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SOUTH AFRICAN TRAGEDY. The life and times of Jan Hofmeyr.  
by Alan Paton. Scribner.



This is the greatest work of a great South African author. His other books, notably "Cry the beloved country", and his experience as leader of the minute Liberal Party, prepared the way for this biography of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr.

It is the story of a brilliant Afrikaner statesman who became the conscience of white South Africa during the vital between-war years when it was still possible to accept into honorable partnership the hitherto overlooked and neglected African, Asian and Coloured members of the young nation. When he died in 1948 at the early age of 54 the opportunity and the will to create a united people had passed, perhaps for ever. The organs of power had been seized by frenzied racists who were intent upon the creation of a Herrenvolk society based on the crudest theories of Hitler's National Socialism. ~~This has, of course, happened.~~

But Paton rightly seeks deeper reasons for the rejection of Hofmeyr's liberalism than the post-war and youthful fanaticism of the victorious Purified National Party of Malan, Strijdom and Verwoerd. History cannot be explained as simply as that. Many complex strands have contributed to the ugly pattern which is modern South Africa. These are all traced with care and perspective in this comprehensive and fully documented life of the great liberal. Although himself, like his subject, a dedicated and unselfish democrat, Paton has not minimised the very real phobias, suspicions and chauvinist passions which have heated the mould from which modern Afrikanerdom has emerged during its short history. Nor has he, himself an English South African, overlooked or sought to excuse the ambivalent role of Britain on the subcontinent. He has given due regard to what Smuts called "The Century of Wrong", the clumsy British annexation of Dutch territory in 1806, the faultily-administered emancipation of the slaves in 1834, successive unwarranted occupation of Boer territory, the Janieson raid which was an attempted coup, and finally the imperialist war of 1899-1902 which destroyed two small nations and left bitter memories of the 26,000 women and children who died in British concentration camps.

The equally important religious element is also considered, the belief of Calvinist Afrikanerdom that they are a new Chosen People, a new Israel called by God to defend white Christian civilisation against the savage black Canaanites and to win a new Promised Land for their permanent and exclusive use. Paton shows clearly enough the inherited and evolved prejudices and superstitions which he, like all his fellow-countrymen must live with and try to overcome. He shows even Hofmeyr labouring under the same handicap and able to declare, in a college debate, his belief that "the whites should present a united front, that there should be no falterers, no disunion in our ranks as we meet the common (native) foe".

This is a work possessing the pathos and beauty of classical Greek tragedy, written in matchless English and presented in strict chronological order. It reveals, like his works of fiction, the intolerable affront of the doctrine of apartheid and its spiritual antecedents, and its challenge to the dignity and self-respect of the civilised human spirit. It pulls no punches in its attack upon this fundamentally bestial creed. To do this satisfactorily he has traced the history of his beloved country as seen through the eyes of its most brilliant son. Starting with the Anglo-Boer clashes of Hofmeyr's youth, he follows the story through the period of defeat, Union and independence....the era of the Generals...., the two World Wars and finally the evolution of the political parties and the success story of the Purified Nationalists and the eclipse of Smuts.

It is by no means an exercise in hero-worship. In fact one discerns irritation at Hofmeyr's apparent failure to recognise the futility of continued partnership with Smuts. Perhaps he should have broken with the S.A.P. and launched a Liberal Party while there were still those in positions of power and influence who would have supported him? He appears to have been unable to permit his powerful judgments on race policy and principle expression in resolute action rather than verbal protest and complaint, action which would have been welcomed and endorsed by an influential and potent minority of white people. He hesitated and the moment passed. His lack of effective leadership and dynamism is



seen to be in striking contrast to his almost incredible ability as a Cabinet Minister controlling up to six portfolios when the need demanded. He is shown to be no leader of men but an exceptional administrator, intellectual and idealist. He lacked the one quality of decision which, added to his other fantastic gifts, would certainly have placed him at the head of national affairs and perhaps have saved the unfortunate black South African from the misery which has since become his daily lot. Truthfully described by Smuts as his "right hand" when safely dead, and certainly the brain and inventive power behind much of what Smuts achieved both at home and abroad, Jan Hofmeyr confounds the analysts by appearing immature as a person, dominated by a possessive mother, untidy and intolerant of criticism and dependent to an extraordinary degree upon the goodwill of his immediate circle of friends and associates. This curious mixture of greatness and childish vulnerability adds an exciting psychological interest to the study. Perhaps Paton has here laid bare the essential reason for his final failure...the failure, be it noted, of the only person who could have challenged and effectively countered the opportunistic and often timorous progress of Malan's neo-nazi nationalist bigots.

There is also a lighter side to the book which provides interest and entertainment true to Paton's genius. This is story-telling at its best. Who before has heard of the rumoured romance between Smuts and Frederika of Greece? Then there are delightful anecdotes about the domestic idiosyncrasies of the young genius and his mother; references to Hofmeyr's almost fanatical interest in cricket, his obsession with physical fitness which resulted in the unusual game of tenequits played with a medicine ball, and his breakfast which invariably consisted of four slices of bread soaked in the gravy from a pound of beefsteak plus an egg "fried on both sides"! Throughout the narrative Smuts himself is revealed stripped of much of his traditional greatness.

"South African Tragedy" first appeared in the full definitive edition published by O.U.P., Cape Town, in 1964. The Scribner edition is considerably abridged by Dudley C. Lunt who has added an expertly-written digest of earlier South African history which is useful to the non-South African reader. The irritating footnotes of the original have also been cut out. The result is 415 pages of novel-type reading, with no loss of any of the vitality of the original which in some respects approximates more closely to a text-book model. But for the serious researcher the O.U.P. edition remains essential reading. ~~But~~ ~~In~~ whichever edition it is an exciting and compelling contribution to modern history and highly relevant to those who wish to understand the South African tragedy.

Much has happened in South Africa since the untimely death of Jan Hofmeyr. The worst trends which he resisted have prevailed and built an edifice of apparently permanent tyranny. All effectual political opposition has disappeared before the steamroller of draconian legislation backed by all the apparatus of the fully equipped and financed police state. Paton's own tiny Liberal Party, following the Hofmeyr ideal, clings to survival with its leadership jailed, restricted or otherwise silenced, and with no representative in Parliament. Paton's passport was withdrawn to prevent a lecture tour of the United States. But at no time have the Liberals commanded more than minimal fringe support from white South Africans, while non-white enthusiasm for multi-racialism has been channelled into more aggressive and nationalistic organisations. The amazingly tenacious idea that English-speaking whites could help them, and that membership of the British Commonwealth would one day ensure relief from their torment, has long since been snuffed out in the minds of Africans, Asians and Coloured people. Even belief in help from the United Nations Organisation or, more vaguely, in the willingness of the "Free World" to step in and demand justice...all such hopes, offered by the moderates of the Liberal Party as real possibilities justifying a non-violent approach, have been stifled by long years of disillusionment and growing, rather than diminishing prospects of change. The enslaved majority now looks elsewhere for succour.

Paton offers no prophecy concerning the future of his country, beyond the oblique suggestion that the fearful bloodbath and ultimate enforced intervention by UNO forces, predicted by Keppel Jones in his "When Smuts Goes" at the end of the 2nd World War, may well be the end of the apartheid road, the baptism of fire through which South Africa may



eventually grow into maturity as a member of the family of nations. He ends on a heartbroken note, devotedly recording the passing of one who was described by Smuts as "the wonderchild of South Africa, with a record with which South Africa shows no parallel, whose achievement in a comparatively brief life shows no parallel in this land.....".

Perhaps he is right. For was it not Hofmeyr himself who warned against his country's attempt to stave off the inevitable in prophetic words: "...the day may yet come when, inspired by the sense of unjust wrongs, they may sweep the whites of South Africa into the sea, and South Africa may come to be a black man's country again.....you may build a wall over the roots of a tree, it will spring up all the same".

Trevor N.W. Bush.  
Llandaff, Cardiff.  
31st January 1966.

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