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REBELLION IN RHODESIA, 1896-7

A Study in African Resistance

T. O. RANGER

(Heinemann 1967, xii + 403 pp.)

The publication of Professor Ranger's book is a matter of interest to anyone concerned with Rhodesian history and with recent events in its public life, owing to the author's distinction as an historian, and the part he played during the seven years or so when he was a Lecturer in History at the then University College of Rhodesia & Nyasaland. There can have been few with any interest in national affairs during that time who did not have views for or against him. Even before he left the country in 1963 it was known that he was engaged on a work on African rebellions in Rhodesia, and though there were fears that his absence from Rhodesia might have cut him off from some of the necessary sources, the book has at length appeared.

Professor Ranger could have been expected to put the resistance movements in the best possible light. But it by no means follows that the book is just an apologia, for he has illuminated dark patches of history, and thrown further light on others previously only slightly known. Perhaps its most valuable part, though Professor Ranger might not agree with this, is his treatment of Mashonaland from 1890 to 1896. As is well known, after the Risings of 1896-7, Sir Richard Martin was commissioned to investigate the administration of the country in the preceding years. His Report was unfavourable to the B.S.A. Co., which led Earl Grey, then Administrator of Rhodesia, to make a reply. We are in consequence comparatively well informed about the regime in Matabeleland between 1893 and 1896, but for some reason or other the Report was jejune and to some extent wrong in its treatment of Mashonaland, and its example was followed by Earl Grey.

We are also less well informed about the actual Rising in Mashonaland than in Matabeleland. In 1926 Marshall Hole wrote that no adequate account of it had ever been published, and nearly 40 years later Dr. Gann also had to say that its organization had long remained an obscure subject.

Professor Ranger has now dissipated much of this obscurity, but what is revealed will not bring much comfort to those who idealise the blessings of early European rule. It is true that in Mashonaland there do not seem to have been the same grievances over cattle that the Martin Report shows to have existed in Matabeleland, and that the grievances over land, and possibly even over forced labour, were perhaps less, but they were made up for by the distress caused by the hut tax, and still more by the outrageous way in which it was collected. The abuses can be understood. The duty of the rudimentary native affairs department was limited to getting in the tax, and the contentment of the Africans lay quite outside its sphere. For personnel the Administration had to rely on such settlers as it could get hold of, and as most of them had come to the country to look for their fortune, scrupulous consideration for the African inhabitants could hardly have been expected.

Consider the personality and career of the first Chief Native Commissioner, J. S. Brabant. He was described by his colleague, M. E. Weale, as rough and ready, illiterate, a good shot and rider, and very loyal to the Company. The Africans certainly found him rough. Early in 1895 he took a force to the Mtoko area, where the payment of the hut tax had been resisted. On his way he met four messengers from the local Native Commissioner, and saw that they were wearing boots. He had them taken

to the Native Commissioner's office and flogged, because, as Weale said, if there was one thing more than another that annoyed Brabant, it was to see a raw native wearing boots. He then had all the other messengers flogged because they had not brought in the taxes. Next it was the turn of the defaulting chief, Guripira, to whom Brabant said that he would burn and shoot everything he saw until he asked for mercy. Guripira seems to have asked for mercy, but that did not prevent Brabant from burning a great deal of what he saw, and Weale described the atmosphere as dense with burning *rupoko*, other corn and grass. Brabant then ordered him to fill the valley with cattle, so that he could take what he wanted for the hut tax. He also said that he would take additional ones as a fine, because the tax had not been paid in the first place. Guripira was also to contribute 200 men for work in the mines. Ultimately Brabant marched off with 500.

If this was the example set by the Chief Native Commissioner it is not surprising that the approach of a white man was as much dreaded as that of the Ndebele impis in former days, and that it caused the Shona to take to the hills with equal precipitancy, as was reported by the Native Commissioners at Hartley, Mrewa and elsewhere in the later part of 1894 and in 1895. Professor Ranger has done a service to history in bringing all this to light, and the indictment against the Company is the more damning in that the evidence is not mere hearsay reports coming to the Aborigines Protection Society and other "do-gooders", but the testimony of its own officials. To the credit of the Company, as Professor Ranger admits, Brabant was dismissed in November 1895, and his successor, H. M. Taberer, was a very different man, and told the Native Commissioners that they should not think of themselves primarily as collectors of taxes. But before the new regime could have much effect the Rebellions broke out.

At the end of 1897 Sir Alfred Milner, then High Commissioner in South Africa, wrote that the blacks of Rhodesia had been scandalously used and Professor Ranger shows that his words were amply justified. But one wonders whether Professor Ranger, like the Martin Report, has not unintentionally underestimated the influence of the rinderpest in causing the Rebellions. The possible lack of proportion is easy to understand. Unlike a human agent, the rinderpest cannot be

put in the dock by the historian, while witnesses, for and against him, are examined. So the Martin Report disposes of it in a few lines, and Professor Ranger in half a paragraph.

It is true that both could have cited in their support the opinion of Selous, who thought that since the first murders of the whites occurred in the Umzingwani, Filabusi, and Insiza area, which had not been touched by the rinderpest when the Risings began, it had not much to do with them. Selous, however, was speaking about a comparatively limited area, and the Rebellions, which first broke out in areas which were still healthy, would never have been given such spontaneous and widespread support, had it not been for the plague itself, and for the consequent slaughter of healthy, or apparently healthy cattle. This gave the impression that the whites wanted the extermination of the people themselves.

What seems more open to criticism is Professor Ranger's account of the part played by the traditional Shona religious organisations in promoting the risings. That they had played a great part had been well enough recognised from the first. In fact the Europeans were at a loss for any other explanation. They had thought the Mashona gentle, inoffensive and grateful at being freed from the threat of Ndebele raids. So they could only attribute their rising to the influence of the witch doctors. This explanation occurs again and again. Professor Ranger has shown that the Mashona had much to complain about, but he certainly would not underestimate the role of the Shona religious authorities. Indeed he describes their influence more fully than has ever been done before. He follows them with care and ingenuity as they knitted together Ndebele, Rozvi, and other Shona tribes further east, and so brought about a national movement, which swallowed up local and tribal loyalties. In this way the risings were an anticipation of the nationalist movements of the present century, and indeed an example to them. The religious leaders, as he says, brought thousands of Shona into a membership of a new society, and made them true believers in the *murenga*, with their own distinguishing symbols, obligations and promises of divine favour.

So far so good. But surely Professor Ranger should have spent much more time describing how this new society acted, when it had thus been brought together, how its first action was the

killing of hundreds of unsuspecting victims, not in fair fight, but by striking them down from behind, or when they were otherwise off their guard, women and children being slaughtered as indiscriminately as men. A tenth of the European population was murdered. Professor Ranger is too honest an historian not to mention the fact, but in a book of nearly 400 pages it might well have claimed more than the ten lines or so in which he speaks about it.

Even from a military point of view the advice given by Mkwati, Kagubi, and Nehanda was inept. Sound policy demanded, not a scattering of the rebel forces to murder Europeans on isolated farms, but their concentration for a quick attack on Bulawayo, and later on Salisbury. Selous recognised this at the time, saying that though the Bulawayo laager was probably the strongest ever constructed in Southern Africa, and could hardly have been taken by assault by the whole Ndebele nation, had 2,000 or even less attacked the town before the defence was organised, the whole white population would have been wiped out.

When to the cowardly conduct imposed by the religious leaders is added their inept strategy, and the promises made to their followers, which could not possibly be fulfilled, such as that their enemies' bullets would turn to water, and their horses feet be burnt, as they crossed the rivers, it hardly seems that they deserve much admiration either from their own people or from others. Even achieving national unity is not a *sanatio in radice*, obliterating all offences done in its name.

The truth is that, despite heroic actions by both black and white during the course of the Rebellions, and here, among others, the names of Bernard Mzeki, Routledge, and Blakiston spring to mind, they were a miserable business of which neither black nor white can be proud. The conduct of the Europeans in doing so much to promote the Rebellions is hard to forgive, but so is the conduct of the Africans when they were provoked. For each the wisest lesson would be to make the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer and to mean what they say.

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