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BOOKS

HOFMEYR-THE GREY WHITE HOPE

By MYRNA BLUMBERG

HOFMEYR, By Alan Paton. (Oxford University Press, 49s. 6d. 532 pages).

It has been common to describe Jan Hofmeyr, who rose to be South African deputy prime minister to General Smuts but died prematurely, as the man who was the white hope of the white liberals, and one is shaken after reading this book to be reminded how grey and feeble that hope was. Perhaps only white South Africans, raking through the wilderness of self-indulgent bigotry that is official white politics there, could seize upon this cautious, prim, ambivalent Afrikaner as someone who might prove we were not all atrocious all the time. Mr Paton, who has written a laborious and characteristically generous biography, even calls him noble. This I find quite baffling.

Certainly most of us never do as much as we should, and what we do looks paltry and futile afterwards; but Hofmeyr, as far as one can see in this carefully documented book, was neither a creative thinker nor an urgent reformer, and though he sometimes made better speeches than his parliamentary contemporaries he nearly always voted for some of the most racially discriminatory legislation. Noble? It may seem sanctimonious to say so but the facts suggest that his story was more tragic and pitiable than inspiring. Perhaps it will illustrate to the world with what tortured effort one white South African struggled an inch forward with one leg and several inches back with the other and was then labelled in his country as one of its most dangerous liberals. The best that can be said of him is that, on the whole, he appeared to want to edge slightly forward when most whites around him were stampeding backwards.

His childhood and youth were exceptional. He was the youngest child in a Cape family which was famous for producing statesmen, although his father, a mild, unassuming manager of an Afrikaans newspaper, was not one. His mother, an imperious, austere woman, dominated them all, and years afterwards she said, with her slight stammer, "But now they know that what I did was for the best. It was I who c-conquered in the end."

There were three step-daughters from her husband's first marriage to whom this remark was most intended because they, unlike the young

known to me, who was arrested for taking photographs of a family of children in the nude. The children had, over a period of years, accepted lavish gifts from this man, who genuinely loved them. The photography episode would never have come to light had not the man's house been unlawfully entered by some curious workmen and the pictures discovered and spread about. The accused, deeply remorseful, confessed not only to the photography but also to assaulting the children. Physically and mentally infantile, no one in his community believed the latter charge. Largely unrepresented at his trial, the man was sentenced last Christmas to four years jail. Today he is sewing mailbags. He receives no psychiatric help. Nor, says the National Council for Civil Liberties, to whose attention I brought the case, is there more than a one-in-five chance of him gaining such help, so limited are the facilities available.

As we have known for some time, between one-third and one-half of all patients who present themselves in doctor's surgeries do so with problems that are basically neurotic in nature. We know now that of this number, the schizophrenics, the senile psychotics and even the depressives – formerly associated particularly with the able and effective strata of the population – are massively more likely than not to be drawn from the lower levels of society. It is a phenomenon about which we need to know far more and care far more – for these people are too submerged, inarticulate and defenceless to speak for themselves. How many people, for example, are aware that the strait-jacket, universally condemned by psychiatrists, is still actively used in British prisons, and probably nowhere else in the world? And how many Class I and II sufferers, do you imagine, ever find their way into a straitjacket?

boy Jan, were not docile before her will. He could probably partially escape in his studies, for he was precociously gifted academically, matriculating at 12, gaining his B.A. honours in Cape Town at 15, a double first at Balliol some years later, and at 22 he was appointed Professor of Classics at the Johannesburg College of Mines, which later became the University of the Witwatersrand; at 24 he was this university's Principal. But he never broke from his powerful mother: he never married and never lived apart from her. She went with him to Oxford ("I first took the mater to her lodgings," he wrote, "and afterwards walked round to Balliol as though I had known the place for years . . .") and when he became Principal of the Witwatersrand University, his students joked when they saw his mother and him together, "There goes the Principal and Mr Hofmeyr."

His brilliant academic career ended ignominiously. Because the Dean of his medical faculty was seen at a cinema and occasionally on the way to the university with a young woman who was not his wife, Hofmeyr told him that "this appearance of evil", whatever that means, must stop. The Dean denied Hofmeyr's right to interfere with his private life and Hofmeyr had him summarily dismissed, and then withdrew the dismissal on condition the man resigned. There was a furore at the university. Hofmeyr stood alone against his colleagues and the students. Mr Paton suggests that Mrs Hofmeyr was to blame, but nevertheless her son's absurd behaviour, which wrecked several lives, was indefensible.

Fortunately for him, at this point (he was 29) he was offered the job of administrator of the Transvaal, which exactly suited his painstaking managerial gifts. When he entered parliament seven years later in Smuts's United Party, much was expected of him: he was described as a future Prime Minister, although a reading of his speeches up to then reveal a few intelligent insights – such as his fear that Africans were writing Christianity off as a fraud – among a great deal of humdrum humbug. His maiden speech was a delight to his opponents and an embarrassment to his friends. On the restriction of Jewish refugee immigration, he supported the Malan cry (and where have we heard similar arguments?) that by curbing Jewish immigration one was in fact *preventing* anti-semitism. Yet later he was accepted as a champion of the Jews, and formed a society of Jews and Christians.

As a Cabinet Minister he made some of his most famous speeches: "Surely it is a mockery for us to talk of ourselves as free people, or acclaim ourselves as the inheritors of a tradition of freedom, while we are as a nation to so large an extent the slaves of prejudice, while we allow our sense of dislike of the colour of some of our fellow South Africans to stand in the way of dealing with them . . . The plain truth, whether we like it or not, is that the dominant mentality in South Africa is a Herrenvolk mentality – the essential feature of our race problems is to be found in that fact . . ." And immediately after that he voted for the passing of the notorious Asiatic Act, known as the Ghettoe Act, which led to the Group Areas Act that prevents people from living, working or even moving in "areas" reserved for "other races".

He found ideas of social and political equality repugnant, but he resisted the racial excesses of the Malan-Strydom-Verwoerd nationalists. (Strydom in 1946: "I want to say to the Minister of Finance [Hofmeyr] that the white man will shed his last drop of blood to remain the master in South

Africa . . .") Hofmeyr's main achievement, apart from his tireless administration during the war years, was the introduction of pensions and education grants for Africans, on a miserable and discriminatory scale – white children received seven times as much as black children – but it was the first time a white Minister had voted any money at all for Africans out of the general taxation.

Once he resigned over the principle of imposing on the Senate an unelected white representative of coloured people, and he unhesitatingly threatened to resign if lotteries were introduced, but there were large injustices he acquiesced to. Moderate African leaders, in the end, saw him as an apologist for white supremacy, and although it is not recorded what present African leaders think of him, it's a fair guess that they would dismiss his efforts as worthless. At one time a few white politicians tried to get him to form a Liberal Party, but he never agreed that "the time was ripe". In the 1948 election campaign when Smuts was defeated, the Malan nationalists organized a scurrilous campaign against Hofmeyr, and he replied, "I am supposed to be in favour of equality between Europeans and non-Europeans. That of course is nonsense . . ."

He died of a heart attack later that year, deeply mourned by thousands. Smuts described him as "the conscience of the white man". But no; South Africa has produced greater debunkers of tyranny, Mr Paton notably among them.

BLOGGS ANSWERS BACK

*I tell you I've been to church, I go all the time.
I walk down High Street Sundays, I hear the din
From the blithering bells, and I might as well go in.
Like yesterday. There was this bloke with the voice
In a stone box at the top of some stairs. Rejoice,
He starts to bellow, Rejoice, God is in your heart,
Rejoice, he tells us, God doesn't dwell apart,
His home is not on the other side of the moon,
Or somewhere out in the galaxies. I sat down
And God (I suppose) sat too. That bastard up there,
Rejoice, rejoice – and pointing at me, I'll swear.*

*Now that the moon is dead and the flaming stars
Never get seen until they've been dead for years
And space is emptier than the bloody church,
where is God hiding? Nowhere left on earth,
Nowhere in space: only that loud-mouthed sod
Getting paid for knowing the whereabouts of God.*

*Mister, you speak for yourself if you please;
I've got no room for refugees.*

Laurence Lerner