Dora Taylor

[](http://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/biography_pics/imgres_0.jpg)

**Synopsis:**

Member of the Lenin Club, Founder member of the Non European Unity Movement and Author.

**First name:**

Dora

**Last name:**

Taylor

**Date of birth:**

1899

**Location of birth:**

Aberdeen, Scotland

**Date of death:**

1976

Dora Taylor was born in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1899. At the age of six her mother died of tuberculosis. She was rejected by her father who regarded her as an illegitimate child. Consequently, she suffered physical abuse and neglect by her relatives. This resulted in her being adopted by Mary-Ann Brown Craig a principal at a local Aberdeen school. Craig provided for Dora’s welfare and educational needs throughout her schooling years.

After completing grammar school, Dora enrolled at the University of Aberdeen where she studied and received an MA in English Literature in 1922. Shortly afterwards, she married James Taylor a psychologist who was had accepted a post as a senior lecturer in Psychology at the University of Cape Town in 1926. That same year Dora followed her husband and together they settled in Claremont, Cape Town. As a family of white middle class immigrants, they became entitled to the privileges that came with being white at the time. Despite this, Dora underwent a radical change of perspective as she became associated with a progressive movement sweeping the Western Cape in the 1930s, and subsequently became an ardent advocate for social justice.

Through their interactions with UCT socialists, Dora and her husband were introduced to radical politics of the left in the Western Cape.  For instance, she began to associate herself with prominent radical scholars like Lancelot Hogben of the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) socialist school. Consequently, Dora and her husband began attending a small Trotskyist discussion group known as the Lenin Club in the early 1930s. Through these meetings, she came into contact with one of the foremost black intellectual, [I.B Tabata](http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/isaac-bangani-ib-tabata), who was the founding member of the [All African Convention](http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/all-african-convention) (1935).  Tabata played a key role in the political and intellectual development of Dora Taylor.

Dora began to write about the inequalities and oppression by the colonial state. She also began to write about the envisioning of a non-racial democratic society of South Africa. Her writings were that of a radical revolutionary writing, and therefore were against the liberal intellectual tradition. As a journalist she wrote for a number of newspapers and magazines, including the *Cape Times,* the *Cape Argus*, and *Trek* (a Cape Town periodical). By 1946, Dora had become one of the leading contributors to Trek's. Over a period of seven years, she wrote over 70 articles and produced two book reviews every month. In her writings she provided a perspective that was shaped by her activities and readings of the Marxist tradition.

When the Lenin Club split over political theory and programme of action, especially in relation to the question of who will lead the South African liberation movement, whether it should be peasants or the proletariat. Dora sided with the majority breakaway group which formed the Workers' Party of South Africa. However, fearing opposition from an increasingly fascist state, the Workers' Party (WP) went underground in 1938. In 1943, the WP pushed for the establishment of a federal alliance of diverse organisations called the [Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM).](http://www.aluka.org/action/showCompilationPage?doi=10.5555/AL.SFF.COMPILATION.COLLECTION-MAJOR.UMSA&) Thus, Dora became one of the founder members of NEUM.

Her contribution in the unity movement was mainly on history and criticism. She gave a materialist perspective on culture and society in the movement, and mainly drove an alternative/popular intellectual tradition in opposition to existing mainstream academic production. Her popular piece was the *[The Role of the Missionaries In Conquest](http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/role-missionaries-conquest)*published in 1952.She wrote this book under a pseudonym of Nosipho Majeke, she exposed the complicity of missionaries and the Christian evangelism in the subjugation of the people of South Africa. As a result, many in the white liberals in South Africa came to resent her. Dora also was also a novelist, playwright, and poet who inspired many in the unity movement.

After visiting Boston, Massachusetts in the 1960s she was advised not to return to South Africa because there was a possibility that she would be arrested by the Apartheid government. Thus, she never came back to South Africa until she died in exile. Dora died in England in 1976.

Her other works that never got to be published in her lifetime were, *Don’t Tread on my Dream*, and *Kathie*.

**References:**

• Sheila Belshaw, [*A brief biography of Dora Taylor*](http://www.kalkbaybooks.co.za/reviews-and-articles-detail.php?id=45), [Online], available at [www.kalkbaybooks.co.za](http://www.kalkbaybooks.co.za/), [accessed 31 July 2012].  
• Dora Taylor, Photograph, [Online], available at <http://dorataylor.bookslive.co.za/about/>, [accessed 31 July 2012].  
• Apdusa Views, (2008), *Dora Taylor: Victimised during her life, Vindicated after her death*. Issue No 90.  
• Sandwith, C, (2002), ‘Dora Taylor: South African Marxist’. [*English in Africa*](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/40238950), Vol 29, No 2, pp5-27.

**Last updated : 03-Sep-2012**

This article was produced for South African History Online on 02-Aug-2012