

'The value of the book is actually in juxtaposing the two [men] ... By doing so, the author has made us look at our history through a new lens and to question once again what we thought we knew.'

- Bongani Ngqulunga, author of *The Man Who Founded the ANC: A Biography of Pixley Ka Isaka Seme*

ROGER SOUTHALL

SMUTS &
MANDELA

THE MEN WHO
MADE
SOUTH AFRICA





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Smuts and Mandela: The men who made South Africa

By Roger Southall

Review by Gordon Young

Jacana, 2024, R380 (paperback)

Roger Southall has written two-and-a-half good books in one. The first is a study of character, placing the two foremost South African statesmen of the 20th century in counterpoint to each other as it were. So we are shown the many unexpected similarities and resonances in their lives, as well as the great differences between the two men and their work.

It is not as if there is a shortage of biographies of these two men: over 30 in the case of Smuts, and seven or eight so far in the case of Mandela. Smuts does of course have the advantage of the semi-official full two-volume treatment by a serious historian, Sir Keith Hancock, which Mandela still awaits. Southall brings the two men together in a single treatment and it is illuminating.

They both came from a background in the rural gentry though in very different circumstances; neither was a conventional Christian though much influenced by Christian ethics; both were lawyers by training; both suffered defeat at the hands of their enemies; and both led their own people into political settlements of reconciliation with these former enemies. And then the differences: for example Smuts was rejected by his own people; Mandela never was. Smuts funk'd the great task of racial reconciliation while Mandela took it on headfirst. Smuts earned global respect as an international statesman; Mandela achieved immortal fame as South Africa's saviour.

Thus Field Marshall J C Smuts, P.C., C.H., K.C., D.T.D., and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, prison number 11657/63. (He had several.)

The second of Southall's books is an excellent potted history of these men's times, and especially the two great periods of reconciliation, the first after the end of the Boer War ending in Union, and the second after Mandela's release from prison in 1990. "A 'new nation' twice born," as Southall puts it. Younger readers will find it a valuable read as the book's account of these times is thoughtful and well-judged and some of the incidents may come as a surprise to those whose only knowledge comes from crude newspaper and online sources. Some of their certainties might be challenged.

None of us alive today was present when the British Empire and the Boer republics made peace in 1902, or in the period of reconstruction which followed, so we have no personal sense of the enormous optimism and economic opportunities which arose in the ensuing years. Under the more-or-less benign umbrella of the British Empire, trade flourished. Union in 1910 provided the final step in the process of the elimination of borders and internal tariffs, unification of the railways and creation of a single civil service, legal system and so forth. Even such a jingo as Rudyard Kipling, largely unread today, was moved to write this paean to reconciliation:

*Here, where my fresh-turned furrows run,
And the deep soil glistens red,
I will repair the wrong that was done
To the living and the dead.
Here, where the senseless bullet fell,
And the barren shrapnel burst,*



*I will plant a tree, I will dig a well,
Against the heat and the thirst.

Here, in a large and a sunlit land,
Where no wrong bites to the bone,
I will lay my hand in my neighbours' hand,
And together we will atone
For the set folly and the red breach
And the black waste of it all.
Giving and taking counsel each
Over the cattle kraal.*

(From "The Settler", 1903. Not quoted in the book).

Only that the black population was excluded gives the achievement of Union the quality of our Original Sin.

The half-book is a thoughtful reflection on the practice of history. Smuts presents a particularly interesting case of a man whose global stature was undeniable when he was alive but practically invisible today. As Southall says, some historians today even seem to regard an interest in Smuts as a branch of antiquarian studies, suitable only for elderly white nostalgists. This is wrong: Smuts made this country as much as any man, for all his faults and mistakes - so obvious to us now! - which Southall does not brush away.

If anything Southall is a little unfair and perhaps slightly contradictory, in handling the key issue of Smuts' failure after the Second World War to promote liberal racial policies, in a period when any hint of liberalism meant electoral extinction. He presents Sir Garfield Todd as having offered a better solution to the problem, in his case in Rhodesia, yet cannot fail to observe that Todd was promptly ejected from Rhodesian politics and could play no better role thereafter than a prophet in the wilderness - which would surely also have been Smuts' fate, a sort of proto-Helen Suzman. One hates to point out that Southall is British born. But you really need to have lived through the period of the Nationalist Party ascent and the United Party decline to understand the hopelessness of any attempt by a white politician to alter the course of events. The successor to Smuts was J.G.N Strauss, and some of us know what that meant!

Southall is above all fair-minded in an era when writers seem duty-bound to be scathing about any historical figure who was not completely up to date - to today - in his or her righteous opinions. He rightly points out that Smuts' international achievements far exceed Mandela's whose 27 years in prison prevented him from doing anything at all except prepare himself and his comrades. Smuts on the other hand was a successful general (one of few) in the British Army in the First World War, a member of the British War Cabinet, and played a crucial role in setting up the League of Nations afterwards. In the Second World War he was again a member of the British War Cabinet (only Churchill himself had also served in both) and again was instrumental in the creation of the much more successful United Nations in 1946. Mandela has a highly successful mediation in Burundi to his credit, a peaceful settlement which outlasted him and survives to this day. But his central achievement was in bringing about a peaceful settlement in his own country, South Africa, displaying the very highest qualities of leadership. This period is well treated by Southall.

Younger readers would do well to study this book just for its treatment of the difficult process of bringing the ANC and the Nats together in the 1990s, not to mention the smaller and sometime troublesome smaller parties like the Inkatha Freedom Party, in a peaceful settlement of a struggle which my generation fully expected to end in a full-scale bloody civil war. This was Mandela's achievement and if it was not his alone, recall that there were many in the ANC who opposed any deal with the Nats, and many Afrikaners who considered any deal with the ANC to be a pact with the devil. Somehow, he brought them all into the same tent and ushered in perhaps the happiest period in South African history. Though we all have much to complain about today, the oppressors no longer have that heavy burden, and the oppressed are no longer oppressed.

The book is well produced by Jacana as usual, to whom we must be grateful for taking the risk on so many new histories, though there are typos on pages 259 (the dates are a century out) and 285.