

1919-1920

← The Great War was at last over. In December 1918 Botha and Smuts left to attend the Peace Conference, leaving F.S. Malan as Acting Prime Minister. In January 1919 Malan approached Hofmeyr to become the Organising Secretary of the South African Party. Although Hofmeyr could see the political advantages of such a post, he decided to turn down the offer, partly because he was reluctant to commit himself to any party, partly because he wanted to become financially independent. Only a Hofmeyr would have thought of doing that on a thousand a year, but that was his intention; he meant to live on very little, and to build up a reserve. He had come to the conclusion that no politician could be honest unless he were independent.

iral Nevertheless he wanted it to be known that this big offer had been made to him. He suggested to his strong supporter Wessels van der Merwe that he might be nominated and the job might be offered to him in absentia, which presumably meant without his consent. He could then decide whether he would accept or not. Van der Merwe told him that such a procedure was impossible; he hoped Hofmeyr would accept the job, and thought that with his sober habits he should be able to save as much on the £800 offered as on the £850 he was earning. When later he heard that Hofmeyr had decided not to apply, he wrote that he would not have congratulated Hofmeyr on getting the job, but only the Party on getting Hofmeyr.

Towards the end of February Hofmeyr returned to Johannesburg with his mother, having spent part of his time at the Strand seaside services, and part at the Bain's Kloof camp of the Christian Association. The New Year was always a wonderful time at the Cape; the rains were finished, and would not begin again for some months. Day after day the sun poured down from cloudless skies. Both he and his mother were looking forward to their return to the gracious city and province where both of them had been born. They were leaving with regret nevertheless, she because of her many friends, he because he recognised that Johannesburg, for all its reputation for materialism, was the most stimulating, most lively place in the Union. The School of Mines itself was at the beginning of a period of great development. This year it would become a University College, and its Council would not rest until it had become a University worthy of the city. The Town Council had given a magnificent site of 90 acres at Milner Park, on a commanding ridge facing north, an aspect much to be desired in Johannesburg's sharp highveld winter. There was to arise the finest University in the Union of South Africa. These new developments would now have to be put into new hands, for in January, after a long period of ill-health, Dr. Corstorphine died. Even now the Council, and its members amongst themselves, were discussing what kind of man they were looking for, and where they would find him.

24 It was on March 4, under the chairmanship of Samuel Evans, that the Council met to consider the future. It took an astonishing decision. It decided to offer the principalship to the young Hofmeyr, who was ~~twenty-four~~ years of age. There were several reasons for this. It satisfied those who wanted 'a man from home'; it satisfied those who wanted a man from Oxford or Cambridge; it satisfied those who wanted a South African. Why look for an English Oxonian if you could get a South African one? And what a one! A brilliant scholastic record, a Rhodes Scholar, the J.B. Ebdon Prize, and notable competence on the Senate sub-committees. There was the Chairman's argument that the man to transform the School of Mines into a great university must be young, brilliant, and industrious, and Hofmeyr was all three. There was yet another possible reason, given by so many that one must attach importance to it, namely that the School was careless and irreligious, and that a man of strong Christian principle was needed to pull it together.

Hofmeyr was certainly not filled with vainglory by the offer of the Principalship. He was in fact overwhelmed by it. His mother, while gratified that her son's brilliance was recognised, could see his unhappiness, and it was decided to seek the advice of J.L. van Eysen, the trusted family friend. Van Eysen wrote emphatically that Hofmeyr must accept the job; the members of the Council were 'hard-headed capable business men', who knew what they wanted and what they were doing. He sent congratulations to Mrs. Hofmeyr and hoped that she would be spared to see her son through. (1) But the son still had misgivings; he prepared a humble memorandum for submission to the Council, expressing the hope that his name would not be pressed, saying that he had no such ambitions, and that the approach was unthinkable and remained unthinkable. (2) He reminded Council that he was a great deal younger than all his colleagues, with an academic career inferior to many. However, if Council persisted, he would accept, provided that the University of Cape Town released him from his new appointment, and provided that the Senate assured him of its support. He recommended humbly that the appointment should be for three years only, and said that he made no claim to be paid the salary in force, but would be satisfied with an allowance of £300 per annum in addition to his £850.

The Senate was equally astounded by the decision. Most of its members had expected their Acting Chairman Professor Ogg to be appointed. Ogg himself was resentful; he was a popular and capable man, and the proposed appointment was a blow to his pride. However, he informed Senate of the Council's proposal to appoint Professor Hofmeyr, as also of a second proposal that Professor Ogg himself should be appointed to a new post, in which he would take

(1) Van Eysen to Hofmeyr 4/3/19.

(2) ~~Box 1, File 11, undated.~~ Hofmeyr Papers.

over the ordinary administrative work, and thus free the new Principal for the intensive planning that lay ahead. Professor Hofmeyr then told Senate that he would accept only if assured of its support and he then withdrew, to be recalled to hear that Senate unanimously congratulated him and assured him of its full and loyal support. The Senate also recorded its appreciation of the services of Professor Ogg, but the Acting Principal was not to be mollified, and in August he resigned.

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On March 15) Hofmeyr was appointed at a salary of £1350. The news caused a sensation in Johannesburg. The TRANSVAAL CRITIC called it a scandal and a blunder, and said it would not rest until the whole business had been entirely cleared up; it attacked the appointment on the grounds that Hofmeyr had not displayed any marked ability as an organiser, and that was what was required, not a lecturer. Hofmeyr replied softly, saying that even though the paper saw fit to continue to criticise the appointment, he thanked it for its support of the proposed Medical School.

Congratulations poured in on all sides. All the old friends of the Students' Christian Association were delighted, none more than the Bulls. The stepsisters were very proud of the success of their young stepbrother, of whom they had seen so little. The relatives on both sides were overcome, and showered praise on mother and son. Mrs. Hofmeyr told friends that her son Jantjie was 'a drop of sweetness in a bitter cup'. Theo Haarhoff wrote from Worcester College in Afrikaans to say, 'It rejoices me that they have appointed an Afrikaner in spite of your premonition that it would be a Scot.' Theo was now married and very happy, and hoped Hofmeyr would have a similar experience.

The Senate of the University of Cape Town, no less astonished than the Johannesburgers, sent its heartiest congratulations. Andrew Young, his friend at the University of Cape Town, wrote that the appointment was a prodigious elevation, and he had heard that Samuel Evans had justified it by saying, 'We found we could not get the sort of man we wanted so we decided to take the most promising shoot we could get and grow the man for ourselves.' Young was older than Hofmeyr, and he felt able to give him advice. *③

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□ 'I must say frankly however that if you are regarding the position as a temporary one in which you may stay for five or at most for ten years, then I cannot honestly say that I think the thing is good either for you or for the institution.'

Young hoped Hofmeyr would stick long enough to the job

12.5.19.

③ Young to Hofmeyr / May 12, 1919.

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to acquire the necessary knowledge of men and human motive; he added that he would not have written in this strain to a smaller man, but what he wrote was written in brotherliness.

Secretan had quite different misgivings. ↗

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(Your news of yourself quite amazes me, and I am not sure if I ought to congratulate you or not. Certainly I do on the personal side at having made such a position for yourself at your age. But my doubt, if you will forgive me for putting it quite frankly, arises from a fear that it may be setting you upon an academic career, whereas, little as I know of South African politics, I have always hoped that you would one day enter the wider sphere of government.) ④

* The Joneses, Rheinallts and Cleatons, were also proud of their distinguished neighbour. Hofmeyr had confided to Rheinallt the news that the offer was being made to him, and he later asked Jones to join the University of the Witwatersrand Committee, and to help him in the task of transforming the School of Mines. Jones was not a University man, and he felt nervous; he felt especially nervous when he first met the Committee, and told Hofmeyr so. Hofmeyr could not understand it, and Jones asked him if he had never been nervous, to which he replied, (Never.)

He certainly took his appointment with his usual apparent impassivity. But there can be no doubt that he felt conscious of divine leading, of the fact that he had been born for something. He was impressed by the fact, and he impressed it on his friends, that he had done nothing to secure this advancement, except, presumably, to work hard and do his duty. Certainly, there seemed to be no end to the divine favour, and he clearly seemed to have embarked on a road that would lead him somewhere. Why was he so insistent, not only at this time but later, that he had done nothing? Why should one not do something? Why should one not actively plan one's future? The answer was not that he was averse to planning and preparing, but that he did not wish to appear as a vulgar and ambitious careerist. He liked the doors of life to behave like the doors of New York Grand Central, and to open while one was approaching.

The new Principal soon earned the esteem of the Council, and of William Dalrymple, the new Chairman, for his industry, his intelligence, and his speedy mastering of university finance. He looked unbelievably young. His portrait in the Senate Room of the

Secretan to Hofmeyr 8/5/19.

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University of the Witwatersrand, while giving him a ruddy colour which he never possessed, astonishes all, even those who knew he was so young. To free him for the great work of expansion, Dr. H. J.W. Tillyard was appointed Joint Professor in Classics in May. In June were appointed the first two professors of the new Medical School, his old Stellenbosch and Oxford friend, Eustace Cluver, to teach physiology, and Dr. E.P. Stibbe to teach Anatomy. The Medical School started in a humble way. It was situated in a tin building behind the Medical Research Institute, and the preliminary courses in Botany, Zoology, Chemistry, and Physics, were taught in the Tin Temple in Plein Square; but plans had already been made for a new building opposite the Johannesburg General, ^{one of the} ~~one of the~~ largest hospitals in the southern hemisphere.* Two more of Hofmeyr's old fellow-students at Oxford were soon to come, Margaret Hodgson, who was to take MacMillan's place while he was on leave, and John Macmurray, the new professor of Philosophy.

Now that Hofmeyr had been appointed Principal, he gave up plans to take an Oxford B.Litt., for which, Pickard-Cambridge had advised him, no residence would be required. Reluctantly he also gave up his plans to take his mother to England in December 1919, and to visit Balliol and the Club, before everyone has become stodgy and dull and married, so he wrote to Secretan. ^{was} ⑤ There was too much to do. On August 1, 1919, the School of Mines became the University College, Johannesburg. It now had 301 students, but on the morning of Inauguration Day, Hofmeyr told the assembled staff and students that the Witwatersrand could provide three thousand, not three hundred. ⑥ The theme of his address was the nature of a university, which should know no distinctions of class, wealth, race or creed. He discussed the mutual obligations of democracy and university, and said that university institutions in South Africa still had much to do.

July

□ They have not, to any great extent, applied themselves to the solution of our South African problems....
Biggest of all is the Native problem, most difficult and yet most specially South African of them all - in essence the eternal problem of the reconciliation of justice and apparent expediency - a problem in regard to which our colleges have been almost entirely silent.'

In the evening a distinguished audience in the Assembly Hall heard Hofmeyr hint that the University College, Johannesburg, might soon become the University of the Witwatersrand. It also

~~*Or the largest.~~

⑤ Hofmeyr to Secretan 23/3/19.
l.c. l.c. ⑥ Brochure of the Inaugural Ceremony

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heard the Minister of Education, the Hon. F.S. Malan, congratulate Hofmeyr on his appointment as Principal. Malan told Hofmeyr that he bore the name of a great South African, and he hoped he would be able to rise to the occasion. He had three duties, to train useful and loyal citizens, to extend the common fund of human knowledge, and to inculcate high ideals, ideals inspired by the eternal verities.

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□ The fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom - and willingness to serve one another and humanity is the true test of character. [Applause.] 'I wish you every success.' [Loud applause.] *⑦

It was a brilliant day and the most brilliant thing about it was the Principal's speech. On such occasions Hofmeyr was superb. He would start with a joke or two, always well-chosen. Then he would develop his main theme, and conclude with a masterly peroration. He would throw his head back, and send his clear strong voice to the farthest parts of the hall, and that required energy and concentration in a day where there were no mechanical aids. But of course he had an abundance of energy. People who heard him often, and especially those who disliked him, accused him of speaking in clichés. One supposes that something of this was inevitable for a man who must have made a hundred speeches every year of his public life. But quite apart from the structure of his speech, he was saying things that people wanted to hear and believe; they wanted to be reassured of their validity, and here they heard them from quite the most brilliant man that South Africa had produced since Smuts, said with a sincerity that only the most hostile would have doubted. If older people were reassured, many of the younger were inspired, and were to remember such speeches their whole lives long.

Meanwhile Hofmeyr was turning out to be a planner in a thousand. He had been empowered by the Council to sell the Plein Square site to the South African Railways for £100,000, and he and Richard Feetham were even then perfecting the plans for converting the College into the University of the Witwatersrand. *⑧ Massive Grecian buildings with great columns were to be erected at Milner Park, and hostels for men and for women.

The Council's vision was big, and Hofmeyr was keeping them busy with concrete proposals. William Dalrymple was knighted in 1920, largely because of his services to education, and the two men

⑦ ^{the} Brochure of Inaugural Ceremony.

⑧ **Richard Feetham, of Milner's kindergarten, became a distinguished South African judge, and an arbitrator of boundary problems in other countries.

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worked well together. The Council wanted a first-class university under a first-class principal, and they wanted to send Hofmeyr to the United States to study university development and administration. But Hofmeyr would not go. Rheinallt Jones said in a posthumous tribute that he would not go because the funds ~~which~~ which the Council proposed to use had not been collected for such a purpose. The Council took this moral instruction well; some members agreed with Hofmeyr, and others thought it was morality gone crazy. Dalrymple told Wylie that Mrs. Hofmeyr had said to him, 'I hope you're not thinking of sending him by himself, without me to look after him.' In any event, Hofmeyr was never to visit America.

It has often been said of the first buildings at Milner Park that they were imposing without and cheap within. The fact is that the plans were so ambitious that the choice was made, perhaps never explicitly, to have cheaper buildings if it meant faster growth. It was said that the buildings suffered because of Hofmeyr's frugality, and no doubt this was also true. Professor Mac-~~roe~~ relates that when he joined the College as a young man, the Principal and his mother were living in the new College House at Milner Park, and he had found Hofmeyr sitting in his overcoat before the empty grate on a cold Johannesburg night. There may have been another reason for that, namely that Hofmeyr would sit before an empty grate because the students had no grates at all. The new College House was compared disadvantageously with the old Sunnyside Hostel in the suburb of Parktown.

The anonymous author of an article in the College Magazine for June 1921 wrote:

□ (Many former residents of Sunnyside on their arrival were delighted to find several Spartan innovations imported direct from Oxford. The use of hard benches in place of comfortable chairs with backs has proved a blessing; it is fortunate Oxford never introduced the practice of using hot shaving water on cold mornings or of partaking of breakfast in bed on the morning after the night before.)

The author complains of inadequate and inhospitable common-room accommodation, and reports that

← unkind gentlemen come to dinner and give long speeches, embodying many words of wisdom and ending with the exhortation to "come to father" when things are not as they should be.

It was soon found that the main buildings were also too cold, especially the science block, and the Council later spent thousands of pounds in installing a system of central heating for which the buildings had not been originally designed.

Although Hofmeyr was proving so successful as organiser, planner, and administrator, he was finding difficulties with both students and staff. In May of 1920 his mother and he agreed, at the request of the Council, that until a Principal's house had been built at Milner Park, they would go into residence at the new men's hostel, provided he was in authority, and his mother was in charge of domestic arrangements. This was not a wise decision. Many of the students of the post-war years had served in the armed forces; they had talked soldiers' talk, lived soldiers' lives, and drunk soldiers' liquor. They liked noise and conviviality, just like the men fellows at Balliol. One of them, Dold, was a relative by marriage of Patrick Duncan; he reacted violently to Hofmeyr's discipline, unable to regard decorum as the point of living. The atmosphere at the new College House was extremely unpleasant in those early days. When Macmurray and his wife arrived in Johannesburg in 1921, he formed the impression that Hofmeyr was trying to 'clean up' the university, and that his mother was going to help him. Neither Hofmeyr nor Macmurray found themselves as close to one another as they had expected. They had not seen one another for seven years, and in that time Macmurray had served as lieutenant in the Cameron Highlanders and had seen another side of life. In religion and friendship he had grown more tolerant and less dogmatic, less disposed to turn the world upside down, more ready to see virtue where before he would have seen none. Quite apart from that, an antagonism developed between him and Mrs. Hofmeyr within the first week. The Macmurrays spent their first few days in Johannesburg at College House as the guests of the Hofmeyrs, until they could find a house, and Macmurray expected to renew the Oxford friendship and to enjoy some kind of men's talk. He soon learned that Hofmeyr did not have that kind of privacy; their apartment hardly allowed it, but neither did Hofmeyr appear to desire it. In fact Mrs. Hofmeyr used to say, then and all through her life, in her shrill emphatic way that was half joking and half serious, 'I don't live with my son, he lives with me.' It was with relief that the Macmurrays found a house and moved away.

Mrs. Hofmeyr made no attempt to hide her opinion that the University College was a godless place. It certainly contrasted sharply with the more sedate South African College, now the University of Cape Town. Hofmeyr not only attempted to control the more unruly elements at College House; he also persuaded Senate to

~~*O. M. May 7, 1920.*~~

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appoint a standing committee to deal with matters affecting the woman students, on the grounds that the behaviour of some of them was unsatisfactory. It was said by an influential section of the students that he wanted to run the University College like a school, and many of them blamed Mrs. Hofmeyr for this, and declared that she was really in charge. There was a cruel witticism on the campus, ek is bang dat ma sal trou, en ma is bang dat ek sal trou. The relationship of mother and son was often ridiculed. They made fun of Hofmeyr's clothes too, especially the cheap ready-made ~~suits~~ white suits which fitted him so badly. There was the story of the young woman student who after the first day of the academic year decided to go to Cape Town, and applied for her fees to be refunded; but when Hofmeyr refused to consider a refund, she stormed out of the office crying, Keep the money then, and buy yourself a new suit.

Yet while Hofmeyr had little in common with certain of his students, he exercised a deep influence over others, who still speak of him and his Principalship with veneration. It would be superficial to say that he repelled the worldly and attracted the earnest, or to divide his students into gay and solemn, wicked and good, hedonists and puritans, drinkers and teetotallers. He already had the gift of being able to attract, especially through his speeches, those who wanted to find some satisfying use for their lives, who thought idealistically of man and society, who were already dimly sensing that something was wrong with South Africa, that the doctrine of the brotherhood of man posed tremendous challenges, which they in their youthful eagerness were ready to accept, especially when they were put by a man who had the gifts of oratory. In fact this ability of Hofmeyr was to ~~grow~~ greater and greater, until he was putting these challenges, not to a college, but to a country. Two kinds of men and women listened to him, those who hated what he had to say, and those who knew that this man was in possession of a truth, the only truth in fact, by which one might guide one's life. But there was a third kind too, namely those men and women who believed in the same truth but were quite unable to recognise that Hofmeyr was a custodian of it, because he seemed to them rather the champion of a morality that was narrow and joyless, and perhaps worst of all, pointless, because of which they came to hate or despise him or both. And when, in later years, Hofmeyr had discarded some of these lesser moralities, or admitted that he adhered to them out of taste and habit and nothing deeper, when he would sip a little sherry and play a Sunday game of tennis-quoits (though never tennis or cricket), it was too late. ~~This third kind of man and woman could not only never forgive him, but they could never see what kind of man he was; and that was a pity, because they were the ones who should have been at his side when~~

② 'I am afraid that Mother will marry, and Mother's afraid that I shall marry.'

③ One hears of a cartoon portraying Hofmeyr and his mother, and entitled 'The Principal and Mr. Hofmeyr'; but there seems to be no trace of it left.)

~~his role became clearer. This does not mean that Hofmeyr's life would have been different if only these people had been different; Hofmeyr would have had to be different too. And his mother would have had to be different also. For where Hofmeyr was disliked, his mother was usually disliked as well.~~

Between Principal and older, more rebellious students there came to be a kind of truce. They learned to behave more quietly than they had behaved in the army, and he permitted more horseplay at the graduation ceremonies than a good many people thought proper. Council decided, in spite of the stories of Sunday card-playing and idleness, that Sunday tennis would be undesirable. Dancing was of course permitted, and the Principal, though not a dancer himself, would put in an appearance at the functions. He did not like dancing; to Haarhoff he made the revealing remark that he himself would as soon take a pole and swing himself round. But it revealed, not his attitude to women, but his mother's attitude to sex.