

The grim message sent abroad from Bloemfontein in the Omar judgment is relieved only by the minority dissenting opinion of Judge Hoexter and by a Freudian slip in the majority judgment delivered by the acting Chief Justice (Rabie ACJ). In referring to the Court's earlier ruling in *Minister of Law and Order v Hurley*, the acting Chief Justice described the person arrested and detained in

that case as "Hurley". (The detainee was in fact Paddy Kearney, the application having been brought before the court by Archbishop Hurley and by the detainee's wife.) Was this slip indicative of the judicial view of the proper treatment of turbulent priests – or, perhaps, just an opportune moment to recall the biblical injunction "Forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do"? □

Review by Marie Dyer

Not Either with Tranquillity

ed. Shula Marks: **Not Either an
Experimental Doll** Natal University
Press, 1987. R17,50

NATAL SOCIETY
LEGAL DEPOSIT

This is an astonishing book. It can be read like a short novel in two or three hours (and is difficult to put down in that time) but the story is a kind of focus in which is concentrated a complex range of insights – historical, psychological, educational, political – into what the editor calls "the South African condition".

The core of the story is a collection of letters, found in the papers of Dr Mabel Palmer some twenty years after her death. These letters, with an editorial introduction and epilogue, document some events in the lives of three South African women – Mabel Palmer herself, Lily Moya, a Xhosa schoolgirl, and Sibusisiwe Makhanya, a Zulu social worker and community organiser. The letters begin in 1949 when Lily, then a 15-year old schoolgirl in Umtata, applied to Mabel for admission to the Non-European section of Natal University in Durban.

The main writers – Lily and Mabel – reveal enough of themselves in their letters to make the correspondence dramatically compelling, and the story is a sad one. Mabel, with great, even sacrificial generosity, arranged for Lily to enter not (of course) the University, but Adams College, and maintained her there for a year; but she was



quite incapable of responding to Lily's desperate need for emotional support: Lily's sufferings from personal and cultural loneliness and alienation in the uncongenial environment of Adams were acute. It seems indeed that Mabel's uncompromising rejection of her appeals eventually precipitated an emotional collapse on Lily's part, and she virtually fled from Adams to her mother in Sophiatown, who was living in very reduced circumstances as a domestic servant. From Sophiatown Lily wrote in her last letter to Madel "For congenial reasons I had to leave Adams, due to the fact that I was never meant to be a stone but a human being with feelings, not either an experimental doll". She was finally committed to a mental hospital and remained in confinement until 1976. During Lily's stay at Adams, Sibusisiwe had been running a social centre not far away, and Mabel had enlisted her help and interest in Lily's affairs, but her intervention had also been inadequate and ultimately unsympathetic.

The editor's scrupulous research and sensitive handling of these awkward and painful events make it impossible for the readers to make hasty or censorious judgements. The sub-title of the book is "the separate worlds of three South African women" and although the starting-point of the study is the personal individuality of the women (an individuality which the editor describes as "precious"), she presents their responses as being also determined and divided by their differences in qualities like "age, ethnicity and race", so the women emerge to some extent as intellectual prisoners of their own environments and their own histories. Thus, for example, although the editor does not seek to minimise the devastating effect on Lily of Mabel's crass, almost brutal fending-off of her personal overtures, she also gives a full and sympathetic account of Mabel's own career as an academically ambitious woman in Britain in the first quarter of this century, indicating the practical and emotional obstacles she had surmounted, and suggesting that her personal coolness and imperceptiveness had had to be developed as her own strategy of survival.

The editor's concern with this correspondence arises from her perception that it illuminates "more of the South African condition than the majority of history textbooks: the generousities, yet limitations, of white liberalism; the nature of mission education, the socialisation of black girls and the dilemmas they confront". It does illuminate these issues, and many more – but mainly through the editor's careful, detailed and elegantly presented research. The wide context and breadth of detail provided by this research place each individual's responses in significant perspective, but conversely prohibit any easy generalisations or oversimplified conclusions. The attitudes of Mabel Palmer as perhaps a "representative" contemporary liberal are thus seen not only against the background of her own individual career but also in comparison and contrast with insights into attitudes of many other liberals of her time. Furthermore, official communications from Adams College, personal letters from staff members, comments from ex-students provide complex and revealing details about the administration and values of that significant liberal institution.

Near the centre of Lily's catastrophe is the overwhelming (and up-to-date) question of what is the best education for Black children in South Africa – here more specifically Black girls. The Anglican mission schools that Lily had attended in the Cape were providing the same academically-oriented syllabus, and sought to apply the same standards, as those obtaining in White schools. The politically egalitarian philosophy of this kind of education was one of the main targets of the Bantu Education Act, passed shortly after Lily left school. It was this system that Mabel Palmer with her English background herself accepted as the norm. (The editor draws attention to the unquestioning acceptance shared by Lily and Mabel of works like *The Admirable Crichton* and Strachey's *Queen Victoria* as indispensable components of the South African educational process). The educational traditions of Adams College, however, were very different. It had originally been founded by the American Board of Missions, subscribing to a philosophy which (in a quoted reference) "aimed to train Blacks sufficiently for life in a modern society yet served to limit any challenge they might pose to White control". By 1951 the school had been transferred to a local Board of Governors, but some of the old influences remained in the emphasis on subjects like agriculture and hygiene, in the insistence on the students' spending some time every day on manual labour, and perhaps in the school's general lack of success in academic exam results (which dismayed Lily). The kind of informal educational opportunities offered by the American-educated Sibusisiwe at her social centre were also based on a philosophy of social upliftment through practical achievement. Her winter schools provided courses for girls in "knitting, gardening, sewing, housework, cookery, native craft work and tree planting". The dislocation suffered by Lily (among all her other despairs) in lurching from one set of educational practices to another is presented as an image of the deep divisions in contemporary educational and political theories – differences which in their turn illuminate today's confused and bitter conflicts.

The editor's accomplishments as a researcher do not allow her readers to make hasty personal judgements or superficial historical generalisations: but her own sensitive involvement with the people whose story she tells also does not allow her readers to become detached. In the epilogue she describes her own efforts to continue the story by tracing Lily and learning her subsequent history. She finds her, and Lily's condition gives occasion for characteristically cogent accounts – both particular and general – of responses to mental illness in African society: but it is clear that for Shula Marks the confrontation with Lily Moya, dulled and drugged after 25 years in unprogressive Black mental hospitals, was a distressing personal ordeal.

Dr Johnson said that "histories of the downfall of kingdoms and revolutions of empires are read with great tranquillity". But this account of the personal downfall of Lily Moya is a different kind of history: it has not been written – nor can it be read – with any tranquillity at all. □