

BOOKS*(April/May
1965)*

PATON, the novelist and politician, needs no introduction. *Cry, the Beloved Country* and the presidency of the South African Liberal Party have made his name familiar in literary and political circles throughout the world.

Paton, the biographer, is a newcomer.

At first sight, his very success in these other fields would seem to militate against his proficiency in this one. Critical detachment, so essential in the biographer, is rarely found in combination with the emotional warmth and imaginative licence of the creative writer, let alone the partisan commitment and embattled convictions of the political leader. Moreover, in this case, the author was an intimate associate and devoted supporter of his subject during the latter's lifetime. Friends rarely make good biographers; disciples almost never. Given these doubts, it should be said at the outset: this book defies all probabilities. It is a magnificent work. If it is not the greatest biography yet to emerge from South Africa, it is undoubtedly one of the greatest. Few combine in equal measure all the desirable traits of dispassionate appraisal, intuitive perception, comprehensive understanding, eloquent lucidity and fearless inquiry, as does this book.

In a certain sense, far from being disqualified by his other attributes and activities, Paton alone could have written this volume. It is as much the outcome of his own personality and past experience as it is the reflection of those of his subject.

Hofmeyr was not an easy person to penetrate or understand. To many he seemed cold, inhuman, impassive, insensitive and remote. His eyes, shielded behind their thick-lensed spectacles, rarely revealed what he thought or felt. Although he met and mingled with thousands of people during the course of his fatally overcrowded public career, he gave himself to very few, and they were often neither his contemporaries nor his equals.

Under such circumstances, the usual documentary sources of biography can prove dangerously inadequate and potentially misleading. It takes the accumulated knowledge, the insights and impressions, of long-standing personal acquaintance to rescue the resulting portrait from caricature, and to add the dimension of psychological motivation without which any biography remains little more than a chronology of external events.

Paton brings to this task not only the recollections of a lifelong friendship, but also the perceptive intuition of a great novelist. Taken together, these two factors enable him to penetrate and elucidate the character and actions of his subject in a way that no other person, relying on the written records alone, could ever emulate.

By any standard, Hofmeyr was a remarkable man. He matriculated at twelve, coming third in the Cape Colony; he graduated B.A. at fifteen, taking first place in the University of Cape Town. By the time he took up his Rhodes Scholarship at nineteen, he had added a Bachelor's degree in Science and a Master's certificate in Classics to his qualifications, finding time, on the side, to write the still unchallenged biography of his illustrious senior cousin, 'Onze Jan' Hofmeyr. At Oxford, he took a double first—that went without saying.

Within six months of his finals, he was already a Professor of Classics. Two years later, at the unprecedented age of twenty-four, he became Principal of the University College of the Witwatersrand. Nor was that all. While still in his twenties, Smuts appointed him Administrator of the Transvaal—a post in which he took precedence over every other person in the Province, except only the Head of State and Prime Minister. A Parliamentary seat and Cabinet portfolio followed in due course—indeed, he held most important offices at one time or another, including that of Acting Prime Minister while Smuts was away in Europe and America during the Second World War. Only the Premiership itself eluded him, and even this might have been his had it not been for his untimely death in 1948 at the age of fifty-four.

While his administrative achievements alone entitled him to a place in history, he will be remembered chiefly for his contribution to the

Hofmeyr
Oxford University Press 58s

BOOKS

development of racial policy in South Africa. The late thirties and early forties were a crucial period in this respect, a time for epoch-making choice, and no man played a more formative role than Hofmeyr.

He was a Christian Liberal—if not the most original, undoubtedly the most brilliant and persuasive ever to emerge in the Union. His advocacy of a shared society, starting with his opposition to Hertzog's Native settlement of 1936, had a profound effect, though ultimately not the outcome he would have wished.

Therein lies both the failure and the tragedy of his life. It was the old, old story of the man of conscience engaged in politics. Far from leading his people to a New Society, he brought upon his head their bitter enmity, and provoked in greater measure the very passions and prejudices he was so anxious to eradicate. It may be that the gods destroy those whom they love, but in a certain sense Hofmeyr destroyed himself.

The explanation for this terrible situation lies partly in the nature of South African politics, and partly in the character of Hofmeyr himself. Paton does justice to both—perhaps the greatest achievement of this book. The major personalities and events of the period are resurrected or re-enacted with a charity and understanding that few could equal; the innermost recesses of Hofmeyr's being are reconstructed and dissected with a precision and perceptiveness that none could surpass.

Two aspects, in particular, are explored with a subtlety and condour that compel admiration: firstly, Hofmeyr's relationship with his indomitable mother, who held him in a grasp of implacable possessiveness from which he either could not or did not wish to escape; secondly, his association with his 'diabolical kinsman' Smuts, who commanded his fascinated loyalty and respect, and yet with whom he often differed fundamentally on matters of principle.

Hofmeyr himself emerges from the pages of this book almost as a tangible figure of flesh and blood. The narrative shirks nothing. We are shown the grubby clothes and ungracious table manners as much as the Christian purity and selfless dedication to duty that were characteristic of him.

The net result is surely as near to the truth as any biography can come. Historians recognise no higher praise, and few deserve it more completely than Paton for this volume.

Minor faults there certainly are. One of them is the inclination to mention little known people without explanatory introduction; another is the tendency to quote at length from Hofmeyr's Oxford friends when their comments cast light on nothing but themselves, and even that imperfectly. Both of these flaws are peripheral, however, and can easily be rectified in a subsequent edition.

THE trouble about writing contemporary history, as one wit remarked, is that it is difficult to be contemporary and impossible to be historical. The inevitable delay between compilation and publication means that the volume in question can claim consideration neither for its news nor for its views. Not only is the bulk of its material of very recent occurrence, but what took place in more remote antiquity is now being refurbished with a modern image. The result, at best, is a distortion of perspective; at worst, a travesty of the truth.

Every rule is said to have its exceptions, and in this case one of them is undoubtedly Dr. Hanna's account of British Central Africa. Not that the bulk of the book is not 'contemporary' nor that the 'earlier' parts have not been revised. Fully a quarter of its pages deal with the developments of the last decade, and the major alterations to the text of this the second edition—apart from the obvious additions necessitated by the passage of time—are all in the chapter on pre-colonial days.

What distinguishes Dr. Hanna's writing from most African historiography is its objectivity. He has set himself the aim of "marshalling the facts as fully as possible and letting them speak for themselves"



Dr. A. J. Hanna

Story of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland
Faber 30s