

# THE MAN WHO FOUNDED THE ANC: A BIOGRAPHY OF PIXLEY KA ISAKA SEME

by Bongani Ngqulunga

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245 pages, photographs, bibliography, index

THIS is a well-written book that has been thoroughly researched and portrays the life of an important historical figure who is internationally recognised. In order to construct this biography accurately, the author (who is an academic with a doctoral degree from Brown University in the USA) had to consult newspapers, archives and libraries for information as there was no large personal collection of Pixley ka Isaka Seme's papers. This book will appeal to historians, archivists, librarians, lawyers and research historians who specialise in the liberation movement. It is highly engaging.

The book is definitely not a hagiography as it gives us details about Seme's life that are fascinating, but also deeply disappointing. He experienced problems with alcohol and was not able to pay some of his bills on time, receiving a bad credit record and experiencing considerable financial problems that led to his downfall as a leader and a lawyer. By the time he died in 1951, he was bankrupt.

Although he had many flaws, he also had an enormous influence on his peers and was one of the first black lawyers in South Africa. He was very fortunate to have studied at Oxford University and graduated from Columbia University in 1906. He forged his own brand of patriotism and nationalism in the founding of a political party that represented all black people in South Africa. While at Columbia, in 1906 he delivered an

award-winning speech for a student debate contest and won a Curtis medal. His achievement was widely reported in newspapers in America and South Africa. In this seminal speech, he remarks 'I am an African, and I set my pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion.'

With his own experience and personal brand of ambition and self-belief, he initiated the South African Native National Congress in 1912; and was president-general of its successor, the ANC, from 1930 until 1937. However, the author believes that his very authoritarian leadership style and inability to get along with others in the party caused considerable ructions and did damage to his reputation as a political leader. Seme was an ardent pan-Africanist and an innovative, historical figure from Inanda who many people admired for his formidable intellectual skills as well as for politically conscientising leaders in Africa and America, reminding them that they needed to restore Africa to greatness.

He had a vision of what he thought the ANC and Africa should be and as a lawyer had high-profile clients such as the Swazi royal family. He was able to secure funding in 1912 from the queen mother for his national newspaper *Abantu-Batho*. His relationship with Sobhuza II lasted for many years and when he died Sobhuza assisted Seme's two sons in Swaziland by giving them large tracts of land to build homes. In the 1920s he had married Zulu King

Dinuzulu's eldest daughter Phikisile. In the 1930s he experienced many problems, the main one being that he was struck off the role of attorneys in 1933 and was unable to practise law.

Seme claimed he had acquired a doctoral degree, but the author of this book asserts that no such record can be found. It is an interesting story of a man who had great ideas, but was not

able to implement all of them fully or carry them out responsibly. However, despite his flaws he laid the foundation for other African nationalists to follow in his footsteps and was an inspiration to many due to his personal brand of ambition and success at a time when things were difficult for many black people.

DEBBY JOUBERT

