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by

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"HOFMEYR"

When Hofmeyr died in 1948 General Smuts had this to say of him: "Here was the wonder child of South Africa with a record with which South Africa shows no parallel, who from his youngest years beat all records, whose activities in a comparatively short life show no parallel in this land and whose star, at the end, was still rising."

Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr was indeed a wonder child, but whether his star was still rising when he died is open to question. Although he didn't go to school until he was eight, he matriculated when he was twelve, and this headlong progress through school, his deeply religious upbringing and the possessiveness of his mother's love all combined to isolate him from boys of his own age. His achievements at the South African College - three degrees, all with first-class honours, and a Rhodes Scholarship in five years, only increased his remoteness. At school he had been a child among boys while at college he was a boy among young men. He had been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship when he was fifteen, but it had been agreed that he should not go to Oxford until he was eighteen. For one reason and another he was just over nineteen when he and his mother left Cape Town for England and Oxford. Hofmeyr was wearing what may well have been his first pair of long trousers. His first impressions of Oxford were that he disliked the products of English Public Schools, for one thing their self-assurance, the result of growing up as members of closely knit school communities, made him feel uncouth. For another their Anglican formalism offended his nonconformity, and finally the absence of a colour bar shocked him. However, he grew to love Oxford and the English countryside and he became prominent in the affairs of the Balliol Boys Club, where he formed friendships which were to last throughout his life.

He left Oxford with a double first and returned to Cape Town to become a Lecturer at the South African College. In 1917 he was appointed to a professorship at the South African School of Mines in Johannesburg, and in 1919 he became Principal of Witwatersrand Unive at the age of twenty-four. There was, of course, a great deal of criticism of Hofmeyr's appointment and there was also much resentment of Mrs. Hofmeyr's interference in matters which were not even the responsibility of the Principal. Mrs. Hofmeyr judged things and by her own implacable standards; what wasn't completely right was

and those who transgressed her strict code were bad and should be removed. Her interference precipitated a long and bitter struggle between the Council, supported by Hofmeyr and the Senate. Neither side would make the slightest concession and the deadlock was broken only when General Smuts made Hofmeyr Administrator of the Transvaal. It was at this stage of his career that a new custom began to grow, in that when he had visitors who had come to talk business or affairs, his mother would leave them alone and it was during his term of office as Administrator that Mrs. Hofmeyr had to swallow what must have been a very bitter pill - nothing less than that her son no longer regarded her judgement as infallible. Hofmeyr proven to be the brilliant administrator and was offered a second term in the post. However, he refused the offer and declined to go to London as South African High Commissioner, so that he might be free to go into politics when the time seemed right. He was approached to stand as the South Africa Party candidate for Johannesburg North, he was elected and entered Parliament in 1929. He was very largely responsible for the reconciliation between Smuts and Hertzog. This resulted in a coalition government in which Hofmeyr held the portfolio of Education, Interior and Public Health until he relinquished them in 1938. However, when Smuts became Prime Minister he made Hofmeyr Minister of Finance and Minister of Education. During Smuts' frequent absences in London and elsewhere Hofmeyr acted as Prime Minister and in addition handled the portfolios of any Minister who was absent. At one stage of the war he held five portfolios simultaneously.

This tremendous work load was lifted very suddenly in 1948 when Smuts and his party were defeated in the General Election. Hofmeyr was returned as the member for Johannesburg North and returned to Parliament as a member of the Opposition, but in spite of having been Deputy Prime Minister in the previous parliament, was not made deputy leader of his party, and didn't sit on the Opposition Front Bench.

He had suffered from intermittent attacks of kidney trouble for some years, and his general health was not particularly good, so that when he collapsed on his way to open a new Y.M.C.A. Cricket Ground, there was little if any hope of his recovery.

Alan Paton has provided us with a very detailed study of Hofmeyr which is also a detailed study of a very crucial period in the history of South Africa. It is, I think, marred by some wishful thinking in

retrospect - wishful thinking that if Hofmeyr had formed a Liberal Party in 1938, the many white South Africans who returned from the war with a new understanding of racial problems would have been behind him to a man. It is difficult to assess Hofmeyr's Liberalism in terms of practical politics. He himself, made it clear that, in his view, Liberalism was a philosophy and not a policy, that Liberalism did not mean equality but the provision of reasonable opportunity. Hofmeyr was intensely loyal to South Africa and while he deplored the politics of Dr. Malan and his party, he was a realist, who realised, only too well, what the formation of a Liberal Party would have meant.

There can be no doubt that Hofmeyr served his country well and the tragedy, if there was one, is that he was unable to acquire the breadth of character and vision and to enjoy the happiness which is the reasonable expectation of every normal man, because of the stupidity of those who pushed him through school and even more, perhaps, because of what amounted to the domination of his mother.

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