55:john-dube&catid=13:authors&Itemid=28](http://www.literarytourism.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55:john-dube&catid=13:authors&Itemid=28). All of these were accessed 12 January 2012. (As above, internet addresses have changed and material has been rearranged or has disappeared; while I have printouts as evidence for these examples, the most recent addresses are given here.)
47. On the Order of Luthuli, see <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?reid=774>, accessed 17 January 2012; Dube’s full citation is at [http://dev.absol.co.za/Presidency/orders\\_list.asp?show=489](http://dev.absol.co.za/Presidency/orders_list.asp?show=489), accessed 17 December 2011.
48. H. Hughes, ‘Doubly Elite: Exploring the Life of John Langalibalele Dube’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27, 3 (2001), 445–458.
49. T. Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xi.
50. N. Hamilton, *Biography, a Brief History*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 237–238.

This trend began before the 1990s, reflecting a change in our attitudes to privacy, and perhaps a more sceptical attitude to authority, so that biography ceased to perform the function of instructing others as to how to live their lives. It would not be far wrong to claim that it is now *de rigueur* in biography-writing to present subjects' private lives as well as their public achievements for scrutiny: failure to do so leaves a sense of a task incompletely done.

In Dube's case, connecting public and private lives has particular significance, a proposition that is at the centre of the new biography, *First President*.<sup>51</sup> It argues that many of his public achievements rested on significant aspects of his personal life, to the extent that it would not be possible to tell the story of the one without referring to the other. An early example is his conversion to Christianity, a pivotal moment. It was already well established that he had been born into a second-generation Christian family in Inanda; his father James was one of the earliest ordained African Congregational ministers. Yet in that church, great emphasis was placed on personal commitment, not merely on background. Conversion thus took on very profound importance. Mokoena shows clearly in her study of Magma Fuze<sup>52</sup> that conversion was an intellectual as well as a religious turning point: it changed one's entire orientation. Dube's conversion occurred before he had even left high school years; they are in consequence recounted in some detail in *First President*.<sup>53</sup>

Most of the scholarly literature on the history of African Christian communities still conveys the impression that they were very largely cut off from traditionalist society. Again, John Dube's own family history questions this interpretation. His father James was known by another name (Ukakonina) because he was related to the Qadi chief, Mqhawe, and accepted as a leading member of the chiefly inner circle. Moreover, John Dube's elder brother, the first-born of the family, dropped out of school and reverted to traditionalism, establishing a homestead at Inanda and in time became an *induna* of Mqhawe's successor, Mandlakayise. Prophetically perhaps, his name was Africa. *First President* argues that the relationship between the brothers was critical at the time of the Bhambatha Rebellion in 1906. The old chief Mqhawe showed strong signs of supporting the rebellion; even though Dube sympathised with the rebels, he knew that if Mqhawe did come out in support, his new school and his new newspaper would be doomed. He and Africa together helped to persuade Mqhawe to pull back.<sup>54</sup> It has often been claimed that the Dube family was the exception that proved the rule about Christians and traditionalists. It is more likely to be the case that this family is (currently) better-documented, and that if our gaze is directed to both domestic as well as public evidence in the historical record, many more such instances will be discovered.

There is a further example from *First President* that is probably of greater significance. The ending of Dube's period of office as Congress president in 1917 has been always been surrounded by a certain puzzlement in the literature, whether he was ousted or resigned, and over precisely what issue, organisational laxity or supposed support for the principle of

51. H. Hughes, *First President. A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jacana Press, 2011).
52. H. Mokoena, *Magma Fuze, the Making of a Kholwa Intellectual* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011).
53. Hughes, *First President*, 31–40.
54. *Ibid.*, 124–125.

segregation. *First President* attempts a different explanation, positing a combination of public failure (the costly and fruitless delegation that Dube had led to Britain in 1914, followed by three years of inactivity caused largely by Congress's undertaking that it would cease agitation for rights while the war was on) and personal disgrace. He and his wife Nokutela (whose contribution to the 'redemptive mission' represented by Ohlange and *Ilanga* is told here for the first time) had been unable to have children; the pressures of social and private expectation proved too great for Dube, who caused a local scandal by making a school girl pregnant. While the baby died and Dube was absolved of any wrongdoing by a school investigative committee, it meant the end of the Dubes' marriage. Nokutela Dube lived out her remaining days in the Eastern Transvaal, until her death in early 1917. The argument in *First President* is that she had been well known and liked in Congress circles, and her death crystallised a great deal of dissatisfaction with Dube (not least a lingering distaste for his moral lapse, which of course at that time would not have been aired in public, but of which his colleagues would have been well aware). Thus, at the critical Congress meeting in February 1917, he was given no option other than to resign, and not necessarily for reasons to do with his stance on segregation, which was consistent with what it had been and remained all his life: he rejected it, unless South Africa could be split into two equal halves (which he knew to be impossible).<sup>55</sup>

Thus, key political moments in Dube's career (or at least it is argued in *First President*) can be explained not so much in terms of a dialectical dance between contending political positions as between public and private constraints and possibilities. Ohlange was in many ways a casualty of Dube's transgression and by the time he married Angelina Khumalo in 1920, he knew that he would have to relinquish control of the school, a defining moment of bitterness for him. Yet even through the long 'post' period of his life (post-president, post-head of Ohlange) which is most usually thought of as his 'conservative' period (participation in state-sponsored structures and in the Joint Councils; acceptance of an honorary PhD from UNISA), Dube was unwavering in his calls for a colour-blind franchise – not for different, racially exclusive organs of government but for the House of Assembly and the Senate of South Africa. Conversely, even from his younger, supposedly 'radical' years, one can find somewhat conservative views, on women's 'place' and on racial mixing, for example. What thus emerges is a 'mix of defiance and compliance, radicalism and moderation, broadness and narrowness of vision'<sup>56</sup> throughout his life. E.P. Thompson's observation on Thomas Carlyle seems particularly appropriate to Dube: 'it was within the social dialectic of this time that progressive human feelings might keep company in the same man with reactionary thought'.<sup>57</sup> This was a complex dance indeed.

## Conclusion

A figure like John Dube himself represents a critical part of the process by which biography becomes possible in southern Africa: the spread of literacy (he was a newspaper editor as well as a highly respected author), the teachings of missionaries (he was an ordained

55. *Ibid.*, 189–197.

56. *Ibid.*, 259.

57. E.P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 30.



minister), the very disaggregation of societies into ‘individual beings’ (he was a biographer himself, producing the first life of Isaiah Shembe, not long after the appearance of the Skota’s *Register*).<sup>58</sup> As subject himself of ‘biographical work’, Dube became a figure of heroic proportion in his lifetime. The critical scholarship after 1946 sometimes portrayed him as either flawed hero or even anti-hero, although much of it was more intent on analysing how history had made him, rather than the other way around. Even before 1994, however, his memory was once more being put to political use, culminating in his full reinstatement as nation-builder in the New South Africa.

What does *First President* add to all this? In attempting to present a fuller view of Dube’s life, perhaps what it does is to show ‘the capacity of even a flawed man to struggle nobly against the misfortunes of life’<sup>59</sup> – for arguably that is what Dube was, and that is what he did. Yet in appearing to add to our understanding by including the dimension of the private life, biography can also appear ‘to be omitting nothing [and yet] has emerged from a process of choices’.<sup>60</sup> The point is that in reality, biography is always provisional, and for that reason, Dube’s reputation will go on being made and remade.

58. J. Dube, *uShembe* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1936).

59. Richard Holmes’s comment on what he considered Samuel Johnson’s central purpose of biography to be. R. Holmes, *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 194.

60. Lee, *Biography*, 10.