

# Paton's Hofmeyr

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*Hofmeyr*, by Alan Paton (Oxford University Press)

THE SUBJECT OF THIS excellent biography is a white South African politician, who had a colossal intellect and a conscience. Although, impelled by the second, he often brought the first formidably to bear on white supremacy, it is arguable that he hindered rather than helped the liberal movement in South Africa.

Hofmeyr was a five-year-old prodigy when the Boer War began; a fifteen-year-old graduate in short pants when the Union of South Africa was established in much hope and little cynicism; he died in 1948, the year of the triumph at the polls of white domination, unashamed and undisguised. ("Now that Hofmeyr is dead, South Africa will not have a conscience," said Smuts, who could not supply the deficiency.)

The theme of the period—and it is compellingly handled—is the gradual but sure evolution rightwards of white politics; by 1948 white South Africa has resolved on its terrible response to the challenge: "what are black hopes, what are white hopes and can they be hoped together?" In counterpoint, Hofmeyr, to use his biographer's phrase, painfully inches his way towards emancipation from traditional white attitudes: fearfully, cautiously, confusedly, but with courage. Meanwhile black politicians grow disillusioned and their attitudes harden.

THE PERIOD HAD GREAT REVELATIONS for black and white alike: the taking away of the common-roll franchise from Africans in the Cape in 1936; the massive African Mineworkers' strike in 1946, which finally exposed the impotence of the Native Representative Council, that "toy telephone" which was part of the shoddy substitute offered for the stolen vote; the confrontation between Hertzog and Smuts over South Africa's entry into World War II; the bitter cleavage in the white popula-

tion which followed; Afrikanerdom's rejection of Hertzog; the country's rejection, in 1948, of Smuts, who championed human dignity in world councils but was silent about or inimical to it at home.

Hofmeyr was a professor at 22; a Principal of a University at 24. ("Do you think you're the Principal Boy?" asked a contemporary comic of another. "No," was the reply, "I'm the Boy Principal.") His long, deep, uneasy relationship with Smuts had already begun when he became a Cabinet Minister with three portfolios in Hertzog's coalition government in 1933.

As a Cabinet Minister, he rebelled against his party for the first time in 1936 over the Franchise Bill, making a great speech and acknowledging his isolation: "I know perfectly well that I am speaking against the feeling of the overwhelming majority of this House; I know that I am speaking against the feeling of the great mass of the people of this country." By "people" he meant "white people": his emancipation had begun but old habits died hard. In 1937 he voted against a particularly vicious clause of an influx control Bill, although he did not vote against the Bill itself. He said then, as he was often to say, that the whites, on the pretext of "saving European civilisation", were surrendering the things which made civilisation meaningful. His resignation was not required by his party on either of these occasions.

WHEN IN 1938 HE OPPOSED an abuse of the Constitution—a defeated party member was given a Senate seat which should have gone to someone "thoroughly acquainted" with African needs—he resigned from the Cabinet. He defied the party again in 1939 over increased restriction on Indian trading, but Hertzog had now had enough and Hofmeyr was forced to resign from the Caucus. Soon afterwards, South Africa entered the war; Smuts became Prime Minister, Hofmeyr was back in the Cabinet and, other than

Smuts, its most important member.

Fusion between Hertzog and Smuts, the War, Hofmeyr's failure to break with a white supremacy party and give a new lead, all these—though they may have accelerated African nationalism—contributed to the long paralysis of white opposition—apart from the Communists—to Herrenvolkism. Perhaps none of these made any significant difference: discrimination was, after all, built into the 1910 Constitution. Mr. Paton, who seldom puts his own point of view explicitly, thinks differently, however: "the forces of right and justice could have been marshalled in the late thirties if Hofmeyr had felt called upon to do it, but he did not feel called upon to do it."

The book is dedicated to Peter Brown, banned Chairman of the Liberal Party of South Africa, which came into existence as late as seventeen years after the Franchise Bill. If Brown is Hofmeyr's heir, he entered into a dubious heritage: Hofmeyr not only delayed the emergence of a Liberal movement, he also stamped the term "liberalism", for some with connotation of compromise and infirmity of purpose, which present-day Liberals have had a hard time erasing.

One regrets that Alan Paton, deferring to Hofmeyr's taste, gave his subject the banal valedictory of an image taken from cricket. Paton's prose is better than Newbolt's verse: "Although he could not see clearly how to go forward, it was forward he wanted to go."

*Then-and-Now Dept.* Alan Paton notes that in 1948 the Nationalists released from prison a Mr. van Blerk, "who had tried to blow up a post office and thereby killed an innocent bystander . . . his story was featured in *Dagbreek*, not as one of violence and sabotage, but as one of Afrikaner patriotism."

ideology. He repudiated the doctrines of the European communists and the nothing-but-anti-communists, not because they sprang from "white" minds, but simply because they are false, because they do not apply to the modern world.

BASICALLY, PADMORE REACHED the same decision in the 1930s as twenty years later, his French-speaking compatriot, Aimé Césaire, deputy for Martinique in the Paris National Assembly, who explained in *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* why he had left the French Communist party: "I have often asked myself the question . . . whether, instead of rejecting *a priori* and in the name of an exclusive ideology, men who are after all honest and basically anti-colonialist—it would not be better to seek a form of organisation as wide and flexible as possible, a form of or-

ganisation that could inspire the many rather than drill the few. A form of organisation in which the Marxists would not be submerged but would act as a yeast, a source of inspiration and leadership, and not play the part which, in truth, they play today, that of dividing the popular forces . . . I opt for the wider as against the narrower; for the movement which places us shoulder to shoulder with the others against the movement which leaves us to ourselves . . . for a movement which liberates the creative energy of the masses, against the one which channels it finally into sterility."

Again and again there is the same accusation: the communists do not understand anything about the spontaneity of the masses, they do not function from within the roots of the peoples, they are a cold and foreign organism. ●

## Words Words Words

Oyono (*Houseboy*, translated from *Une vie de boy* by John Reed).

THE WHITE AFRICAN LOVE-HATE business spills over into nonfiction with *The white tribes of Africa* by Richard West (hopefully less superficial than his recently co-authored *The making of a prime minister* or the foretaste in the London *Sunday Times*) and Margaret Black's *No room for tourists* ("about white South Africans, how ordinary people came to accept dictatorship as normal").

A white partisan case will no doubt be put in *South African journey* by Bernard Newman, who was so impressed by Sobukwe's accommodation of Robben Island. Did Newman really "stay in primitive kraals" as he "wandered about Zululand and the Transkei" as his publishers write? (Either he broke the law in several places or this is being laid on by the S.A. Information Service for the favourable few.

"Over 40 politicians and scholars" have been collected in John A. Davis and Jane K. Baker's *Southern Africa in transition* and one man's progressive view will be in *South Africa* by John Cope, former M.P. and founder editor of *The Forum*, recently and wastefully defunct.

Of the continent is a whole similar large Gunther-like surveys are piling up. One Scipio, a distinguished public man in disguise, writes *Emergent Africa*; John Hatch *The history of postwar Africa*; Philip Curtin, American historian of West Africa, *The image of Africa*; and Barbara Ward *Africa in the making*. The most ambitious publisher's claim is for Peter J. M. McEwen and R. B. Sutcliffe's *The study of Africa*: "a comprehensive account of the principal social, economic and political issues facing contemporary Africa".

Regional and biographical British Spring books are Richard Hall's *Kaunda, Founder of Zambia* and his *Zambia*, and Arthur Stratton's *The great red island*. "a biography of Madagascar".

History and literature are similarly surveyed in, respectively, Margaret Shinnie's *Ancient African kingdoms* and *African English litera-*

*ture* by Anne Tibble, a survey, anthology and (for R2.50) "evaluation of all African writers". Other literary collections are *Quartet*, stories by New African writers James Matthews, Richard Rive and Alf Wannenburg, and Alex La Guma, banned before we began, and *Origin East Africa* by David Cook with among others New African writers J. T. Ngugi and Jonathan Kariara.

HOW DOES ONE DESCRIBE that genre in which are Thomas Sterling's *Stanley's Way*, Peter Franekel's *Wayaleshi*, Anthony Barker's *The man next to me?* These serious yet gay, human views of African life by outsiders may be added to by Cynthia Nolan's *One traveller's Africa*, illustrated by Sidney Nolan, and Emily Hahn's *Africa to me*.

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NEW NOVELS BY PETER ABRAHAMS (*A night of their own*, "about the resistance movement in South Africa") and Doris Lessing (*Landlocked*, fourth in the *Children of violence* sequence), perhaps the best stayers from that postwar English South African stable—a reprint of William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* ("with a long and important introduction" by Laurens van der Post) and half a dozen lesser works make up the list of forthcoming English novels in the African setting.

Among the latter, Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Pillow Fight*, its publisher finds "the most piercing, pungent love-hate story ever written". White South African society provides the theme as it does in David Lytton's *The grass won't grow till spring*, "a black novel about white men and women in South Africa". The mixture gets even stronger with Johannes Meintjes' *The silent conspiracy*, apparently semi-autobiography even more romanticised than Monsarrat's. Its hero "the dynamic Abrie Vorster . . . attracts love and hate equally and is himself devoured by two passions, painting and his beautiful manor house Levenfontein".

Heinemann's three Spring List novels in their African Writers series are all East African by Lennie Peters, T. M. Aluko, and Ferdinand