

Kevin Shillington, *Patrick van Rensburg: Rebel, Visionary and Radical Educationist. A Biography*

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For a certainty there has been only one van Rensburg in this country and maybe no one comparable in the rest of Southern Africa. But let's see what can be learnt from the new book, which begins at the end with the sad cover photo, and not at the exhilarating beginning, with the small back cover photo of Botswana's founding President Seretse Khama's visit to Swaneng Hill School founded by Van Rensburg in Serowe?

The sponsors, the Foundation for Education with Production, may have told Kevin Shillington, the author, that they wanted a straight up and down, no-frills biography with no side turnings. Thanks to them and the author, this is what we have got, a book which should provide the basis for further discussion and debate both for van Rensburg's admirers and his detractors.

The book falls naturally into three parts, the first covering Patrick's earlier years in South Africa, Leopoldville (Democratic Republic of Congo) and London and his slow journey down the length of Africa to this country, largely cobbled together from his draft autobiography. With the second part comes Patrick's galvanising first years in Serowe. Here the story gallops along at fine pace with the establishment of the three schools -Swaneng, Shashe, Vice-President Masire's encouraging involvement in a workcamp, Madiba, the first co-op society since 1909, the hotel, the Brigades and Boiteko -all being described by a veritable roll call of fascinating names.

In the third part, disillusioned, van Rensburg moves from Serowe to Gaborone to re-establish *Mmegi* as a platform for his ideals, throws all his energies into getting education with production established, but meets with only flickering success here and in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Then the names begin to fall away, the lights have gone out, and he is left in his austere rooms above *Mmegi* building. And so it ends as it began, perhaps appropriately, at the home he first built for himself and his wife Liz, in Serowe, with younger son Mothusi.

When Patrick and Liz started work at Swaneng, the country had just four secondary schools taking students through to Form Five (two being recently established), three tribal junior secondary schools in Mochudi, Kanye and Molepolole, and 214 primary schools. In 1966, which could also have been 1961 or 1963, it had only five citizen Batswana qualified to teach Form Five.

Whilst hoping to establish a secondary school in Serowe, the van Rensburgs would have known that Serowe had no secondary school of any kind, although a Teacher Training College was soon to be established in 1963. They must also have known that the London Missionary Society only managed to establish a secondary school in the country a hundred years or so after Dr David Livingstone's first rudimentary school at Kolobeng. They would also have been aware that it took the British colonial administration 80 years before it got around to establishing a secondary school in Bechuanaland Protectorate (colonial Botswana), in the new Gaborone, as part of its Independence package. Could Pat and Liz, alone and without backing, do what was not done during those long years?

What sort of a start did they have in Serowe? It could have been a shocker. It is, at the least, open to question whether a few years later the newly independent government, so in thrall to South Africa, would have been as accommodating as the Protectorate administration. For it, a troublemaker in one country was a troublemaker in all, and there could hardly be any question that Pat had been, for the apartheid South African government, a really major troublemaker at home and in London.

Interestingly, Serowe's traditional elite -Seretse, Leapeetswe and Sekgoma Khama and Lenyeletse Seretse -all welcomed the initiative, as later did Kgosi Linchwe II of Bakgatla and Kgosi Seepapitso of Bangwaketse. The British District Commissioners, Dave Robinson and Eustace Clark, and the District Officer, Jon Harlow, were equally supportive.

The educational context in which Pat and Liz hoped to ground their new project was dismaying. A quick glance suggests that it wouldn't ground at all. Educational policy, both pre-and post-Independence, was all over the place. In 1963 the British administration made it known that it was concentrating its scarce resources on the new Gaborone Secondary School, which meant that the three tribal junior schools would be demoted to primary. In 1965 the Protectorate government, wilfully, proposed to establish its own secondary school in Serowe, making two there, but was persuaded by Patrick's protest (assisted by District Commissioner Eustace Clark) to drop the idea.

Further, in 1965 the government rejected Patrick's application to start a second secondary school in Maun and instead allowed the American Methodists to do so. Ironically, they soon ran into financial problems and the school had to be taken over by the government. Soon afterwards the government double-backed on itself and agreed that Patrick could start his second school in Shashe. In early 1967 the government said that it was taking over secondary education.

Overall, these conflicting decisions point to a degree of policy confusion and oscillating views which was perhaps not so surprising, because never before had there been even the mildest controversy about education. In sum, the instincts of many of the new political leaders and many in the civil service were deeply distrustful of van Rensburg, but under the circumstances they had little choice but to approve his early initiatives, albeit reluctantly.

On the other hand, I had always assumed that the old Tiger Kloofers would have looked at van Rensburg's initiatives positively, perhaps seeing Swaneng as a reinvention of their own school. I was wrong. Shillington quotes Masire as explaining that 'many in the cabinet did not trust him'. Most had attended Tiger Kloof and knew that 'the Bantu Education Act of 1953 was aimed at training black people for manual and menial tasks'. Was van Rensburg trying to replicate the South African system in Botswana? Besides this, he was challenging their perceptions of what entailed 'a good education'.

The country may have paid heavily for that back-to-front perception. The Tiger Kloof ethos in the 1960s, therefore, led not to Swaneng but directly to the elitist Maru a Pula of 1972 in Gaborone (which Shillington does not mention), with that school's first intake including the children of the President and Vice President. Were this not enough, one of the first two Ministers of Education, KP Morake, was vociferously opposed to Swaneng and van Rensburg. (Gaositwe Chiepe was an exception throughout, being a van Rensburg supporter).

All this meant that, with Maru a Pula's establishment, Pat's goose was effectively cooked, as it was later to be cooked in Zimbabwe and South Africa when people in those now-independent countries came to the same conclusion as this country's Tiger Kloofers. Pat's final denouement came when he joined the central committee of the Botswana National Front (BNF) in 1997. For the government that really was the last straw. Thereafter, it let him exhaust himself banging away at an 'education with production' door that was never going to open. The end? Not at all.

To get a haircut today, I go to a Zimbabwean barber. When I need a carpenter, an electrician or a plumber, I am very likely to end up with a Zimbabwean, the 'manual and menial' people, presumably, who can earn a living with their hands! Van Rensburg had a dream to turn Serowe into a huge production centre with people of this kind. He came close to achieving that aim. Take Vernon Gibberd's marvellous dairy production brigade of the late 1960s/early 1970s. Here was a low-cost project with a daily milk production of 450 litres a day from a fifty strong Friesian herd. This was a very small amount of course compared to Sunnyside's later, reported 9,000 litres a day, but with government denying it the support it needed, it went bust. The milk was pasteurised, cooled to four degrees and sold in retail packs in Serowe, Palapye and Gaborone. Cream, butter, yogurt and cheese were also produced. The project was without its own motor transport and for its marketing used mule-drawn carts, the local bus and the mixed goods train. It had a 7kVA generator for lighting and cooling.

Compare that achievement with Serowe's recently collapsed P10 million dairy project. And let's not forget the shameful P200-250 million Milk Afric project in Lobatse. It might all have been so different had the government been more receptive to new ideas, less conservative, and had deemed van Rensburg to be more of an aid than a threat. Instead, it saw in him only a revolutionary, a socialist/communist who got donor support from abroad, a perverter of youth and a purveyor of a Bantu-style education!

It is possible that, with time, he will be forgotten. Yesterday is already long gone. It is also possible, however, that in future the country's unemployable youth will come to see Pat as an inspiration, the one and only person who battled to equip them with the 'manual and menial' skills they would need in later life. In which case, the ever-closed door will one day be forced open. For the greedy, the acquisitive and unnecessarily rich, he will always be a reproach.

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