

BOOKS

A wasted chance

Valentine

Hofmeyr
by Alan Paton
OUP 58s

The 1965 session of South Africa's Parliament heard Dr Verwoerd enunciating a policy of white domination over 87 per cent of the country and the leader of the official opposition, the United Party formerly led by Smuts, outbidding him and enunciating a policy of white domination over 100 per cent of the country. How did white South Africa get so unlovable?

Paton's biography of Hofmeyr is not only a brilliant presentation of the life of a white South African whom Professor Eric Walker described as "the most outspoken South African champion of civilization since (W. P.) Schreiner"; it is also the compelling story of white South Africa's frightening and apparently irreversible retreat from the relatively liberal standards of the Cape Colony before Union.

Hofmeyr was an infant prodigy; a graduate with three South African degrees by the age of 16 and later, a distinguished Balliol graduate. He went into politics as a follower of Smuts — in relation to whom he was a combination of *enfant terrible*, back-room boy wonder, and, perhaps, still small voice — and he took with him intelligence, an infinite capacity for work and a conscience active in the area of racial discrimination. By the standard of the thirties he was a liberal; there were others more liberal than he but none with his combination of great gifts and political eminence.

In Hofmeyr's lifetime the Boer War took place; the two Republics and the two Colonies became the Union in 1910; South Africa participated in two World Wars on Britain's side; and Afrikaner Nationalism with its avowed white supremacy triumphed at the polls in 1948, the year of his death.

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There is much drama in this period, arising out of the conflict of modes of thinking and of personalities; it is also the last period in South African history when the actors are almost all white. There were conflicts between Hofmeyr and Smuts and between Hofmeyr and a House often almost united against them; there was the ousting of Hertzog as Afrikaner leader by Malan, the first "purified" Nationalist Prime Minister; the conflicts between Hertzog and Smuts, and the tragedy of Smuts, or rather, the two Smutses: he who spoke nobly of freedom abroad and connived at oppression at home. Smuts sacrificed much to achieve fusion with Hertzog; what he achieved was a papering over of the cracks; and he himself ripped the paper aside when he took South Africa into World War II. He rode out heavy weather at home in the Allies' dark days and the electorate discarded him in 1948.

In 1936 the all-white Parliament destroyed the only common roll franchise exercised by Africans. This Cape vote had been entrenched in the Constitution but the requisite two-thirds majority for its abolition was easily obtained: the voting was 169 to 11. White South Africa had given the clearest intimation of her future course.

By opposing the Franchise Bill and rebelling against his Prime Minister, Hofmeyr spoke in the voice of contemporary liberalism. He said that talk of "letting the native develop along his own lines" meant "keeping the native in his place"; that the communal franchise offered in return for the common roll franchise implied a divergence of interests among South Africa's racial groups and there was no ultimate divergence of interests. He said that the Bill offered inferiority and would promote hostility. Having said this and more he voted against the Bill, but did not resign from the Cabinet or the Party. His resignation from the Cabinet came in 1938 over a smaller issue in the field of race

which was shaking both President Kasavubu and Mobutu and his College of Commissioners; and the UN operations in Katanga must be placed after the formation of the Adoula Government, which was intent on ending Katanga's secession anyway, but lacked the means to do it. Another part of this coherence can be seen in the expert way Miss Hoskyns fills in the secondary characters on the vast canvas, men like Cleophas Kamitatu, the middle-of-the-road President of Leopoldville province, and the loyal Lumumbist General Lundula who eventually arrested Gizenga. It is interesting, too, to trace the development of the Lumumbist minister Christophe Gbenye, during these years, in view of his later activities as one of the leaders of the 1964 rebellion. At this stage he seems to have been more prepared to compromise than Gizenga, and acted as a go-between from Adoula to Gizenga at the time of the Lovanium Assembly, which saw the formation of the Adoula Government.

The background of Gbenye is but one of the many examples that can be found in these pages to illuminate the present situation. The turbulent nationalism of Stanleyville emerges clearly, as do the parallels between the Gizenga régime of 1961 and the Gbenye régime of 1964. The author records that United Nations officials who were in Stanleyville were adamant that the stories of "wholesale, fascist-type brutality" under Gizenga which were circulating in Leopoldville and Brussels were grossly exaggerated. One wishes it were possible to say the same about the short-lived Gbenye régime in Stanleyville last year. The economic background Miss Hoskyns provides is also useful in illuminating Tshombe's financial settlement with the Belgians in February of this year. But for understanding the Congo in 1965, the book is above all useful in its analysis of Katanga secession and the rôle of M. Tshombe, explaining exactly why he arouses such suspicion in African states. The theme of Katanga runs all the way through this book, and completely dominates the latter part. The author provides a shrewd character assessment of Tshombe as "a personality of considerable charm and glamour. Though widely regarded as a mere pawn in the hands of the Europeans, he was certainly more than this and it seems to have been to a large extent due to his soothing and flexible leadership that the very disparate elements which made up the Katanga régime were able to work together As a negotiator he had the useful gift of being apparently forthcoming while in fact giving nothing away and of being able to make totally contradictory statements without the least embarrassment". All of which makes a lot of sense in a 1965 setting, in helping to account for the Tshombe phenomenon.

Tshombe aside, Miss Hoskyns makes it clear that the Katangese and the Belgians who encouraged them have a heavy responsibility for the lengthy duration of the crisis, and indeed for its internationalisation in the first place. Had it not been for the Katanga question, she argues, Lumumba might have agreed to the disarming of the Force Publique, the need for which was at the core of the crisis in July 1960. And Hammarskjöld's scrupulous caution in dealing with Katanga in August 1960, when the amount of Belgian intervention could have justified stronger action, still within the UN mandate, was a major error from which many subsequent problems sprang. "If a fraction of the pressure used against Katanga in 1961 had been used in 1960, the whole story would have been very different".

¹ *The Congo Since Independence, January 1960 to December 1961*, by Catherine Hoskyns (Oxford University Press, for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 55s.)

relations, and in 1939 he was forced to resign from the caucus when he opposed increased restrictions on Indian trading. But the war found him back in the Cabinet: "the brain and power behind the South African war machine in all aspects except the military", is the uncontroversial judgment of his biographer.

Liberals, unorganized, had long looked to him to leave the United Party and lead them into a Liberal Party, but he did not. His letters suggest that he might have done so had not war intervened and had he lived longer. Perhaps there were two other reasons. In the first place he was not quite sure what he wanted: not equality but equality of opportunity; a Christian trusteeship which acknowledged that the ward would grow up. He was a white South African not free of prejudices and fears but, as his biographer remarks, "he knew them for what they were and was feeling his way out of the bog", and was still feeling his way forward when he died. Secondly—and here present day South African liberalism is different from Hofmeyr's—although "he knew well enough that the white man's time for negotiating change was running out, he was not really impelled by that knowledge": he lacked a sense of urgency. What impelled him was his sense of right. So he went forward in faith, not in fear—his favourite contrast, this—but all too slowly for the march of events.