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## SOUTH AFRICAN STORY

ALAN PATON: *Hofmeyr*. 545pp. Oxford University Press. £2 18s.

Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr was a remarkable man. Born in 1894 he went through school in five years and by the age of sixteen had degrees in both arts and science. He was awarded a Rhodes scholarship but did not go up to Oxford until he was nineteen. To fill in the intervening months he first obtained his M.A., then wrote and translated the official biography of his famous kinsman, "Onze Jan", a founder of the Afrikaner Bond. Accompanied by his mother, he spent three immensely happy years in Oxford and emerged with a double first in Greats to return to South Africa, where, after a spell of lecturing, he became, at twenty-four, principal of the college that was soon to become the University of the Witwatersrand. At twenty-nine he was appointed Administrator of the Transvaal by Smuts. Five years later he entered Parliament, where, almost immediately, he became one of the key figures drawing together Hertzog and Smuts to form the United Party in 1933. For the next fifteen years, with one short break when he resigned on a matter of principle, he was one of the most important men in the government of the country. At a time when racialism was increasingly rampant, Hofmeyr, not without inconsistencies, was becoming more and more the spokesman for a common society. Eight times acting Prime Minister, he seemed destined to become the leader of those South Africans who were prepared to meet, and come to terms with, a changing world rather than to retreat into the laager. But in 1948, at the time he was most needed, Hofmeyr died. His life, although filled with success and honour, was, like his death, essentially tragic.

Mr. Alan Paton, while providing us with an admirable history of South Africa, has sought to show us not only what manner of man Hofmeyr was but also how he came to be what he was. In his lifetime Hofmeyr inspired many men and women yet he had only three deep personal relationships: with his mother, with Smuts, and with God. Of Hofmeyr's many tragedies perhaps the greatest was that he was never heard to say, "I loved". He was a man apart, "sundered from his fellows, not so much by his intellect, as by his incredible childhood". Before he was out of his teens

Hofmeyr learned that the price of his mother's devotion was his own devotion. . . . He was able to realise that if ever he wanted to be free, it would create such a crisis of recriminations, claims, self-pityings, and other ugliness that he could not have borne it. So he came to heel.

Yet he was not unhappy or resentful. It could be said that he accepted his mother's possessiveness as a fact of life with which he had to come to terms. If his mother died, he once said, he would like to marry; meanwhile he was bound to her in a symbiosis from which there was no escape.

Hofmeyr's father died when his son was two and in many ways Smuts became the father of the strange introvert, who was a brilliant lieutenant but who did not, perhaps could not, step out ahead to lead a new party as he was pressed and tempted to do both in the late 1930s and again in

Hertzog and Smuts, or to sympathize with Hofmeyr as he tries to act rightly in the treacherous area between principle and expediency.

Hofmeyr was paralysed by South Africa and in his defeat one may see the ruin of his fellow whites; for political power "had changed the whole tenor of his life. In a way he was like Samson who had bound himself with his own seven locks of hair". Thus, on November 26, 1946, one of the turning points in South African history, Hofmeyr, as acting Prime Minister, tersely rejected the plea of the Natives Representative Council for the abolition of discriminatory legislation. His statement severed the last remaining direct link between black and white political leaders and Hofmeyr, "in the eyes of many non-white people, ceased to be the spokesman of freedom and became the spokesman for white supremacy". But that same year he delivered the magnificent address in which he bluntly told the country that, "the plain truth, whether we like it or not, is that the dominant mentality in South Africa is a Herrenvolk mentality", and that for whites, "the curse of the Iscariot may yet be our fate for our betrayal of the Christian doctrine which we profess. . . . Here in South Africa the greatest evil of all is the tyranny of prejudice".

Hofmeyr was caught in the coils of white politics and was at the same time feeling his way out of the darkness into which he had been born. The reason why thousands of men loved him, followed him, and were greatly grieved by his death was that he was willing to grapple with good and evil, and to try to do what was right. This courage to face the truth in all circumstances and to allow himself to be changed by it took him from arrogance to humility, from white exclusiveness to an increasingly active belief in the brotherhood of man, and from optimism to resolution. Is not the test of saintliness not how good a man is but rather in which direction he is moving?

Hofmeyr is dead and the racialists he fought so hard to defeat are now in power. The journal founded in 1938 to fight for his ideas has, this year, ceased publication through lack of support. The unfinished manuscript of this biography spent part of its life hidden lest police should raid and take it away. Indeed the one minor mistake in the book, the reference to the doors of New York Grand Central opening as one approaches (which they do not), is a reminder that Mr. Paton himself is restricted and may not leave South Africa. The ideas which germinated in Hofmeyr's mind are under increasingly hysterical and vicious attack by a group which, although immensely powerful, is, none the less, terrified by that liberalism for which he stood. Hofmeyr saw that "in the mind of the average white South African there was a struggle between the desire to be just and the fear of being just. Yet fear produces hatred and hatred produces disaster. Therefore one must go forward in faith not fear".