

J.H. HOFMEYR 1894-1948

Any school could be proud of having produced a J.H. Hofmeyr. He went to Saas when he was almost eight years old; he went late because of early illness, but by this time he had learnt to read; his mother suddenly discovered that he could do so. It appeared that this small boy, if he saw printed words, and at the same time heard them spoken, would, when he saw them again, be able to speak them himself. This astonishing memory of eye and ear was one, but only one, of his great intellectual gifts.

His father died when he was three years old. By this time his mother knew that she had no common child, and his delicate health endeared him to her further; he in his turn was docile and affectionate. The two were joined together in an extraordinary relationship of mutual trust and dependence which only death was to end. She was a religious woman, and trained him strictly, while he in his turn was a willing and eager pupil.

When he was about six years of age, his mother sent him to her family at Stellenbosch for a holiday. It was 1900 and people were bitter about the Boer War, so that when he returned home, he refused a friend's gift of a Soldier's Testament adorned with the Union Jack. His mother rebuked him, saying that the Lord was the lover of all peoples. At last he consented to take the book, provided that she wrote in it in the four colours of the Vierkleur. She believes that it was at that time that the seeds were planted of the liberalism which was to be his political creed.

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In five years the small boy passed through the S.A. College School, from Standard I to Matriculation. It was for this last success that he was given the now famous award of condensed milk by his mother; he wanted a dozen tins, but she thought that too many, and gave him three.

The name Hofmeyr was at that time held in great honour at the Cape because it was borne by the elder statesman, Onze Jan, a senior cousin. The old gentleman wanted to pay for the boy's schooling, but the mother would not hear of it. Other offers were to be made to her but she refused them all. She was determined to pay for the schooling herself. Luckily this was not to prove costly, for the boy won many scholarships and bursaries. His fame was spreading, but his mother kept him a small boy; he wore sailor suits, and carried a cat in his blouse.

When he matriculated, third in the colony, he won further bursaries to take him to the University. Onze Jan gave him a good talk, emphasising that character was more important than intellectual achievement; this talk he was always to remember. Indeed Onze Jan played a great part in his life; he used to say that if one wanted to understand his political aims, one must read the lives of Onze Jan and John Bright. His <sup>mother</sup> ~~mother~~, Onze Jan, John Bright, and add to them Jan Smuts and the Emperor Augustus - these were the five humans who counted most for him.

He went to the S.A. College in short trousers. At the opening students' function some person, a wag no doubt, warned him that he

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was expected to reply for the new students; on some pretext or other the small boy got up, and quickly vanished into the night. His progress was as brilliant as ever, but he was not allowed to miss any steps. He came 2nd in the Intermediate examination of the University of South Africa, and won all <sup>five</sup> medals in the Junior B.A.

At the age of 14 he strongly opposed Women's Suffrage in the Debating Society. At this time he wrote out his speeches at full length. He was active in both Debating Society and Students' Christian Association. In 1909 he took his B.A. brilliantly, in the Classics; and in that year suffered the great loss of his senior cousin, Onze Jan. He was awarded the Rhodes Scholarship on his degree, but his ~~mother~~<sup>mother</sup> sought permission for him to take it up in 1913. Of this part of his life little is known; he had fellow-students enough, but they did not stop to observe the words and deeds of their child contemporary.

In 1910 he took a second B.A. in Maths and Science. He took his M.A. in 1911 and then settled down to the writing of Onze Jan's life. He was ceasing to be a child, and began to assume responsible position in student life. He was now somebody, and people began to observe him; but it was his moral stature that impressed them, rather than his intellect. His morality annoyed some, because it was sometimes concerned with small things, things which he himself in later life would have found unimportant; but in his case being moral about small things was a training for being moral about greater ones.

About this time too the S.C.A. began to hold its Boys' Camps,

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and this camping, and his cricket, which at last he was able to play on rather more level terms, were to be two of the abiding pleasures of his life.

In 1913, the biography ended, he went to Balliol, accompanied by his mother. They returned for the long vacation in 1914, in time for the publication and first reviews of his book. It was a boy's book, but an extraordinary boy's book; it was comprehensive and accurate, well-documented, and though never concealing the author's admiration for his subject, it was objective and restrained.

In September they returned to Oxford, but the war had taken and was taking away all those students who would and could be taken. The young man, as he was to do again in 1939, decided to render extra service, and did two or three men's work in the Balliol Boys' Club and the Oxford and Bermondsey Mission. Nevertheless he passed 1st class in the Final Classical School, and returned to South Africa in 1916, anxious to enter the larger world of life and work.

After a year as lecturer in Latin at the S.A. College, he was appointed Professor of Classics at the School of Mines in Johannesburg, and at the age of 25, when Dr. Corstorphin died, he was made Principal, much to the dissatisfaction of the older professors. Here his second and third intellectual gifts were revealed, the ability to grasp the essentials of a case or situation quickly and thoroughly, and the ability to act and move efficiently and smoothly in any established situation; he showed a genius for administration. He found himself, and others found him, in spite of the fact that he had

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never had much money, able to control and use it.

He overcame his diffidence in speaking, and became the most brilliant and witty orator in the Transvaal. His name became widely known, and more than one prophet predicted that he would be Prime Minister. It was breath-taking, though not entirely unexpected, when Smuts made him Administrator of the Transvaal at the age of 29.

So he forsook the world of learning for the larger world of affairs. His self-confidence was greatly increased, though he lost nothing of his modesty. Not long after his appointment by Smuts, the Hertzog Government came to power, and many of its influential supporters demanded his resignation. He entered this non-political fight for the non-political status of the Administratorship with vigour and enjoyment, and Hertzog gave him a proper if cold support. He was a brilliant Administrator, and a more brilliant speaker than ever. He was welcomed at gatherings of all kinds, and it was clear that he had catholic views of South Africa and its many problems. There is no doubt too that he felt that the doors were opening to him, and it was natural that his thoughts turned to a political career. His mother watched this with anxiety, for she knew his true nature, and was not eager for him to enter the hardest world of all.

At the close of his term as Administrator, he and his mother sailed for England, and he was criticised for not first stating his political intentions; but those who knew him found it inconceivable that his support should be given to anyone but Smuts. This he announced in London, but it was well known that he was not enthusiastic

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about partisan politics.

It was not surprising therefore that when he entered politics which he did in 1929, he should have been ready to work for a coalition between Hertzog and Smuts. This he and others achieved in 1933, and he became Minister of Education and the Interior in Hertzog's Coalition Cabinet.

In the meantime he had been giving more and more attention and consideration to the most difficult of all South African problems, namely what is called the Native Question, and finally he made up his mind that he would have to oppose General Hertzog's intention to place enfranchised natives on a separate roll. This was the hardest decision of his life; it meant not only opposing a redoubtable Prime Minister, but also incurring the displeasure of Smuts. He fell ill and did not appear for the second reading of the Bill, but opposed it at the third. The Bill became law, only eleven voting against it. It was his first step into the unknown.

Although he remained a Minister, relations worsened between him and his chief, and eventually in 1938 he resigned from the Cabinet, and in 1939 from the Caucus. After the resignation in 1938 he wrote to a friend that for the first time he felt he would one day be Prime Minister. Meanwhile his speeches were as brilliant as ever, dealing now more and more frequently with the subject that began to fill his mind, namely the just fashioning of a multi-racial society in Africa. But he was beginning to incur hatred, and though he had many friends and supporters, he was tasting a new kind of loneliness,

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imposed not by his natural reserve, but by the inevitable nature of leadership. Nor must one forget the kind of child which he had been, in whose docile and gentle nature his mother had sown the seeds of this unswerving devotion to duty and justice; that duality in itself was to bring much pain.

When Hertzog fell in 1939, Smuts recalled <sup>Hofmeyr</sup> ~~him~~ to the Cabinet. While Smuts occupied himself with the problems of the world, Hofmeyr managed the affairs of South Africa, holding at times, four, five, six portfolios, and piloting nineteen Bills through in a session, and delivering his great speeches, not forgetting the subject which filled his mind. His health suffered gravely, and about 1944 he began to know that his life was not likely to be long. He was at times in great pain, which he bore uncomplainingly, and disliked to have mentioned.

At this time he thought deeply and long over his own future. He began to think that the United Party would be harmed if he were to inherit the leadership from Smuts. He paid four-fifths of his salary into a Deo Gratiae fund, administered by some of his friends for non-European causes. The great strain of the war, and of his own concerns about the future, had caused some kind of withdrawal, but he emerged from it, quieter, humbler, calmer. He was continually attacked, but the pain of it he kept to himself. Old friends who had felt shut off from him, were aware at once of the change in him. His only personal concern was for his mother; and she watched him, doing what she could and knowing there was much she could not do.

When the war ended, friends wrote to him about the great part he  
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had played; some of their letters moved him to unusual tears. He flew to England to receive the Honorary Degree of D.C.L. from the University of Oxford, the greatest honour of his life. He was made a Privy Councillor, the Right Honourable J.H. Hofmeyr. In 1947 the Balliol Boys' Club was reformed into four houses, one of them to be called Hofmeyr House, and he did something he had never been known to do before; he asked a friend to see that the news was given to the Press.

Then came the General Election of 1948. His opponents declared that it would be a Hofmeyr election, that he must be destroyed, that he was a danger to white civilisation in Africa. General Smuts's defeat was a shock to him as it was to the country. Some of his opponents boasted, some of his colleagues declared, that he had lost the election. He faced his challengers with courage, and eventually they signified their confidence in him; but they had wounded him already. Each time he spoke he weakened his hold on life, but it was no personal motive that drove him to defend himself. It was the conviction that if men thought it better not to say the things he did, then right and justice would have been abandoned.

On November 27, 1948, he went to open the new Y.M.C.A. turf wicket in Johannesburg. He was very ill and his mother did not want him to go, but he was determined. He could neither deliver a ball nor receive it; he could not even shake hands with the teams. He had notes for a speech, but it was never made. He was taken home, where he died on December 3, causing great grief in many hearts, and

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leaving in South African public life a gap that has never been filled.

When men remember him, it is not for his intellectual gifts, but for his moral splendour, and above all his courage. He never accepted the view that man was the creature of circumstance, least of all himself. He understood well enough how a man is made, but he believed in that Divine Assistance by which a man might rise above circumstance. He never whined about the time or place in which he was born. He did his duty as he saw it; for him the world was God's, but it had to be fashioned by God's men. The school that had him as a boy can be proud of it; but it will be still prouder on some time that is not yet come.