

BOOK REVIEW

THE RISE AND FALL OF JAN HOFMEYR FROM GOLDEN DAWN TO TRAGIC CLOSE

BY J. A. GRAY



JAN HOFMEYR was the talk of South Africa from the start. "The wonder child," Smuts called him in his funeral oration. South Africa has certainly known no one so precocious.

Consider his early achievements. Matriculation at 12 years of age (1st place in his school, third in the Province), B.A. with honours at 17 (still in short trousers, plumping for a tin of condensed milk as a prize), biographer of his famous uncle Onze Jan at 18, a double first class at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar at 21, Professor of Classics at 22, University Principal at 25—an amazing record. When he was only 17 years old the family doctor was calling him, half in fun, half in earnest, a future Prime Minister—as the whole country was to do later on, when he was barely out of his twenties.

He proved himself no mere juvenile prodigy. If he went up like a rocket, he remained in orbit to the end, a man of principle and integrity, with shining gifts—matchless as an orator, legendary as an executive, master of the parliamentary art. Whether, had he lived, he would ever have attained the topmost place for which his whole career was a preparation, may however be doubted. His star had to all appearance begun to set when he died so tragically at the age of 54.

His biography* has now appeared. We have had to wait a long time for it, considering Hofmeyr has been in his grave sixteen years. Alan Paton says the delay was due to factors outside his control. One of these factors, no doubt, was Hofmeyr's mother.

She was, everyone knows, a dominating influence in her bachelor son's life. It was a relationship so intimate, so pervasive, so decisive, as to demand complete candour on his biographer's part. Mr. Paton is candid to the point of being merciless. He could hardly, in decency, have glossed the book in Mrs. Hofmeyr's lifetime—and she, against expectation, lived on in bitterness and solitude for another ten years, until she was 95.

It is a question whether Mr. Paton does not go too far and give too much of a place to this mother-and-son relationship. Some of the things he says or cites are enough to make poor Hofmeyr turn in his grave. Was "aunte Borrie" really quite such a dragon? It was not the impression I made on me.

She was unquestionably a strong personality who never hesitated to shake her mind. According to Mr. Paton, she was the only person Smuts feared. Jealous, fiercely jealous, perhaps she was—particularly of any young female who might have her eye on the "catch of the son"—and implacably resentful of any slight or injustice done to her or to who was the apply of her eye.

But was that so very unnatural? If Hofmeyr remained tied to his mother's apron strings, to the derision of many and possibly to his own disadvantage, there is not the slightest evidence that he would have benefited otherwise. He remained to the end as devoted to his mother as she was to him, and to nothing did he react more quickly than any other man on anyone's part to recognise the place she occupied.

Next to his mother, Smuts was the great personal influence in his life. It was Smuts who gave him his first big chance. The Prime Minister (as he was at the time) flabbergasted everyone by hoicking him out of the University of the Witwatersrand and making him Administrator of the Transvaal, head of the provincial government with multifarious problems and fierce political rivalries, at the age of 29—careless boy in an ill-fitting ready-made suit and heavy boots, peering from behind thick high-powered spectacles on the greybeard world of the Raad.

It was a critical test of character as well as ability. He lost his main support, Smuts, almost right away, when Hertzog took over the Government, and he found himself confronted by a numerous and influential opposition, including some in high places, who made no secret that they were out both for his blood and his job.

Hofmeyr rose supremely to the occasion. He outpointed his opponents in every round with a display of skill, diplomacy, resource, humour, and, not least, political impartiality that captivated all onlookers. Before

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long he had the Transvaal eating out of his hand, and the major political parties outbidding one another for his eventual allegiance.

His happiest days, his biographer calls them. His name was on everyone's lips. Everywhere he was hailed as the coming man. Never again was he to enjoy such universal esteem. From first to last he kept everyone guessing about his politics, remaining tantalisingly uncommitted. Hertzog, his most sedulous wooer, offered him the High Commissioner'ship in London (before Charles de Water) or another spell as Administrator of the Transvaal.

Hofmeyr turned his back on this and other temptations and went off, still uncommitted, on a trip to the Holy Land and other places with his mother. Actually it was in a newspaper article he wrote at my invitation at that time that he eventually came off the fence.

To win his parliamentary spurs he chose to fight the most marginal seat in the land—it could not have been more marginal, the last member having had a majority of precisely one—and he won with flying colours. It was still roses all the way.

Came the dramatic moment of reconciliation between Hertzog and Smuts that ushered in the six marvellous pre-war years of Fusion—surely South Africa's finest hour. But before that happened—the necessary prelude to it—there was the vain attempt to find an accommodation between Smuts and Tielman Roos. Neither would accept the other as Prime Minister, and Mr. Paton records the hitherto unknown fact that Smuts went the length of proposing Charles de Water, then at South Africa House, as head of the Government. Really!

Automatically Hofmeyr took his place in the Fusion Government. Already he was being widely saluted as the likeliest successor to the Generals when the time came for them to outspan. But there were breakers ahead. The first ominous sign came when Hertzog produced his plan to do away with the Cape native franchise. Hofmeyr with his liberal instinct could not swallow it. Magnanimously the Prime Minister allowed him to speak and vote against his policy, but it was manifestly only a question of time before there was a break.

It came, a year or so later, on the relatively footling issue of whether A. P. J. Fourie, a member of the Cabinet, was a fit and proper person to represent the Coloured people in the Senate. Until war broke out 18 months later Hofmeyr, like Churchill, was in the wilderness, out of step with his party and practically everyone else, and drifting further away from Smuts.

Then began his last and greatest service. Smuts made him Minister of Finance, but that was only his nominal position. Bit by bit his power and influence grew until he became the linchpin of the Government, second in command to Smuts, his deputy at the head of affairs during the Prime Minister's increasing and lengthening absences, "up North" or in Europe, Leader of the House, and Poobah and dogsbody for every Tom, Dick, and Hendrik in the Cabinet who for any reason could not carry on. At one moment he held no fewer than five main portfolios simultaneously.

No man could have carried such an accumulation of burdens without feeling the strain. For all his legendary executive talent, amounting to genius, and his unmatched parliamentary brilliance, even Hofmeyr began to weary; but he felt bound to carry on so long as Smuts, 24 years his senior, refused to take a break—indeed seemed to thrive on his ceaseless comings and goings. Hofmeyr could only marvel at the Prime Minister's resilience, and keep pegging away.

His mother was the last person to look on stoically. She told Smuts to his face that he was killing her son. Mr. Paton's evidence is that Smuts showed himself singularly insensitive to the warning, though there was no person in the land he feared like Mrs Hofmeyr. Even when Hofmeyr was at last driven to ask to be relieved of Finance, Smuts was slow to do anything about it. So poor Hofmeyr drove himself on until he literally dropped. But that was his way. Even with

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the hand of death upon him, as his friends recognised, he refused to give in, keeping a silly little cricket engagement from which he had to be carried home unconscious to die.

Mrs. Hofmeyr never forgave Smuts. Years afterwards, at my last meeting with her, she still maintained coldly, implacably, that her son had been done to death. Rather I prefer to regard his as a martyr to his own ideal of service.

There was more to it than overwork. In the last year or two of his life Hofmeyr was hounded as few political leaders have even been. At the general election of 1948, destined to be his last, he as heir apparent had to bear the brunt of the attack, not the ageing Smuts; and when the Smuts Government was unexpectedly overthrown he was widely blamed by his own side and by the Press for their defeat. "Kaffirboetie" was almost the most complimentary of the epithets flung at him.

One indiscretion above all others his opponents fastened on. This was a remark, made quite gratuitously in the first instance, as it seemed, but deliberately repeated later on, to the effect that he looked forward to the day when non-whites would be represented in Parliament by men of their own race and colour. Whether this was such a staggering revelation of his political testament may be doubted, for he had never attempted to conceal his liberal ideas; but in the mouth of the next Prime Minister, as he was generally regarded, it was no doubt a political blunder of the first magnitude.

Be that as it may, the general election of 1948 left its mark upon him. When I had my last talk with him in Pretoria a few weeks before his death the fight had clearly gone out of him. He was a disenchanted man who had come to realise, I think, that not for him was the leadership of the big battalions.

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Alan Paton has written an outstanding biography. He has written it with sympathy, as befits a friend, but also with objectivity. The complicated, baffling, brilliant man who was Jan Hofmeyr clearly emerges. The book throws new and penetrating light on political developments and intrigues in South Africa in the crucial decade and a half spanning the second world war and culminating in the Nationalist triumph of 1948, when the curtain descended on the Smuts era. Chiefly, however, it must remain a study of a great might-have-been.

