

Book Review

AFRIKANER ODYSSEY: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE REITZ FAMILY

Martin Meredith

Ian van der Waag
Stellenbosch University

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Deneys Reitz (1882–1944), the acclaimed memoirist and author of *Commando*, is arguably the best known of his gifted family.¹ Several generations before him played interesting roles in the history of South Africa. The progenitor, Jan Frederik Reitz (1761–1824), was a Dutch naval officer, and then a Cape civil servant, before becoming a substantial landowner. His marriage into the influential Van Reenen family assisted as a social escalator. They had four sons and a daughter. Of these, Francis William (1810–1881) was a Swellendam agriculturalist and politician, and was returned in 1854 as one of the youngest members of the Cape Parliament of Francis William’s twelve children, a daughter married WP Schreiner, later a prime minister of the Cape Colony, and a son, another Francis William (1844–1934), served as president of the Orange Free State, then as state secretary of the South African Republic (Transvaal), and after 1910, as the first present of the Senate of the Union of South Africa. His talented sons included legal men, politicians, an author and poet, and another Union senator, as well as Deneys, the soldier-politician and trusted confidant of General Jan Smuts.

Afrikaner odyssey announces itself as an “account of the life and times of three generations” of this family (page xi): Deneys, his father, and grandfather. Being somebody who enjoys prosopography, and with the promise of good doses of family history in the case of *Afrikaner odyssey*, I eagerly bought the book. It is an easy, at times entertaining, read by a well-published author. However, based on a narrow reading of mostly secondary sources, *Afrikaner odyssey* lacks the depth and nuance of Meredith’s earlier work. It is also too focused on the Anglo-Boer War generally. Deneys’s later autobiographical work, *Trekking on* (London 1933) and *No outspan* (London 1943), which deal with his First World War and later years, are cited in the

‘Select bibliography’, but almost no use is made of them. Moreover, at all turns, the reader wants to know more about more members of the Reitz family and the Reitz households, their interpersonal relationships, their hopes and aspirations, personal trials and tribulations. Deneys’s wife, Leila, who became the first female member of the South African Parliament in 1933, is shelved in a short paragraph on page 203. The First World War is dealt with, almost as an afterthought, in a brief, 8-page, Chapter 18 (“Broedertwis”), while the Second World War, which sees Deneys Reitz back in Cabinet office and then as SA High Commissioner in London, is dismissed with a single paragraph on the final page of the epilogue. How utterly disappointing.

Endnotes

¹ Deneys Reitz, *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Anglo-Boer War* (Faber and Faber, London 1929).