



Jack Simons: Teacher, Scholar, Comrade

A Jacana Pocket Biography

Hugh Macmillan

Jacana: Auckland Park, 2016. 167 pp

Reviewed by Howard Smith (Jack Simons Branch, South African Communist Party)

This is Hugh Macmillan's second book in the Jacana Pocket Biographies series, following his 2014 *Chris Hani* (reviewed in *New Agenda* (60) in 2015.) A research historian and author of *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia 1963–1994* (2013), Macmillan also knew Jack Simons well in Lusaka: "It was my privilege to walk and talk with him about once a week for 12 years, from 1978 to 1990."

Born in 1907, Jack's life spanned the rise and fall of racist rule in South Africa: he was six when the Natives Land Act was introduced and died a year after the 1994 elections. Throughout, Jack believed in the common history and destiny of all the peoples of South Africa and contributed his intellect and commitment to the realisation of a democratic inclusive South Africa, in the course of which he suffered bannings, imprisonment and enforced exile.

The bannings interrupted and then ended his academic career at the University of Cape Town, to that institution's and the country's loss. He followed his calling after leaving

South Africa in 1965, first for two years in Manchester, England – where he and his wife, Ray Alexander, completed their *Class and Colour in South Africa* – and then in Lusaka. From there, he spent time in the ANC/MK camps in Angola, leading political education for the youthful post-1976 exiles.

First and foremost a teacher, Jack believed that the "object of a class is to get the students to study, and not to give the teacher an opportunity to exhibit his wisdom and eloquence. The students, not the teacher, should do most of the talking." His style of classroom engagement proved extremely popular with his students at UCT, in the camps, and with activists attending political education classes based on his published lectures.

Jack was always enquiring and never doctrinaire. He wrote that Marxism "was, and will remain, a great liberating force, an analytical tool for dissecting social structures and exposing the realities of the bourgeois, capitalist mode of production. Marxism-Leninism will survive the blunders and crimes committed in its name."

A short review can't include the many political issues on which Jack expressed thoughts or contested the views of others in the liberation movement over decades: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the position of the coloured community taken as a whole in relation to the ANC, the Black

Consciousness Movement, and the political – as distinct from military – role he held should be adopted by MK cadres.

Macmillan acknowledges his sources as primarily the Simons papers at UCT and the ANC and Tambo archives at the University of Fort Hare. My one criticism of this publication is that the often extensive quotations are not referenced, leaving the reader in the dark about when the views were expressed and how to access the originals.

I did look for one aspect of Jack's life and thought that might have value for the challenges we face today, as I imagine he would wish. In the late 1930s, he initiated a course on comparative African government and law at UCT. In 1965, he wrote,

I thought the subject should be made to correct the dominant bias at all South African universities towards Europe and western civilisation, by giving students a thorough grounding in the history, traditions and problems of Africa. The focus therefore shifted from the purely administrative process to a sociological examination of colonial systems, the related political and economic institutions and the emergence of independent African states.

That approach may, I think, somehow contain what remains lacking in the transformation of curricula today. [NA](#)