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# Benjamin Farrington: Cape Town and the Shaping of a Public Intellectual

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## Abstract

Benjamin Farrington, an Irish Protestant, joined the University of Cape Town, Classics Department in 1920, and wrote articles for *De Burger* to win Afrikaner support for Sinn Fein and the Irish Republic. He was credited with initiating a conference in Paris in 1922, to launch the Irish World Organisation. Disillusioned by its stillbirth he effectively shut down the Irish Republican Association of South Africa and its newspaper, *The Republic*, which he had founded and edited. Prominent in the circle of Ruth Schechter, whom he later married, he engaged with the likes of Hogben and Bodmer. Disengaged from active politics by mid-1922, he emerged as a public intellectual in Marxist and Leninist/Trotskyist groupings. Inspired by Karl Marx's thesis on the Epicurean theory of atomism, he campaigned against determinism, and in particular against fundamentalist and superstitious attacks on experimental science. Thus in the classical context he presented Socrates' mix of disembodied mathematics, ethics and theology as a major block to Greek physical science long before Christianity. Farrington's scientific humanism is evidenced in his translations of the Africana texts of Ten Rhyne and Grevenbroek, and in his work on Vesalius. At UCT he advanced Classics from primarily language study to the broader study of history, science and culture. He could be labelled a public intellectual by virtue of his lectures to groups in the community, articles and reviews in the press, and publications for a general readership. But he took his model rather from Epicurus.

**Key words:** Farrington; University of Cape Town; Irish Republican Association (SA); Epicurean atomism; Leninist/Trotskyist; Ruth Schechter; public intellectual

Benjamin Farrington (1891–1974) came to South Africa from Ireland in 1920 to join the academic staff at the University of Cape Town. It would seem that apart from any academic ambitions he may have had, he came as an Irish nationalist with a mission to win support from Afrikaner nationalists for the Sinn Fein cause. But by early 1922 he had decided that he could not fight for Irish independence as de Valera defined it, and he had no heart for the infighting in the Irish Republican Association of South Africa. That and the Rand Revolt also sealed the end to his interest in Afrikaner nationalism. His liaison with Ruth Schechter was in any case leading

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him in a different direction, and he got in with a circle of radical thinkers, including Frederick Bodmer and Lancelot Hogben. He was attracted to Marxism and in his rather unassuming way became what one might label a public intellectual<sup>1</sup> for those who were open to a materialist interpretation of science and society. His career in Cape Town is of more than antiquarian interest because of the pattern of cross-connections between a number of fields which tend to get treated as historiographically discrete. Thus this paper aims to supplement the informative and illuminating treatment of Farrington in Hirson's *The Cape Town Intellectuals* by expanding on his brief direct involvement in politics – to show why he disengaged from political activism in 1922, and by contextualising the development of his ideas on the interrelationship between politics and science,<sup>2</sup> and his emergence as a public intellectual.

Farrington was born in Cork, his father being the city engineer and a Congregationalist. Benjamin took his first degree at University College Cork and then went to Trinity College, Dublin, where he combined with Classics the study of Old and Middle English, graduating in 1915. He registered for the degree of MA (English) at Cork, and duly graduated in 1917 with a thesis on Shelley's translations from the Greek. In 1916 he had become a lecturer in Classics at Queen's University, Belfast, and while there took the LL.B course. He moved to Cape Town in March 1920 to take up a lectureship in Greek. He was promoted as senior lecturer in Classics in 1922, and then to the chair of Latin in 1930. He left Cape Town in 1934, and his next academic post was in Bristol, before he was appointed to a professorship of Classics at University College, Swansea, which he held from 1936 to 1956. In the history of scholarship he is perhaps best known for his work on the development of Greek scientific thought in its changing socio-political context, but in truth he is, or used to be, more generally remembered for his association with communism. E.R. Dodds, likewise an Irish<sup>3</sup> Protestant, and a contemporary at Trinity College Dublin, characterised him as 'a gifted and charming man whose career was even more bedevilled by politics than my own'.<sup>4</sup> Dodds may be alluding to the fact that while he succumbed to the charms of the Labour Party at Oxford University,<sup>5</sup> Farrington became, though much later in his academic career, a member of the British Communist Party (and remained so until he lost faith in the movement after the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956).<sup>6</sup>

Back in 1920, his commitment to the campaign for an independent, republican Ireland calls for some comment, as his background was Protestant, or more precisely non-conformist. He had been in Dublin during the lock-out of 1913,<sup>7</sup> and he would have been in Dublin in November

1. H. Small, ed., *The Public Intellectual* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) offers a historical overview of the concept and critical discussions of the issues; J. Poyner, ed., *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006) brings the subject closer to South Africa.
2. B. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her Circle, 1907–1934* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), where Farrington features as Ruth Schechter's soul-mate and later husband. Hirson liberally summarises, or quotes, primary source documents, including private letters to Farrington and press cuttings without by-lines, which he was able to consult by courtesy of the family of Farrington's daughter by his second marriage. This article is a companion piece to an essay in preparation on Farrington (and probably also Baldry) for a book on the classical tradition in South Africa.
3. Or Anglo-Irish, if the term is used not as marking his denomination, but the ancestry of the family. The Farringtons hailed from Lancashire, and were thus Anglo-Irish as opposed to, for example, Scottish-Irish.
4. E.R. Dodds, *Missing Persons: An Autobiography* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 68.
5. *Ibid.*, 129–130. He seems to have joined the OULP in 1936 or 1937.
6. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 229.
7. Which pitted the trade unionist James Larkin against the powerful industrialist, W.M. Murphy, the target of W.B. Yeats' wrath in his poem *September*, 1913.

1914, when the newly elected provost of Trinity College, J.P. Mahaffy,<sup>8</sup> banned a meeting of the Trinity College Gaelic Society because one of the speakers was to be Patrick Pearse, who was in this context of the Great War ‘a declared supporter of the anti-recruiting agitation’.<sup>9</sup> Farrington’s attitude to Mahaffy’s dictatorial action can be judged by his later comment that he had loathed the man. Then the Easter Rising of 1916 made a great impression on him, as he indicated in an article in *De Burger*. He left Ireland in the context of the Anglo-Irish War (1919–21). Clearly, he migrated to South Africa as a ready sympathiser with Afrikaner nationalists,<sup>10</sup> and this was surely a factor in his decision to apply for the post in Cape Town. In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a steady pattern of migration from Ireland to South Africa, and Akenson calculates from the report on the census of 1926 that the Irish accounted for about 3.5 per cent of the white population.<sup>11</sup> While working-class Irish and farmers tended to emigrate to America, Canada and Australasia, Irish business-people, skilled tradesmen, and professionals were more likely to choose South Africa. The predominant social background of the Irish immigrants in South Africa may in itself explain why the percentage of Protestants was disproportionately high. But the religious factor may have played a role, with the Irish Protestants feeling some affinity with Afrikaner Calvinists. McCracken states that ‘1907 must be regarded as the date when nationalist Ireland lost interest in South Africa’,<sup>12</sup> but the Great War and the Anglo-Irish War produced fresh manifestations of a sense of affinity between Irish nationalists and Afrikaners.<sup>13</sup> Thus it was not particularly strange that Farrington, a professional from a middle-class Protestant family, chose to migrate to South Africa, but there was more significance in that one of his background came with an active commitment to the Sinn Fein cause: there was always some element of eccentricity in his decision making.

Not long after his arrival in Cape Town the story goes that he visited Johannesburg, in mid-1920, and then apparently wrote home, justifying the pass laws and segregated public transport, and was duly ticked off by a relative for his naivety.<sup>14</sup> Back in Cape Town he went into action to contribute to political debate among Afrikaners, as he wrote a series of four articles for the local Afrikaans newspaper *De [sic] Burger* over the period 15 to 24 September 1920. The series was anticipated in an unsigned piece in *De Burger* of 11 September, attacking Lloyd George for his

8. Mahaffy (1839–1919) was an Irish aristocrat of the old order, and a classicist who, despite all his eccentric ideas, attracted international recognition for his work on papyri and social history.
9. Mahaffy’s thinking is cited in a letter by Yeats dated 10 November 1914, as quoted by R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats, a Life, Volume 1: The Apprentice of Mage, 1865–1914* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 523. Yeats failed in his bid to mediate a compromise between the students and Mahaffy.
10. Sympathy with the Afrikaner cause was not too unconventional, but Farrington’s move to South Africa was more idiosyncratic.
11. D.H. Akenson, *Occasional Papers on the Irish in South Africa* (Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1991), 68.
12. D.P. McCracken, *The Irish Pro-Boers, 1877–1902* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1989), 168.
13. Then the Irish Civil War that began in mid-1922 triggered off something of a surge in the emigration of Protestants from southern Ireland. See Akenson, *Occasional Papers*, 69.
14. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 124 and 237. The South African expert on the politics of segregated transport is G.H. Pirie, ‘Racial Segregation on Johannesburg Trams ... 1904–1927’, *African Studies*, 48, 1 (1989), 37–54. Farrington’s attitude in this case was not too unusual, as Irish sympathisers with the Afrikaners during and after the South African War had generally not shown any sensitivity to the situation of the indigenous majority and, one should add, to the other black communities. See S. Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 46–48, 56–60.

bullying style and lack of respectful gratitude to the dominions for their assistance in the Great War.

One assumes that Farrington's pieces were translated into Afrikaans for him, as they are lengthy and he had only been in the country six months, while the paper obviously had a team regularly engaged in translating into Afrikaans material such as news items from international press agencies. Clearly the paper was not going to undermine his contributions by letting him patronise the readers with pidgin Afrikaans. In this series he dilated on the history of British oppression of Irish Catholics and their struggle for liberation, and he examined factors that he thought would resonate with Afrikaner readers – the need to assert the language of the people, the limited prospect of success from affirmative economic development, and the necessity of a readiness to seize any opportunity to engage in active rebellion. It is striking that the style of his first article is the most bellicose. He was addressing those whose nationalism had been shaped by the South African War, and tested in the Great War;<sup>15</sup> and he could claim that in Ireland, though the uprising of 1916 had failed, it had strengthened nationalist and republican sentiment. His main objective was to encourage Afrikaner support for Sinn Fein and the newly self-proclaimed national government in Dublin,<sup>16</sup> or more precisely for its republican wing. But it suited his purposes to emphasise not the Declaration of Independence of January 1919, but rather the proclamation of the Republic in 1916.<sup>17</sup> He claimed that since 1916 the Irish had been building up a government and administration, and that the English were using their military might with the sole purpose of destroying those institutions. What the new Republic needed was international recognition.<sup>18</sup>

Farrington was well aware of the differences between the Irish and South African situations and directly confronted the problem that Afrikaners were Protestant, and that those of Huguenot origin were in South Africa because of oppression in Europe by Catholic authorities. His message in the second article was that 'religious and racial differences' should not be 'settled by the sword', and that republicans and Afrikaner nationalists have two guiding principles, 'religious tolerance and the subordination of race differences to national unity'.<sup>19</sup> In this and the following two essays he focused on the religious issues, and was at pains to emphasise that one of the biggest obstacles to Afrikaner support for Irish nationalism was the malicious myth that the latter was but a product of 'Vaticanism',<sup>20</sup> and that its victory would lead to the demise of Protestantism. Now Farrington could play the card that he himself was not a Catholic, but showed that one could be Protestant and also committed to Sinn Fein as a matter of principle,<sup>21</sup>

15. Many working-class Irishmen who heeded the call to arms, quickly found after their return from the war that they had become non-persons, unable to find employment or scholarships for their children. See K. Myers, 'The Irish and the Great War: A Case of Amnesia', in E. English and J.M. Skelly, eds, *Ideas Matter: Essays in Honour of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1998), 103–108.
16. The Dail Eireann, set up on 21 January 1919 by those of the 73 Sinn Feiners who had been elected to Westminster as MPs in the election of December 1918 and who had not been put in prison.
17. J.M. Curran, *The Birth of the Irish Free State 1921–1923* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 23.
18. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 124–126 summarises Farrington's first article.
19. *Ibid.*, 127, referring to the second article, of 17 September 1920.
20. *De Burger*, 17 September 1920.
21. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 123, refers to him as a member of the party, but this is not, I think, indicated in what Farrington wrote for *De Burger*. Unsurprisingly, the elite of Sinn Fein was 95 per cent Catholic, and the rest made up of a few Protestants, and fewer agnostics and dissident Catholics. See T. Garvin, 'The Anatomy of a Nationalist Revolution: Ireland, 1855–1928', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28 (1986), 468–501, esp. 482.

and he could bear witness to the religious tolerance practised by the Irish Catholics.<sup>22</sup> Thus he was in a good position to plead for mutual recognition between Irish and Afrikaner nationalists. In the same piece he included the comment that if the Catholics of Cork had been driven by the same resolve as the Orangemen of Belfast, not a single Protestant would have survived. The formulation here suggests that he was not unaware of the wave of IRA violence directed against Protestants in his hometown, Cork, in 1920.<sup>23</sup> The articles reveal something of a mix of principled naivety, and shrewd political rhetoric. But his debut as a columnist (unless polemicist would be a better term) in the Afrikaner press was apparently brought to a swift end by some form of warning from the University of Cape Town (UCT) that he should cease writing for the press.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the more xenophobic Afrikaners were not too distressed to see this maverick Irishman bow out,<sup>25</sup> and events of the following few years might have given him cause to worry about associating with the more extreme wing of Afrikaner nationalism.

But for the moment Farrington focused now on promoting Irish nationalism in South Africa, to which end he was active in promoting the Irish Republican Association of South Africa (IRA(SA)), and produced a periodical, *The Republic*, from November 1920 (i.e. shortly after he stopped writing for *De Burger*) to June 1922,<sup>26</sup> with a total of 41 issues. Typically, the issue ran to 16 pages and was packed with news from overseas and the local branches, lengthy opinion pieces, items of historical and cultural interest, such as the epic *Táin bó Cúalarge* (*The Iliad of Ireland*) serialised in nine parts. The front page of the first issue was dominated by a portrait of Terence McSwiney, the lord mayor of Cork, who had died on 25 October from a hunger strike while in prison. The first item of text, on the next page, was an address to the new governor general, HRH Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, expressing in a very cheeky and direct way why the Irish community in South Africa could not welcome him nor wish him well. Farrington did not sign this piece, and indeed a striking feature of the whole run is that the identity of the editor is never revealed, and Farrington's name is not given in any news item, as far as I could see, till 25 February 1922, when a report on the Paris conference from an overseas correspondent mentions him by name as elected as congress secretary, and singles him out as 'a very active member of the Congress', but the editorial team referred to 'the South African delegate' without giving his name.<sup>27</sup> Nor does he appear in the group photograph of the delegates at the national conference in Bloemfontein. The concealment of the editor's name was odd enough for the issue of 28 January 1922 to report on speculation in *The Cape* on the identity of the regular editor. The acting editor rebuts the suggestion that there is a split in the ranks, and says that 'our absent colleague ... has certainly written nothing to deserve what a patriotic Irishman must regard as

22. Article in *De Burger*, 17 September 1920.

23. J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 77–78 shows that the Catholic archbishop of Dublin and 'virulent Catholic groups' actively encouraged anti-Protestantism.

24. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 128, citing a published letter of 12 October 1920 by R.I.C. Scott Hayward of the IRA(SA). At the same time my impression is that the four articles were planned as a group, and do not suggest that Farrington was aiming to be a regular contributor offering a running commentary on Irish affairs. Howard Phillips tells me that he imagines that the principal, 'Jock' Beattie, would have put a reassuring hand on Ben's shoulder, and told the dear chap in his avuncular manner that writing such columns for *De Burger* was not quite the UCT way.

25. It would not have strengthened ties between the two nationalist groups that by December 1920 the IRA(SA) was divided on the issue whether to give public support to the National Party in the up-coming election, or to settle for thanking the NP for its support for Sinn Fein. See Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 131.

26. Extracts are quoted in Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 128–137.

27. As in *The Republic*, issue 36 of 25 March 1922.

censure'. (Incidentally, he goes on to cite *De Burger* as evidence that the Irish have 'powerful friends' in South Africa.) The persistent anonymity calls for some comment.<sup>28</sup> Presumably it suited the editorial committee and the executive of the IRA(SA) to avoid making a celebrity of the editor;<sup>29</sup> but I suspect that the practice was kept up because Farrington wanted it so. He had been warned that his foray into writing for *De Burger* was unwelcome in circles that mattered at UCT. They might have complained that he should not use his status as a lecturer to lend authority to his political journalism, and that he should not expose the university to the risk that readers might think that his opinions in some way reflected the university's stance. He might invoke the principle of academic freedom to protect his autonomy in the profession of his discipline, but when he involved himself in politics in 'the real world' in South Africa, and Ireland, he had to take his chances with such protection as the law provided him as an ordinary citizen or resident. Thus he could accept that his identity as a lecturer in Classics at UCT was not to be confused with his identity as a major role player in the IRA(SA). Anonymity as editor of *The Republic* was a device for protecting this divide. More directly, it would not have been smart in November 1920 to risk being blocked from journalistic activity by the same charge as had been used against him, if only informally, a month or so earlier.<sup>30</sup>

The run of this paper is testimony to the quite extraordinary amount of time and effort it must have cost Farrington. It could hardly continue indefinitely, but, as is explained below, it collapsed for other, less noble reasons.

At the Association's AGM in Bloemfontein in November 1921, Farrington was elected to be its representative at the Irish Race Conference<sup>31</sup> to be held in January 1922 in Paris. There he was to press for the formation of an Irish World Organisation (IWO), and this should have been a joyous occasion for Farrington, as de Valera and others credited the South African Irish, and Farrington in particular, with initiating the project.<sup>32</sup> Indeed Farrington had first aired the idea in *The Republic* in February 1921, and explained in the issue of March 1921 that the goal was to get '*Magna Hibernia* ... to share in the great destiny of their motherland'.<sup>33</sup> But in Paris, even before the proceedings began, the feuding erupted between the representatives of the newly appointed cabinet of the provisional government in Dublin, led by Eoin MacNeill, and de Valera

28. An anonymous referee informed me that it was the convention for the editor's identity to be withheld, but another historian working in the field gave a counter-opinion, and said that even if the editor's name was not printed, the identity was no secret to the regular readers.

29. Such a policy may be indicated by the absence of any name of an officeholder in its compilation of extracts from *The Republic* in *The Irish in South Africa, 1920-1* (Cape Town: IRA(SA), March 1922), as noted by D.P. McCracken, 'The Irish Republican Association of South Africa, 1920-2', *Southern African-Irish Studies*, 3 (1996), 52.

30. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, xxix, notes that the family scrapbook included many pieces written for the *Cape Times* and other papers in the period November 1922 to December 1924, but most had no by-lines, and Hirson was not always able to work out whether the article or review had been written by Ben or Ruth Schechter.

31. Otherwise referred to as the Irish Race Congress or the Irish World Race Convention. The other candidate for the honour of representing South Africa was A.E. O'Flaherty, but relative youth and Classics prevailed over age and Sanskrit studies.

32. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 136; also G. Keown, 'The Irish Race Conference, 1922, Reconsidered', *Irish Historical Studies*, 32, 127 (2001), 365-76; Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, 206-207 and 705. Keown suggests that Farrington was moved by naivety, but also some political ambition. MacNeill in his memoirs referred to Farrington as the 'chief organiser' of the convention with the purpose of creating 'a cultural union among Irish people all over the world'. Quoted in M. Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill: Scholar and Man of Action, 1867-1945* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), 307.

33. Cited by Keown, 'The Irish Race Conference', 365.

(as president of Sinn Féin and leader of the wing opposed to the Treaty with Britain signed in December 1921) and the delegation nominated by him.<sup>34</sup>

There had been a South African element in the events leading up to the Treaty of December 1921, for in secret negotiations in 1921 Smuts had persuaded King George V and Lloyd George to allow him to approach de Valera with encouragement to accept the opportunity to strike a deal with the British.<sup>35</sup> Smuts would speak from his own experience as the negotiator for Afrikaner nationalists, and urge him to settle for dominion status. De Valera met Smuts secretly in Dublin in July, and, as Smuts saw it, de Valera yielded to the advice;<sup>36</sup> but he was hostile to the proposals presented at the end of November to his team of negotiators in London. Griffith and Collins got his grudging consent to press on for a compromise and in the end in the early hours of 6 December Arthur Griffith signed the articles of agreement of the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>37</sup> De Valera's immediate reaction was to call for the resignations of the three ministers who had signed the treaty.<sup>38</sup> But he had to yield to pressure from the majority who wanted a peaceful settlement, and, when the Dail Eireann ratified the treaty on 7 January 1922, he offered to resign as president of the Dail Eireann, and formally resigned on 9 January, albeit with the expression of a willingness to accept re-election.<sup>39</sup> De Valera was indeed a candidate in the election held on 10 January, but gained only 58 votes to the 60 for Arthur Griffith, who was then formally chosen as president of the Dail Eireann, and hence president of the Republic on 11 January, after a walk-out by republicans. Ten days later, de Valera made it clear to the conferees in Paris that he was still on the warpath for nothing less than complete independence for a united Ireland. As Hancock observes, 'De Valera would not, and could not accept South African history, in the Smuts version nor in any other, as a copy book of wisdom for Irishmen'.<sup>40</sup>

But on 18 January Farrington joined MacNeill's party on the steamer to Holyhead for the journey to Paris, and was thus party to drawing up an agenda for the conference to be presented as a counter to the agenda that had been circulated by de Valera. Thus Farrington was very much in the fray from the start, and he was elected secretary of the conference, and appointed to a small working group to formulate proposals on the aims and objectives of the IWO, along with de Valera and his ally, Art O'Brien. Farrington and O'Brien were further tasked with organising

34. The anti-de Valera version of what happened over the week of the conference can be found in the report by the cabinet delegates, Diarmuid Coffey, Michael Hayes *et al.*, submitted in February 1922: available on the Web as Documents of Irish Foreign Policy (hereafter DIFP), ref. no. 239.

35. Thus W.K. Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force, 1919–1950* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968), 51–59, attributes the initiative to Smuts. McCracken more critically refers to 'Lloyd George's use of the general to interfere in Irish politics': McCracken, 'The Irish Republican Association', 58.

36. De Valera's version was that he 'explained to [Smuts] how the position in Ireland differed from that of South Africa': D. Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (London: Gollancz, 1937), 490; and that he took his decision on 8 July at the conclusion of discussions at the Dublin Mansion House between invited representatives of the Southern Unionists and Sinn Féin on the British offer of a truce.

37. These negotiations are well covered by Curran, *Birth of the Irish Free State*, 116–131.

38. *Ibid.*, 141.

39. But de Valera retained the presidency of Sinn Féin, and added to the confusion by forming a new party, Cumanna-Poblachta (the Republican Party), which held its first convention on 5 February. See Macardle, *The Irish Republic*, 683–92. Griffith's more radical colleague, Michael Collins, was elected chairman of the provisional government on 14 January. Curran, *Birth of the Irish Free State*, offers a detailed history of this period, with careful referencing to the primary sources.

40. Hancock, *Smuts*, 60. Further on Smuts and his dealings with de Valera, see O. Geysler, *Jan Smuts and his International Contemporaries* (Johannesburg: Covos Day, 2001), 139–158.

publicity. The representative of South Africa had his moment of glory on the first day when he proposed that

permission be sought from the Irish government for the erection in Ireland of some permanent memorial of the good will of the Irish abroad. It is suggested that this memorial might take some practical form, such as the establishment in the capital town of every county of a technical institution etc.<sup>41</sup>

This magnanimous proposal, anticipating donations from expatriate Irishmen, was howled down by republicans who were sure that the provisional government would misuse the funds. The proposal was withdrawn, and Farrington reported back that he found the trouncing it received as ‘humiliating and also illuminating’.<sup>42</sup>

The conference then settled down to the principal issue, and the report drafted by the cabinet team indicates that de Valera was single-minded in wanting to use the conference to advance his cause for a fully independent Ireland. The battle over the wording of the mission statement of the World Organisation reads rather like the struggle at Nicaea in AD 325 to get a creed that believers would accept as Christologically sound. In Paris, the Australian delegate proposed to the working committee that the organisation’s objective should be ‘to aid the people of Ireland in the attainment of their political, cultural and economic ideals’. De Valera then threw in the word ‘full’ before ‘political’, and his henchman, Art O’Brien, introduced an additional motion that the overseas delegates should separately debate a proposal that the national organisations of the Irish diaspora should commit themselves to the campaign for ‘the independent Republic of Ireland’. This latter motion was fiercely opposed by the Australian delegate and Ben Farrington. But the original emended version was taken to the following plenary session, and further emended by the meeting to read: ‘To aid the people of Ireland to attain to the full their national, political, cultural and economic ideals, and to help Ireland to take her rightful place among the free nations of the earth’.<sup>43</sup> This motion was carried. As many of its supporters drifted away, the plenary session held two days later seems to have been rather chaotic and de Valera clawed back much of the ground he had lost.

Farrington’s clash with O’Brien shows that he was opposed to de Valera’s brand of nationalism, at least on the issue of the terms of reference of the IWO; but the report of the rival cabinet delegation does not enthuse about Farrington’s role in Paris. That interpretation is supported by the record of the session of the Dail Eireann of 2 March 1922, when de Valera reported back on the conference, and claimed that the expatriate delegates went to Paris with mandates from their respective national associations to support his vision of an independent, republican Ireland, though the Minister of Education, Hayes, claimed that the representatives of Australia, South Africa and New Zealand ‘repudiated this organisation’ (i.e. as defined by de Valera).<sup>44</sup> Farrington clearly had sought independence for the South African branch of the IWO to set up its own agenda, but that was not what the men from Dublin had in mind, whether they

41. T.K. Daniel, ‘The Scholars and the Saboteurs: The Wrecking of a South African Irish Scheme, Paris 1922’, *Southern African-Irish Studies*, 1 (1991), 162–175, esp. 169–70, quoting from a report in *The Republic*.

42. *The Republic*, 39, 6 May 1922; Daniel, ‘Scholars and the Saboteurs’, 170.

43. This is the wording given in the report of Coffey *et al.*, DIFP, ref. no. 239, dated February, 1922; Farrington gave somewhat different formulations in his report in *The Republic*, 37, 8 April 1922.

44. That was also the perception of MacNeill, who wrote in his memoirs that Farrington’s idea was a world Irish cultural union, but de Valera had decided to hijack the conference to serve his own partisan cause. See Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 307.

accepted the treaty with Britain, or, like de Valera, held out against it. Hayes' comment on the repudiation of the organisation would refer to the post-conference meeting held on 30 January, when MacNeill reported that he had failed in his bid to get a co-secretary appointed to the IWO to work alongside de Valera's nominee. At this point Farrington and the other major southern hemisphere delegates gave notice that their national organisations would be advised to block all cooperation with its central executive council (the Fine Ghaedal or Fine Gael).<sup>45</sup> In any case the provisional government effectively stopped the launch by forcing de Valera to withdraw his proposal to the Dail that a loan be made available to the Fine Ghaedal to cover the initial costs.<sup>46</sup>

Farrington might have felt aggrieved that membership of the proposed executive was to be limited to those within 24 hours' journey time from Dublin, and he would have been excused for feeling generally rather deflated by the Paris conference. Seen objectively it was a waste of time and his grand plan came to nothing.<sup>47</sup> But he was not too daunted to write directly to de Valera just after the conference to tell him bluntly that support for the Irish government was 'not a possible objective' of the IWO.<sup>48</sup> He gave further vent to his feelings in *The Republic* of 22 April, when he launched an acerbic attack on de Valera and his promotion of a personality cult. Farrington wrote this in defiance of IRA(SA)'s official stance of neutrality in the dispute between de Valera's republicans and the supporters of the treaty. Farrington was reined in, and the paper ground to a halt with the issue of 3 June. Ironically he was now opposing the hard line which he appears to have followed in the early issues of the paper, for in the first issue he had given as the prime purpose of the IRA(SA) 'to labour for the international recognition of the Sovereign Independence of the Irish Republic'.<sup>49</sup> A reason given for the closure of the paper was the disruption of the Irish community organisations in the north as a consequence of the Rand Revolt, in which the IRA(SA) was compromised by the active participation of at least some Irishmen.<sup>50</sup> Thus the association reported that it lacked the cash to continue running *The Republic*. Furthermore, as it happened, the publication folded just before the eruption of the Irish Civil War, which began in June 1922 and lasted to April 1923, and which saw former Protestant supporters of the republican movement shouldered out.<sup>51</sup> The Irish world union that Farrington had promoted was sidelined by a move to exclude Irish expatriates from any role in the institutions of the Irish Republic, and 'expatriate' was taken to include those who split their

45. Daniel, 'Scholars and the Saboteurs', 172; cf. the record of the Dáil Éireann session of 2 March 1922 (available on the Web at [historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/DT/D.S.192203020024.html](http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/DT/D.S.192203020024.html)).

46. *Ibid.*

47. It is of some significance that the conference is ignored in the otherwise very detailed accounts of the period by Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (especially chapter 68), reflecting de Valera's view; and Curran, *Birth of the Irish Free State*.

48. Keown, 'The Irish Race Conference', 373–374.

49. Editorial in the first issue of *The Republic*, quoted by McCracken, 'The Irish Republican Association', 52. By January 1922 the issue in Dublin, as de Valera proclaimed it, was a 'conflict between majority rule on the one hand and inalienability of the national sovereignty on the other': Cited by Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 308.

50. J. Krikler, *The Rand Revolt: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2005), 58 and 106 on a so-called Irish Brigade or Sinn Fein Commando at Fordsburg, mentioned in the record of the Special Criminal Court, case no. 18 of 1922.

51. Dodds, *Missing Persons*, 82–83, who comments that 'in the new would-be Gaelic Ireland there was little or no place for [the Anglo-Irish]'. Among these was the poet W.B. Yeats (1865–1939), though he was invited to join the senate of the Irish Free State in December 1922, and held his seat till 1928, defending, as Dodds puts it, 'the old values', critical of attempts to force Gaelic on everyone, and generally a champion of human rights issues (before he drifted towards admiration for fascism).

time between residence in Ireland and residence abroad.<sup>52</sup> The political scene in Dublin changed again in August 1922 with the death of the president, Arthur Griffith, and the murder of Michael Collins. And in South Africa the association itself seems to have fizzled out before the end of 1922. McCracken summarises Farrington's contribution to the organisation: 'In some ways it can be said that he both built up and then destroyed the IRA(SA)'.<sup>53</sup>

If Farrington had nurtured an ambition to move into the political arena, his experience in Paris and with the IRA(SA) would have made him realise that he was not in the mould of Protestants who became prominent in republican politics, such as Robert Childers Barton (1881–1975), Roger Casement (1864–1916) or Erskine Childers (1870–1922) and that he had more to offer at an intellectual level, even if he could not match the likes of W.B. Yeats and Patrick Pearse.<sup>54</sup>

Meanwhile South African politics in the early months of 1922 had been dominated by the Rand Revolt. Farrington was out of the country in the critical period and *The Republic* of 25 March has nothing on the fighting in the north, but includes a long chatty report from 'the South African delegate' to the Paris conference about the social interactions and his meetings with Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith.<sup>55</sup> *The Republic's* silence about the revolt might be explained by the IRA(SA)'s long-since declared position of not taking sides in South African politics, and because the local Irish, quite apart from those who were Ulstermen, were sharply divided on many issues, and some undoubtedly supported the Rand revolutionaries, as noted above. Press reports referred to rumours of Irish involvement in the revolt,<sup>56</sup> and it was more than a rumour that Fordsburg had its own Irish Brigade, or regiment, but this was an assumed pet name, rather than an ethnic descriptor, and those wanting to join this outfit did not have to be Irish.<sup>57</sup> Even without direct evidence we can reasonably assume that Farrington would have deplored the strikers' resort to violence, and especially the racial killings, and the ferocity of the government's action to end the revolt; and he would surely not have wished to stand behind the white women proudly displaying the banner with the key message of the strikers: 'WORKERS OF THE WORLD, FIGHT AND UNITE FOR A WHITE SOUTH AFRICA'.<sup>58</sup> In *De Burger* on 17 September 1920, he had written that racial and religious differences cannot be settled with the sword, and in referring to the Irish struggle for emancipation he uses the expression *vryheidsbewegings* rather than any more militaristic formula. He aligned himself with the pragmatists who accepted the Irish Treaty with Britain as a tactical necessity, and distanced himself from de Valera's commitment to existential violence. The men on the Rand had demonstrated the futility of an armed uprising against a militarily superior legal authority.

52. Here I am not referring to any legal prescriptions, but to the way the gatekeepers of Irish culture debated the criteria for Irishness. Thus for example in the last 15 years of his life the cultural mandarins were divided on the issue whether W.B. Yeats was excluded by not meeting the residential qualifications or had retained sufficient commitment to the Republic for a dispensation to be considered Irish. In 1924, James Joyce could not be considered for special invitation to the Tailteann games as he did not meet the residence requirement: R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story* (London: Penguin, 2001), 103.

53. McCracken, 'The Irish Republican Association', 51.

54. Though Pearse was a Catholic. He was executed for his role in the Easter Rising of 1916. Yeats, as a token intellectual and eminent man of letters, endured a lonely existence as a senator.

55. This is consistent with the picture of him trotting round collecting autographs in a scrapbook.

56. McCracken, 'The Irish Republican Association', 61, cites the *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 March 1922 and *The Star*, 21 March 1922.

57. Krikler, *Rand Revolt*, 58.

58. Krikler, *Rand Revolt*, 110 with plate 8. Hirson shows that it is reasonable to assume that Farrington shared Ruth Schechter's liberal values, and Hogben labelled her group 'anti-segregationist'.

In view of Farrington's earlier bid to woo Afrikaners into supporting Sinn Fein, it is necessary to touch on the issue of the significance of Afrikaner nationalism in the Rand Revolt. It began as a general strike in protest against plans to lay off some 2 000 white miners.<sup>59</sup> Local Transvaal Communist Party officials played an important role in the revolt, and although they were campaigning on behalf of white workers, they made a genuine attempt to stop attacks on black workers.<sup>60</sup> But other players in the revolt were unashamedly racist, and it later became the received wisdom that the campaign was rapidly taken over by Afrikaner 'commandos', as Roux puts it, and the revolt became a rallying cry for Afrikaner nationalists.<sup>61</sup> Krikler argues that the role of Afrikaner nationalism in the revolt has been greatly exaggerated, and that English- and Afrikaans-speakers operated together with a significant degree of harmony. This well-substantiated interpretation now generally prevails.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, such perceptions (or misconceptions) were around. When Smuts presented his defence of his actions to parliament on 31 March 1922, he claimed that 'the vast body of people who formed the rank and file in this sad and terrible business were Nationalists'; and he blamed the 'Nationalist Party' for preaching policies that could easily be misunderstood by 'the poor whites, the flotsam and jetsam of our urban population ... the uneducated classes'. He further charged the party leadership with inciting their lower class followers with defamatory attacks on the government of the country.<sup>63</sup> He knew that National Party (NP) parliamentarians had faced a dilemma when white workers called on them to proclaim a South African Republic, but not as the NP would have defined it.<sup>64</sup> From another angle, Mohamed Adhikari shows that even at the time the petit bourgeois coloured leaders of the African People's Organisation (APO) saw Afrikaner involvement in the Rand Revolt as particularly significant:

They hoped that Afrikaner rebelliousness would serve as a foil for their patriotism and that, by comparison, Coloureds would be shown to be responsible, law-abiding citizens, worthy of full acceptance into the dominant society.<sup>65</sup>

Then there is the evidence of D. Ivon Jones' reports to the Comintern, which he submitted as the representative of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) on the Executive Committee of the Comintern in Moscow. On 25 March 1922, he reported that the situation had taken a turn for the worse as 'several tragic conflicts [have] occurred between Black and white workers ... which would make the task of the Communist Party far more difficult in future'. He goes on to

59. E. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (London: Gollancz, 1948), 147.
60. *Ibid.*, 148; J. Krikler, 'Constraints upon Popular Racial Killing: A South African Case', *South African Historical Journal*, 58 (2007), 203–225, esp. 211.
61. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 148. In such a situation the patterns were complex: Hull and Lewis (a distant relative of this author's wife, and his friend) went to the gallows singing *The Red Flag*, though it is improbable that they were intellectually committed to communism and the unity of all workers. Their unheroic story is summarised by N. Herd, *1922: The Revolt on the Rand* (Johannesburg, Blue Crane Books, 1966), esp. 193–195.
62. Krikler, *Rand Revolt*, 104–109. K. Breckenridge, offers a valuable review article, 'Fighting for a White South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 57 (2007), 228–243, dealing in particular with the racial issues.
63. The verbatim report of Smuts' speech is reprinted in J. van der Poel, ed., *Selections from the Smuts Papers, Volume 5* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), 118–135.
64. Krikler, *Rand Revolt*, 108.
65. M. Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens, OH and Cape Town: Ohio University Press and Double Storey, 2005), 78 and 208, citing APO 28 January and 25 March 1922; and *Educational Journal* (April 1922).

predict that one outcome might be the emergence of a 'Labour-Republican block', which would have to incorporate 'the Anti-Imperialist farmers' party' (i.e., the NP).<sup>66</sup> The flow of this report would seem to support Krikler's line. But in his earlier report of 15 March, Jones identified Bill Andrews as

... the one man who commands the unbounded respect of both the Dutch and Republican farmers, as well as labour, and is the one man who by his record can restrain the pogrom proclivities of the Dutch farmer class against the negro masses.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, while Krikler at this distance from the events, may offer the correct overall interpretation, evidence remains that a perception at the time was that the industrial action was knocked off course, and that Afrikaner nationalists were at least party to racial violence.

The relevant conclusion here would be that by mid-1922 Farrington could see that the complexities and divisions of Afrikaner nationalism were as serious as those in Sinn Fein, and that the Rand Revolt had not heightened the moral standing of Afrikaner nationalism. Thus there was little to be gained by further courting of support for Irish nationalism from that source. And after these rather futile forays into the real world of politics, he now withdrew from campaigning on the issues that had attracted him when he first arrived in Cape Town. There is no indication that he switched his energies to the politics of the university. One good reason could be that within the Department of Classics that space was already occupied by his seniors, Prof Ritchie and Prof Le Roux, to whom we shall return. But more seriously he would have found the university's problems of the day rather dull and the process of change rather slow. The institution, though it had originated in the South African College established in Cape Town in 1829, only gained its charter as the University of Cape Town in 1918. From that point it was at least trying to present an image of being a progressive force in society, as Howard Phillips shows in *The University of Cape Town 1918–1948*. There were problems of access to be grappled with. To accommodate the surge of young servicemen returning after the First World War, the normal admission requirements were relaxed. As these men were predominantly English-speaking the balance tipped from Afrikaans<sup>68</sup> to English as the first language of the majority of the student body. Then the establishment of the Students' Loan Fund in 1923 further strengthened the intake of students who were English-speaking and white. Phillips cites a confidential letter from the registrar of March 1923, which reports that the attitude of Council was that 'it would not be in the interests of the university to admit native or coloured students in any numbers, if at all'.<sup>69</sup> The university was particularly sensitive to problems that might arise if a black medical student were to examine a white patient or cadaver, or if a black Fine Arts student was obliged to gaze at a white model: so these disciplines were effectively closed to black applicants. But even without covert racial screening, blacks faced two other major obstacles to admission to the university:

66. A. Davidson, I. Filatova *et al.*, eds, *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History, Volume 1, 1919–1930* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), 97–98; B. Hirson, *A History of the Left in South Africa* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), chapter 3, 'The General Strike of 1922', esp. 42–43.

67. Davidson and Filatova, *Volume 1*, 93.

68. Afrikaans was first introduced as a university course at UCT in 1919, and from that year students were allowed to answer examination questions in English, Afrikaans or Dutch. But in 1920 the only academic using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction was the philosopher G.H.T. Malan: H. Phillips, *The University of Cape Town 1918–1948: The Formative Years* (Cape Town: UCT, 1993), 30 and 116.

69. *Ibid.*, 114.

the difficulty of meeting the matriculation requirement and the lack of funding to study.<sup>70</sup> As for the degree programmes, the government finally agreed in 1920 to establish a 'Bantu School' to be sited at UCT, to cover the range of disciplines that might be labelled Social Anthropology, and also African languages. But the grand plan was undermined by the government's reduction of its promised financial support in successive cycles, and by 1925 the language component was down to a first course in Xhosa,<sup>71</sup> and the programme in African Studies made no measurable contribution to the recruitment of blacks<sup>72</sup> – not that such recruitment had to depend on an African Studies programme.

A very different concern preoccupied the non-professorial academic staff, who campaigned for some direct representation on the University Senate. In 1920 they did at least gain recognition for their Lecturers' Association.<sup>73</sup> But while UCT was settling down into the role of a white, English-speaking university, and worrying about issues of access and governance, Farrington was becoming increasingly active in circles that were much more radical and concerned about the freedoms denied to those who were not white.

Within a short period after his arrival in Cape Town he had been introduced to Ruth Schechter, who 'had the only salon which attracted the Cape Town intelligentsia', according to Lancelot Hogben (at UCT 1927–1930 as professor of Zoology).<sup>74</sup> Ruth was a Jewess, daughter of Solomon Schechter of Cairo Genizah fame, and wife of Morris Alexander, who was a prominent civil rights lawyer and sat in splendid isolation from 1921 to 1929 as the sole representative of the Constitutional Democratic Party in parliament. Ben's friendship with Ruth was, as Hirson depicts it, an intellectual symbiosis, and quickly blossomed into romance.<sup>75</sup> She eventually left Cape Town for New York in late 1933, and after getting a divorce from Morris, moved to Britain and married Ben in August 1935. He had left Cape Town in 1934, and his departure from UCT was no doubt expeditious, as Morris Alexander was a member of Council (from 1930 to 1936). Her split from Morris Alexander was presaged by issues other than her affection for Ben Farrington. Hirson suggests that she would have reacted forcefully against a statement which her husband included in his speech to parliament in April 1923, when, reflecting on the Rand Revolt, he asserted that Judaism was 'the very antithesis of Bolshevism'.<sup>76</sup> She moved further in a radical direction in June 1929, when her sister Amy, as a member of the American Communist Party, was among those arrested and charged with the murder of a senior police officer when

70. *Ibid.*, 114–115.

71. Though Radcliffe-Brown, a professor of Social Anthropology was no friend of the language section, he was considerably more successful in attracting students. See Phillips, *The University*, 22–23.

72. There had been money prizes for the best entrants of work on 'Native' Lore and History, and the lists of prize winners for 1923 and 1924 include the names of black students. The prizes were then increased in value, with the stipulation that entries had to be submitted in an indigenous language. But the competition was apparently quietly dropped and no awards were made in 1925. See H.M. Robertson, *A History of the University of Cape Town*, unpublished manuscript, incomplete at the time of author's death, pagination not continuous, 718–719. Chapter 6 refers to the Faculty of Arts, with the focus on the 1920s. Copy held by UCT's Manuscripts and Archives.

73. The first minute book of the association went missing between when I first saw it and when I received the records for collation and submission to the Archives and Manuscripts division of the UCT Library. But, for what it is worth, I have no recollection of ever seeing his name in the papers.

74. A. Hogben and A. Hogben, *Lancelot Hogben, An Unauthorized Autobiography* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1998), 99.

75. Within months of his arrival in Cape Town his family in Ireland had picked up that he was completely smitten with Ruth. See Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 122.

76. *Ibid.*, 120–121.

police raided a camp of strikers at the Loray Mill, Gastonia, North Carolina. The strike had been for the right of workers in the cotton mills to unionise, but resistance to the strike was presented as a necessary campaign against a communist plot.<sup>77</sup> As Hirson observes, ‘Morris [Alexander], who was trying to effect a reconciliation with Smuts, could only have been embarrassed by the publicity in the press’.<sup>78</sup> Then, in 1930, Alexander apparently sided with those who supported Hertzog’s franchise bill, which extended the franchise to all white women in South Africa, without qualification. After the first reading of the bill on 3 March, Ruth and others signed a letter of protest, published in the *Cape Times* of 5 March 1930, complaining that the bill was regressive in the way it excluded coloured and African women from the vote.<sup>79</sup> The second reading debate began on 6 March, and the proposal was strongly opposed by many in Hertzog’s ruling party, but supported by the leader of the opposition, J.C. Smuts, and many members of his South African Party. In the debate it was pointed out that the enfranchisement of white women would significantly strengthen the voting strength of the whites, and reduce the percentage of African voters to a mere 2 per cent.<sup>80</sup> Ruth could not accept Morris’s pragmatic liberalism. Ben no doubt genuinely shared her hostility to Hertzog’s cynical move to strengthen the white vote, and had something to gain by making sympathetic noises.

Ruth had already adopted District Six as her cause. This was the large suburb to the southeast of central Cape Town, where the vast majority of the coloured community lived, packed into slums mostly owned by absentee landlords. But it was also home to many indigent whites, and in particular to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. For these, Morris Alexander provided a synagogue.<sup>81</sup> Ruth’s main project was the organisation of a play centre for indigent coloured children, but she worked to dispel any romantic illusions about District Six by writing a string of articles for the local newspapers, and a novel, *The Exiles*, though it was still unpublished at the time of her death. Her forceful engagement with social issues would have gelled well with the humanism evidenced in Farrington’s writings. Ruth was a prolific contributor of book reviews to the *Cape Times* and the *Cape Argus*, and both wrote articles and reviews for the press in the fields of literature and politics. Hirson found that with a collection of cuttings from their early period of association he was not sure, when the by-line was missing, which was to be attributed to Ruth Schechter and which to Farrington.<sup>82</sup>

Some light on Farrington is shed indirectly by what is recorded about Ruth’s circle. For example, Hogben wrote about one of the group, Herbert Meyerowitz: ‘his political outlook was

77. Amy’s story is told in Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 172–179.

78. *Ibid.*, 178.

79. *Ibid.*, 221. Hirson notes that Alexander voted for the bill, but he lost his seat in parliament in 1929. The truth may be that Alexander indicated his support for the proposal when it was first raised in 1928. On the other hand, A. Paton, *Hofmeyr* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), 133, claims that Hofmeyr, who won a seat in 1929, opposed the bill. The bill was first introduced and accepted on 3 March 1930, and the second reading began on 5 March. The debate took an extraordinary amount of time, stretching over several sessions, but the Hansard account does not show Hofmeyr as having contributed to the debate at all, though he had plenty to say for himself on other issues in the period, and in the final vote he joined the ayes along with J.C. Smuts and Hertzog (the tally is given in Hansard for 24 March 1930, cols. 2269–2270). The noes included men from Hertzog’s ruling party, who saw the bill as opening the way for the enfranchisement of greater numbers of ‘non-whites’ (these days collectively called blacks), and more radical members of Smuts’ party, who objected that the bill was illogical in not extending the franchise to women of all racial groups, or at least to coloured women.

80. The full set of figures appears in Hansard for the session held on 10 March 1930, column 1645.

81. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 107.

82. *Ibid.*, xxix and 142. Ruth’s publications are reviewed in chapter 9.

intelligently, not dogmatically, Marxist. Like all members of the circle of friends we had in Cape Town, he was anti-segregationist'.<sup>83</sup> Hogben found his professorial colleagues at UCT not stimulating,

... but several of the junior academic staff were companionable, among them Benjamin Farrington, then a lecturer who taught Greek, and Frederick Bodmer,<sup>[84]</sup> senior lecturer in the Dept of German ... Farrington awakened my interest in early Greek science and the Greek atomists sufficiently to make me read everything accessible about them – including the doctoral thesis of Karl Marx.<sup>85</sup>

Incidentally, Farrington's rejection of fundamentalism in favour of materialism had a certain topical flavour, as we are dealing with the period shortly after the prosecution of John Scopes in Tennessee in 1925 for teaching Darwinian theory in his biology classes. With less to lose, Hogben took Smuts on when the British Association for the Advancement of Science held its conference at the newly opened Groote Schuur campus of UCT in 1929. He attacked, in his characteristic merciless way, Smuts' holistic ecological model, pitting against it his own materialist ideas, and criticising Smuts' holism for its accommodation of racist eugenics.<sup>86</sup> The principal, Jock Beattie, must have had mixed feelings when Hogben handed in his resignation in 1930. Farrington was left behind to hold the flag for Marx, Lucretius, Epicurus and the Ionian atomists.

Farrington would also have been an acquaintance of Eddie Roux, who was a friend of Hogben, after Roux's return from Cambridge in 1929 and appointment to a post in a government research laboratory in Cape Town. For a while, Eddie Roux was entrusted with the editorship of the newspaper of the CPSA, the *SA Worker*, but in 1931 he was found guilty of heresy by the comrades and the production of the paper was returned to Johannesburg. He eventually left the CPSA in 1936, disillusioned by Stalinism and the tight control which the Communist International exerted over the South African party.<sup>87</sup> He drifted away even from Marxism, complaining that Marxism fails 'when it ceases to be an empirical study and becomes a dogmatic creed'.<sup>88</sup> This was the burden of Farrington's explanation of the failure of science after the successes of the early Ionian scientists: empirical study and experiment (for him the more significant element) gave way to superstition and a priori assumptions.

83. Hogben and Hogben, *Lancelot Hogben*, 99.

84. While Hogben and Bodmer were colleagues at UCT they planned the series *Primers for the Age of Plenty*, which was to include Hogben's *Science for the Citizen* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938) and Bodmer's *The Loom of Language* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943).

85. Hogben and Hogben, *Lancelot Hogben*, 105. This would have been about the time that Cyril Bailey published his note 'Karl Marx on Greek Atomism', *Classical Quarterly*, 22 (1928), 205–206, emphasising the significance of Marx's appreciation of Epicurus' divergence from Democritean atomism with his introduction of the notion of swerve. Marx's thesis bore the title *Über die Differenz der Demokritischen und Epicureischen Naturphilosophie*.

86. J.B. Foster, 'Marx's Ecology in Historical Perspective', *International Socialism Journal*, 96 (2002) (available on the Internet).

87. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, x–xi. But the documents seem to show him as still an active member in 1937, albeit as one of 'the opposition'. Another facet of the story emerges from the documents of the Communist Party assembled by A. Davidson, I. Filatova *et al.*, eds, *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History, Volume 2: 1931–1939* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), which offer a grim picture of feuding among the comrades. Although Roux was regularly in trouble with the authorities because of his dedicated, unremitting activism, and although he was a member of the Politbureau until 1935, he was through this period variously described by his comrades as 'politically unstable', dangerously right wing (p 73), a Buntingist and not the sort of person one wanted in the Party. His name is generally misspelled. Roux was no less capable of robust dismissive labelling. Farrington sensibly stayed away from the Communist Party's internal scrapping.

88. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, xii.

Intellectually Farrington was more in with the Trotskyists, and this was in the context of the drift of Cape Town Marxists away from whatever was the party line of the day. In 1921 the International Socialist League had made way for the foundation of the CPSA, which in July held its inaugural conference in Cape Town. The CPSA was established as an affiliate or section of the Third International,<sup>89</sup> a step that was not uncontroversial, as there were those, particularly in Johannesburg, who were horrified at the idea of taking direction from Moscow. Furthermore, in the Cape this launch marked a stage in the development of a progressive labour movement committed to the incorporation of workers of all ethnic groups, which was generally not a serious concern in the Transvaal. Thus in Cape Town even the whites who made up the Labour Party made an effort to meet with representatives of black trade unionists,<sup>90</sup> and indeed the Cape province was relatively progressive in having limited, but still meaningful provision for 'natives' to have the franchise. The presence and scale of the coloured population in the Cape Peninsula made the racial divide less marked than in Johannesburg. The divisions were exposed in the Rand Revolt of February/March 1922, on which we have commented above, and the conflict was further complicated by issues that divided Afrikaner nationalists.

The CPSA had proved incapable of providing leadership at a national level, and the view from Moscow, as seen by David Ivon Jones, was that 'the Comintern will henceforth have to take over direct responsibility for the native masses'.<sup>91</sup> Farrington did not wish to have the Comintern in his life, any more than he wanted an Irish International telling him what to think. Thus it is not surprising that he was not attracted to the CPSA, but moved rather in Trotskyist circles.

At this point the story becomes a little complicated. Thanks not least to the efforts of S.P. Bunting, the CPSA developed into more of a black party in the 1920s, so that by January 1931 its Central Committee was made up of 19 blacks and four whites.<sup>92</sup> But following a directive from the executive of the Comintern, the Party expelled a cluster of stalwarts, including the radical S.P. Bunting, as being too reactionary.<sup>93</sup> By now there was something of an expanding

89. The constitution, rules and manifesto adopted by the conference can be found in *South African Communists Speak: Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party* (hereafter *SACS*) (London: Inkuleleko, 1981), 57–65. The Party came into existence on 30 July 1921 and the secretary applied for the affiliation to the Third Communist International on 10 August: Davidson and Filatova, *Volume 1*, 84–85. The Comintern had refused to recognise the Communist Party of South Africa, formed earlier in Johannesburg by Dunbar, with the active support of the Yiddish Speaking Branch of the International Socialist League. See E.A. Mantzaris, 'Radical Community: The Yiddish-speaking Branch of the International Socialist League, 1918–1920', in B. Bozzoli, ed., *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 160–176, esp. 170–171. The reason given was that it would allow only one Communist Party in any one country: *SACS*, 40.

90. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 198.

91. A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2002), 63.

92. Report of the Ninth Conference of the CPSA, quoted in *SACS*, 113–114. In his report to the Comintern of 13 August 1921, Ivon Jones gave prominence in his Who's Who in the Communist Party and related bodies to S.P. Bunting, and labelled him as 'inclined to leftism in questions of parliamentary elections, and advocates devoting Communist activity solely to the Negro workers': Davidson and Filatova, *Volume 1*, document no. 14, 86.

93. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 255–256; *SACS* 112–113. I have not referred so far to the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU), established in Cape Town in 1919, as I do not know if Farrington became interested in its stormy affairs. Furthermore, the headquarters moved to Johannesburg in 1925. Of immediate relevance is the division between the radicals and the more liberal pragmatists, which led to the expulsion of the Communists from the movement in December 1926, and a bitter battle between the founder of the ICU, Clements Kadalie, and Bunting in the Communist Party lines. See Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 161–167.

universe of Trotskyist and anti-Trotsky splinter groups, not least in Cape Town.<sup>94</sup> There in 1931 the International Socialist Club (ISC) was founded, its members including CPSA rejects. An offshoot of the ISC was the Marxist Educational League, for those of Trotskyist persuasion; and Communists set up the October Club to counter Trotskyism<sup>95</sup> and to proselytise among black workers; and some Trotskyists found a home in the Independent Labour Party, a group that had broken away from the Cape Town Labour Party. Stirring the pot was the *Gezelschaft far Erd*, made up largely of Yiddish-speaking Jews, and dedicated to opposing Trotskyism. Trotskyists found lurking in this CPSA affiliate were duly expelled, and they went on to found the Lenin Club in July 1933. Thus the core of the Lenin Club was Yiddish-speaking, and it attracted radical thinkers from UCT, including Benjamin Farrington, who, it is said, lectured to the group on dialectics.<sup>96</sup> Towards the end of Farrington's stay at UCT the Lenin Club split into the Workers' Party, spawning the Spartacist Club, of which Bodmer was briefly chairman, and what became the Fourth International.<sup>97</sup> Farrington might address such groups, but membership should not be assumed.<sup>98</sup> There is the element of the circular argument in suggesting that because he was a public intellectual he avoided formal membership of political associations, but there is less risk in claiming that he could be seen as a public intellectual by the way he contributed to debates in these circles with material built up from his study of classical texts, and indeed by his publications for a much wider readership.<sup>99</sup>

His research interests and extra-mural activities, in lecturing to groups and writing for the press, made him something of an oddball in the Classics Department.<sup>100</sup> The pillar of Classics at UCT was the Latinist, Prof W. Ritchie, who had been in his post since 1882, and remained in service until he retired in 1929, to be succeeded by Benjamin Farrington himself. Ritchie served on all the key committees including Council, and deputised at times for the principal. Theo le Roux, the professor of Greek,<sup>101</sup> gave his spare time to student administration and supporting student sporting activities. William Rollo, who joined the department in 1926 was no less active

94. The proliferation of splinter groups arose no doubt from some frustration. There was a similar development in the black townships in the dark days of apartheid with the explosion of separate churches. Issues that divided Marxists included the priority to be given to mobilising the urban black proletariat over against the agricultural proletariat and peasant farmers; land redistribution; and the development of a shared class consciousness among black and white workers. This history is well covered by Drew, *Discordant Comrades*.

95. But the Comintern had it entered as a Trotskyist club. See Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, 186.

96. *Ibid.*, 139–142.

97. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 312.

98. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 167–169 notes that Ruth Schechter distanced herself from 'the Communist Party and its front organisations', and the Hogbens joined no political group, and 'most academics in these [Trotskyist] circles stayed away from formal political groups'.

99. An indicator of the intended readership is the list of series in which his books appeared, including *The Thinker's Library* (for *Head and Hand* (1947)); *Home University Library* (for *Science in Antiquity* (1936)); and *Unwin University Books* (for *Science and Politics* (1939)).

100. Classics was perhaps more a department in reality than in formal structure. The university calendar of 1920 does not use the label for Classics: it only came in with the calendar of 1923. Farrington's arrival in Cape Town had been preceded by the brief youthful periods at SAC/UCT of J.H. Hofmeyr and T.J. Haarhoff, who left successively for the professorship of Classics at the institution that was to be known as the University of the Witwatersrand. Hofmeyr was a lecturer in Latin at UCT, but when he left he was replaced by Theo le Roux, who was soon after advanced to the chair of Greek. For a summary of Farrington's career as a classicist, see F. Smuts, 'Classical Scholarship and the Teaching of Classics at Cape Town and Stellenbosch', *Acta Classica*, 3 (1960), 7–31, esp. 18–20.

101. From 1919 till his death in 1948.

in research than Farrington, but, although his Leiden doctoral thesis was on the Basque dialect of Marquina, his publications in his early years at UCT were squarely in the conventional field of classical philology (in its nineteenth century sense) whereas Farrington's publication list included more exotic items like his study on *Samuel Butler and the Odyssey* (1929),<sup>102</sup> and his translations of Vesalius and Africana texts in Latin. Farrington was more the public intellectual, in its most positive sense,<sup>103</sup> thus gloriously rather unpredictable, and more of a presence in the circles of non-classicist intellectuals.

The Department saw advantage in using his talents to launch a course in Classical Culture through the medium of English, and Farrington 'consented to give the course' himself, despite misgivings because, like most progressive classicists at the time, he felt the tension between the commitment to keep the classical languages alive and the desire to promote the study of classical literature and civilisation more widely. Farrington wrote about his decision,

I felt it necessary to transcend the usual limits of the curriculum in two directions, namely, by including the history of science and by continuing the story to include the rise of Christian Greek and Latin literature. This altered the direction of my subsequent studies.<sup>104</sup>

While he may have caused some eyebrows to be raised, because he was prepared to teach classical texts in translation, it was not necessary at that time for him to be defensive about offering translation as a research interest. But what set Farrington apart here was his choice of texts to translate. In the context of the struggle to get a school of African Studies launched at UCT, it is significant that he was attracted to Africana texts, and published translations of Wilhelm ten Rhyne's *Schediasma de Promontorio Bonae Spei Ejusve Tractus Incolis Hottentotis* (1686) and J.G. Grevenbroek's *Elegans et Accurate Descriptio Gentis Africanae circa Promontorium Capitis Bonae Spei, Vulgo Hottentotten Nuncupatae* (from a letter written in 1695).<sup>105</sup> The critical notes show how he brought his classical knowledge and special interest in Greek science and philosophy to bear on the texts and extended his areas of research far beyond the classicist's usual boundaries. Thus, for example, he comments in his introduction to the translation of Ten Rhyne that he

... had imbibed his hostility to the *a priori* method of interpreting natural philosophy from an early work of Greek science that has attracted much attention in modern times. In 1669 and again in 1672 Ten Rhyne published discussions on the Hippocratic tract *On Ancient Medicine*.<sup>106</sup>

102. I suspect that Farrington was following the lead of John Pentland Mahaffy (1839–1919), the first professor of Ancient History at Trinity College, Dublin, despite his claim to have loathed the man.
103. For the term has a similar range of connotations to those of the Greek term sophist. Appropriately Farrington, in his *Science and Politics in the Ancient World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), 125, says of Epicurus that he 'did not believe in street-preaching, but he taught that one must not refuse to lecture when asked'. As noted above, Farrington had such invitations from the Lenin Club. Insofar as holding office in the Classical Association is an indicator of rank in the profession it might be noted that after the launch of CASA in 1927, Prof Ritchie became the first executive president, Rollo one of two national secretaries, and Farrington the secretary of the Cape Town branch. In the university context the cynical definition of the intellectual might be one who skips faculty board meetings and brings to committees little more than inscrutability, or is a garrulous pusher of paradox or *idées fixes*.
104. Letter to F. Smuts, quoted in Smuts, 'Classical Scholarship', 19.
105. The two translations were published in the volume I. Schapera, ed., *The Early Cape Hottentots* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1933).
106. *Ibid.*, 83. Here Farrington is referring to Ten Rhyne's criticism of Descartes for explaining wind patterns as due solely to the moon, and not using 'induction based on experience': *ibid.*, 99.

Farrington's political attitude to his material may be reflected in his comment that Grevenbroek 'attracts by his honest indignation at the abuses of the time and by his charming, if absurdly expressed, enthusiasm for the Cape and its native inhabitants'.<sup>107</sup>

Farrington's materialist interest in science and medicine had already been demonstrated in press articles on Vesalius (in 1930 and 1931),<sup>108</sup> and his translation under the title 'The Preface of Andreas Vesalius to *De Fabrica Corporis Humani*, 1543'.<sup>109</sup> Vesalius was very much the hands-on practitioner of dissection, vivisection and surgery. Farrington's interest in Vesalius was probably inspired, or at least encouraged, by Hogben, who had a section on Vesalius in his *Science for the Citizen* (1938) where he stresses the importance of Vesalius' engagement in 'actual experiment' in particular with regard to the function of the nerves in passing messages to the muscles.<sup>110</sup> Farrington went on in his own work on ancient science and medicine to emphasise the prime importance of experiment,<sup>111</sup> and to cite its absence as a major reason why Greek science regressed after the ground-breaking work of the Ionians, and in particular the atomists, although, as he later conceded, atomic theory could not go much beyond 'speculation based on the observation of uncontrolled natural phenomena'.<sup>112</sup>

On Epicurus' significant reworking of Democritus' theory on atoms, Farrington, as we have seen, had persuaded Hogben to read Karl Marx's thesis on the subject. As it happened, the original text was included in the collected works of Karl Marx published by the Marx-Engels Institute in 1927, which was the year when Hogben started at UCT. If Farrington missed the original notice of the publication, he would certainly have picked up the reference from Cyril Bailey's 'Karl Marx on Greek Atomism'.<sup>113</sup> Epicurus' theory of the self-initiated atomic swerve served as a counter to determinism, and the foundation for his teaching on human free will. For Hogben and Farrington the assault on determinism sat well with their scientific humanism, but their paths diverged after they left South Africa, Farrington becoming a committed Communist, and Hogben being a very vocal opponent. In his view, before the war, support for communism was as good as giving weapons to fascists.

But there was another line on which they agreed: scientific research as an aspect of the Ionian enlightenment ground to a halt in Athens because of its form of democracy, which allowed the upper class to manipulate the citizen body into voting against its best interests. Superstition was used as a means of social control. The people were particularly vulnerable to the persuasive powers of a Socrates or a Plato, and Plato was, in Farrington's view, the enemy of the Ionian scientific tradition by his insistence on the primacy of disembodied arithmetic and geometry, and by substituting for rational astronomy astral theology. Hogben seems to follow Farrington's line.<sup>114</sup>

Farrington left Cape Town with a wealth of diverse experiences, as an Anglo-Irishman among Gaelic republicans, then Afrikaner nationalists, Yiddish-speaking Marxists, and conservative

107. *Ibid.*, 170. For example, where he attacks the greed and materialism of the Dutch settlers, and notes that 'erecting crosses and gibbets for the suppression of crime' is not the way to found a colony: *ibid.*, 285.

108. So Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 140.

109. This appeared in *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 25, 9 (1932), 1357–1366.

110. Hogben, *Science for the Citizen*, 794–798.

111. See, for example, the first two chapters of B. Farrington, *Head and Hand in Ancient Greece* (London: Watts, 1947).

112. Farrington, *Science and Politics*, 57.

113. Bailey, 'Karl Marx on Greek Atomism', 205–206.

114. See Hogben, *Science for the Citizen*, 76.

colonialists. As we have seen, he joined the British Communist Party, and after a year in Bristol, moved to the University College of Swansea in 1936<sup>115</sup> to the chair of Classics. One might say that Farrington went to Swansea burdened with a name for an approach to the history of science that was in need of some correction. To shore up the edifice of his thesis he went back to Marx and Epicurean atomism, and stressed the idea that an atom could ‘swerve’ by an act of volition. But Samuel Butler had readily recognised that such a notion was an act of faith, for ‘no objection can lie to our supposing potential or elementary volition or consciousness to exist in atoms ... By giving them free will we do no more than those who make them bound to obey fixed laws’.<sup>116</sup> Thus by starting with Epicurus’ atomic theory, Farrington was basing his case against determinism on an a priori assumption. At the same time, after blaming Socrates’ emphasis on ‘supra-sensible reality’ for the demise of experimental science, he had to justify the idea that Epicurus’ atomic theory had not stood in the way of his championship of experiential testing. At the more personal level it may seem surprising that after all his resistance to political control and thought police, he committed himself to the discipline of the British Communist Party.

But paradox, the challenge to conventional wisdom, is the hallmark of the public intellectual. After his first two years in Cape Town he learnt that he was not suited temperamentally for the world of active politics. But he had learnt from the likes of W.B. Yeats and MacNeill and had found much stimulation from Ruth Schechter and her circle of intellectual friends. He mixed with the likes of Hogben and Bodmer and the lively minds in Trotskyist circles. His study of Epicurean atomism, Greek science and medicine gave him new ideas to contribute. He did not need modern theories on the nature of the public intellectual, for he found his own models in antiquity. I suspect that Farrington was revealing something of his own ambition when he wrote of Epicurus: ‘He never doubted the extent of the influence that can be exerted by one man who shuns the path of ambition, if he has something to say to his age’.<sup>117</sup>

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115. Thus a year before Thomson took the chair of Greek in Birmingham, in succession to E.R. Dodds.

116. Samuel Butler, quoted by C. Bailey, *Titi Lucreti Cari: De Rerum Natura, Volume 2* (Oxford: OUP, 1947), 841–842.

117. B. Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1967), 78.

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