

**REVIEW OF ALLISON DREW, *BETWEEN EMPIRE AND REVOLUTION: A LIFE OF SIDNEY BUNTING 1873–1936*  
(London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007; Pretoria: Unisa Press).  
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How does a privileged son of the British Empire come to fight relentlessly against imperial capitalism? How does a boy growing up in an upper middle class Liberal home become a devoted champion of the working class? How does a “believer” raised in Wesleyan Methodism become a founding member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)? How does one take up the cause of workers while one’s family is vigorously pursuing its commercial ambitions at Lidgetton in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands? How does one reared into white chauvinism become a nigrophilist or “kaffirboetie”?

Answers to these and other questions may be found in Allison Drew’s outstanding study, *Between Empire and Revolution: A Life of Sidney Bunting 1873–1936*. Drew’s biography is a rich and revealing narrative of an eminent South African, Sidney Bunting, and reminds us once again of the many different persons, white and black, who chartered the course of freedom in this country. A lecturer in Politics at the University of York, Drew has an in-depth knowledge of the history of Left politics in South Africa, having already published a two volume documentary history of the “Radical Tradition in South Africa” covering the period 1907–1960, as well as *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2002).

*Between Empire and Revolution* is both a personal story and a political story, and shows how the one is imbricated in the other. While an earlier 1943 biography of Bunting, by Eddie Roux, his personal friend and comrade, gives mainly the portrait of a political luminary, Drew’s book paints a more intricate picture as she provides details of Bunting’s personal and family background and the tempo and texture of the historical and social context in which he lived in both Britain and South Africa. We have a good sense of the dominant values and influences of the British Empire of the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, against which Bunting carved out his own unique mission.

Indeed, Drew’s research is rich in period detail, where the personal and political are intertwined. She draws from extensive archival research both in the United Kingdom and in South Africa, from family papers, letters and correspondence, minutes of meetings, and Bunting’s own voluminous writings, to recreate Bunting’s biography. She also conducted research in the Comintern archives in Russia, and worked through numerous trial transcripts from Bunting’s legal and political career.

Drew is adept at recreating socio-cultural context, whether that of late Victorian London or early twentieth century Johannesburg. She delineates in graphic detail the complex social networks at work and the way they interact with and impinge on the life of a single individual.

Bunting was born in London in 1873, when the Victorian era was at its height. In his early life he was exposed to a social activism that derived directly from his staunch Wesleyan Methodist background. Working among the poor in London, or going to the Working Men's College was routine, which would undoubtedly have laid the foundation for an acute social conscience, and sown the seeds for the making of a revolutionary. When he was a young adult, his parents introduced him to the renowned Liberal Party leader, William Gladstone, and they were also ardent supporters of Booker T. Washington and Ida B. Wells, prominent US civil rights campaigners.

In the 1890s Bunting studied at Oxford, where he won the Chancellor's prize, and become part of the Bloomsbury and Oxford circuit of intellectuals. Bunting completed his studies and was on the threshold of a promising legal career; he could have enjoyed an illustrious position in any one of the outposts of Empire, if he so desired. As Drew puts it: "With a Queen's Medal in his pocket, a first-class degree from Oxford and a solicitor's training, a white man might go far in South Africa" (p. 58). And many did. A friend and contemporary of the president of Magdalen College, for example, at the time when Bunting studied there, was Alfred Milner, who in 1897 became High Commissioner for South Africa and Governor-General of the Cape Colony.

But when Bunting came to South Africa in 1900, to support the British side in the South African War, he confronted the race question head on. This was to put him immediately and irrevocably at odds with the Empire. He came to South Africa at a time when the mining industry, on which the wealth of white South Africa would be founded, was establishing itself and influencing the way race and race relations were configured. Johannesburg, the city of gold, at the epicentre of this industry, was on the long road to defining itself as the economic and political hub of the country.

Drew paints a multi-layered picture, showing the converging of histories of many different worker groups; black, white, Indian and Chinese. While apartheid aimed to separate groups, Drew's book shows the way in which our histories are actually "shared histories".

Bunting was deeply distressed with the treatment of the working class, both white and black. It was logical and inevitable that he soon became immersed in political activities to alleviate their plight, and the rest of the biography deals with his changing fortunes in the leftist groupings that emerged to fight the scourge of worker oppression.

Bunting was drawn to join the Labour Party, formed in the first decade of the twentieth century, before the institution of the Union of South Africa. These efforts to fight for change naturally intensified after the promulgation of the 1913 Land Act. Bunting broke from the Labour Party, which was largely a "white labour" party, and felt increasingly the need to develop interracial working class unity, through an International Socialist League; in 1921 this became the CPSA, with Bunting as one of the founder members. The CPSA worked with the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), which gained ground under the charismatic leadership of Clements Kadalie, and with the ANC. Further afield, the success of the October Revolution against Czarist Russia convinced him that state power was not invincible. Bunting was to visit Moscow during Lenin's reign.

Much of the political tension at the time was due to increased Comintern involvement in South African affairs and adoption of the "native republic" thesis as a stage towards a workers' government. Bunting initially opposed this but changed his

position after attending the Sixth Comintern Congress in August 1928. He worked hard to build the party but the debate on the concept of a “native republic” damaged Bunting's standing within it.

We read with increasing uneasiness of the internal rifts and personal rivalries in the CPSA, which came to a head when Bunting was expelled from the party in 1931. The victim of what was termed an “Anti-Bunting push”, his expulsion engendered profound shock both within the party and beyond.

The relationship between the ICU and CPSA had also deteriorated in the late 1920s. Alongside this political narrative, the biography deals with the marriage and partnership of Sidney and Rebecca, the raising of their two sons, Arthur and Brian, the entrepreneurial ambitions of his extended maternal family at Lidgetton in Natal, named after his maternal family, and of his sustained and sustaining musical pursuits.

Although he continued his activities as a political commentator and journalist, Bunting had to deal with ostracism and ridicule from the party he nurtured, deteriorating health, and increasing and irreversible penury. Memorialisation of Bunting after his death restored some of this lost dignity, for his family, but did not mitigate their deep hurt at the wrongs he had suffered.

Drew’s biography goes a long way in vindicating his life. While “Buntingism” became a dirty world in the political turmoil in which Sidney Bunting was embroiled, Drew’s biography reinstates the Bunting name in the annals of South African history. What she does not elaborate upon—understandably, as this is a story of Sidney Bunting—is that Brian Bunting was to carry the torch of his illustrious father, and become a leading figure in his own right in the South African liberation struggle.

Had Sidney Bunting lived to see it, his faith in history would have been restored when, in 1994, South Africa became the “native republic” he fought and died for. One wonders though how he would have felt at the increasing dominance of neo-liberalism and capitalism in the early twentieth century, having given his life to struggling against them. Bunting believed unwaveringly that political, social and economic emancipation are indivisible. Do we? He was opposed to “parlour Bolshevism”, and wanted nothing less than the redemption of Africa. Do we?

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