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**South African
Tragedy**

**The Life and Times
of Jan Hofmeyr**

BIOGRAPHY BY ALAN PATON

Reviewed by Franklin D. Scott

ALAN PATON HAS WRITTEN a great biography of his friend who was almost great. As art it is superb, for the author makes the reader feel the anguish of the subject as he raised himself from prejudice to understanding, but he failed to carry enough others with him in his intellectual progress. This failure was the "South African Tragedy," for as extremism mounted Jan Hofmeyr became the shining hope, the only hope, of the moderates.

His all too early death, fatigued by the strain of the battle, left no one to check the power of the Nationalists and their program of apartheid.

The biography is a colorful portrait of a strong man shackled by his environment and most of all by his mother. She possessed and encompassed her genius son; she went with him everywhere, even to Oxford; and she kept other women away. She hated politics, and while she may have strengthened her son's faith, she probably weakened his will, if he had it, to strike forth on his own.

He was imbued with Christian faith and love of his fellow man, he was ambitious yet timid, wanted peace but was constantly in strife, was keen of mind yet sometimes doubted his own convictions. How could he be sure when most of his colleagues felt differently? And "how could one be simultaneously both governor and crusader?"

JAN HOFMEYR WAS BORN into a

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respected Boer family, altho the "poor relation" branch, and a distant relative of Jan Christian Smuts. He was an infant prodigy, awarded a Rhodes scholarship while still in his early teens. Back in South Africa he was made principal of the University College of Johannesburg at the age of 24, and administrator of the Transvaal at 29.

He went on to parliament and to Hertzog's cabinet. During Smuts' last administration he was the deputy prime minister who ran the government while the prime minister was out doing his international duties.

Perhaps his greatest error was that he did not lead boldly. He waited to be asked to lead, as his life had taught him to wait. Paton makes clear how things had always come to him, hence must be expected to continue to come.

In the sphere of practical politics he finally reached the ironic position in which every victory he achieved in fair treatment for the natives became a victory for his opponents, for each "success" drove men out of his moderate United Party into the ranks of Malan's extreme Nationalists.

WHILE HOFMEYR COMES life-size so a number of other players on the stage are etched in unforgettable vignettes: D. F. Malan the implacable, pressing for sharper separation of the races; Jan C. Smuts who put unity before principle; Hertzog, white supremacist indeed, but not anti-English enough to suit his extremist son and others, who was therefore cast aside at the end of his long career.

It is clear that Paton understands out of his own experience the soul-searching that lay behind the statesman's acts and that wore him out. Hofmeyr may have "too much inclined to reason and too little to feel," yet to a large extent too he merely bottled up emotions deeply felt. He is a man well worth knowing, and Paton makes him fully known.

The book is both biography and history, with the style and the impact of "Cry the Beloved Country." It is tragic drama of highest quality. [Scribner, 424 pages, \$10]