

Paton's Hofmeyr

Marion Friedmann

Hofmeyr, by Alan Paton (Oxford University Press)

THE SUBJECT OF THIS excellent biography is a white South African politician, who had a colossal intellect and a conscience. Although, impelled by the second, he often brought the first formidably to bear on white supremacy, it is arguable that he hindered rather than helped the liberal movement in South Africa.

Hofmeyr was a five-year-old prodigy when the Boer War began; a fifteen-year-old graduate in short pants when the Union of South Africa was established in much hope and little cynicism; he died in 1948, the year of the triumph at the polls of white domination, unashamed and undisguised. ("Now that Hofmeyr is dead, South Africa will not have a conscience," said Smuts, who could not supply the deficiency.)

The theme of the period—and it is compellingly handled—is the gradual but sure evolution rightwards of white politics; by 1948 white South Africa has resolved on its terrible response to the challenge: "what are black hopes, what are white hopes and can they be hoped together?" In counterpoint, Hofmeyr, to use his biographer's phrase, painfully inches his way towards emancipation from traditional white attitudes: fearfully, cautiously, confusedly, but with courage. Meanwhile black politicians grow disillusioned and their attitudes harden.

THE PERIOD HAD GREAT REVELATIONS for black and white alike: the taking away of the common-roll franchise from Africans in the Cape in 1936; the massive African Mineworkers' strike in 1946, which finally exposed the impotence of the Native Representative Council, that "toy telephone" which was part of the shoddy substitute offered for the stolen vote; the confrontation between Hertzog and Smuts over South Africa's entry into World War II; the bitter cleavage in the white popula-

tion which followed; Afrikanerdom's rejection of Hertzog; the country's rejection, in 1948, of Smuts, who championed human dignity in world councils but was silent about or inimical to it at home.

Hofmeyr was a professor at 22; a Principal of a University at 24. ("Do you think you're the Principal Boy?" asked a contemporary comic of another. "No," was the reply, "I'm the Boy Principal.") His long, deep, uneasy relationship with Smuts had already begun when he became a Cabinet Minister with three portfolios in Hertzog's coalition government in 1933.

As a Cabinet Minister, he rebelled against his party for the first time in 1936 over the Franchise Bill, making a great speech and acknowledging his isolation: "I know perfectly well that I am speaking against the feeling of the overwhelming majority of this House; I know that I am speaking against the feeling of the great mass of the people of this country." By "people" he meant "white people": his emancipation had begun but old habits died hard. In 1937 he voted against a particularly vicious clause of an influx control Bill, although he did not vote against the Bill itself. He said then, as he was often to say, that the whites, on the pretext of "saving European civilisation", were surrendering the things which made civilisation meaningful. His resignation was not required by his party on either of these occasions.

WHEN IN 1938 HE OPPOSED an abuse of the Constitution—a defeated party member was given a Senate seat which should have gone to someone "thoroughly acquainted" with African needs—he resigned from the Cabinet. He defied the party again in 1939 over increased restriction on Indian trading, but Hertzog had now had enough and Hofmeyr was forced to resign from the Caucus. Soon afterwards, South Africa entered the war; Smuts became Prime Minister, Hofmeyr was back in the Cabinet and, other than

Smuts, its most important member.

Fusion between Hertzog and Smuts, the War, Hofmeyr's failure to break with a white supremacy party and give a new lead, all these—though they may have accelerated African nationalism—contributed to the long paralysis of white opposition—apart from the Communists—to Herrenvolkism. Perhaps none of these made any significant difference: discrimination was, after all, built into the 1910 Constitution. Mr. Paton, who seldom puts his own point of view explicitly, thinks differently, however: "the forces of right and justice could have been marshalled in the late thirties if Hofmeyr had felt called upon to do it, but he did not feel called upon to do it."

The book is dedicated to Peter Brown, banned Chairman of the Liberal Party of South Africa, which came into existence as late as seventeen years after the Franchise Bill. If Brown is Hofmeyr's heir, he entered into a dubious heritage: Hofmeyr not only delayed the emergence of a Liberal movement, he also stamped the term "liberalism", for some with connotation of compromise and infirmity of purpose, which present-day Liberals have had a hard time erasing.

One regrets that Alan Paton, deferring to Hofmeyr's taste, gave his subject the banal valedictory of an image taken from cricket. Paton's prose is better than Newbolt's verse: "Although he could not see clearly how to go forward, it was forward he wanted to go."

Then-and-Now Dept. Alan Paton notes that in 1948 the Nationalists released from prison a Mr. van Blerk, "who had tried to blow up a post office and thereby killed an innocent bystander . . . his story was featured in *Dagbreek*, not as one of violence and sabotage, but as one of Afrikaner patriotism."