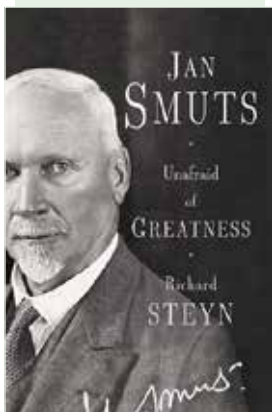


BOOK REVIEW

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JAN SMUTS: UNAFRAID OF GREATNESS
By Richard Steyn
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Jan Smuts: Unafraid of Greatness by Richard Steyn

Almost my earliest conscious memory is being taken by my parents to watch as Field Marshal Jan Smuts' cortege passed solemnly along the streets of Johannesburg on 15 September 1950. For the grownups who raised me, his demise long remained an epochal event, matched only by Churchill's death in 1965. People of every generation have their particular heroes who – despite some inevitable shortcomings – embody their own aspirations and values on a gigantic scale. Smuts was certainly such an icon, his stage was not confined to South Africa but encompassed the world. In our own times, the only South Africans to have enjoyed similar international stature are President Mandela and Archbishop Tutu. Who knows Smuts today? The superb statue by Sydney Harpley outside the South African National Gallery in Cape Town – which abstractly embodies the philosopher-soldier-statesman's brilliant, questing intellect and indomitable spirit – is only another 'symbol of colonialism' to be subjected to spray-paint and abuse by those who would be hard-pressed to assess Smuts in a reasonably informed manner.

That is why Richard Steyn's masterful new biography of Smuts is so timely. It's not as if there is not already a compendious quiversful of hefty and comprehensive biographies available – and Steyn is very clearly familiar with them all. But, as he states in his preface, he took the decision to write a compact book that distills the secondary sources into an easily readable account for a new generation which has everything to learn about Smuts and why he was a world figure. And I should add that, for readers of my generation who are more familiar with Smuts' story, this study reminds us of how he attained greatness in so many areas, yet failed utterly to address the pressing need to create equitable political, economic and social relations between the black and white peoples of South Africa.

Steyn has neither eulogized Smuts nor condemned him out of hand. Rather, he has written a balanced, dispassionate, but not unsympathetic, account that appreciates those qualities and activities which made Smuts extraordinary, yet never glosses over his foibles, blind spots and contradictions, and is properly critical when Smuts failed to live up to his own high principles.

The book is sensibly structured into two sections. The first is a straightforward account of Smuts' life and career, securely set in the context of his times, which Steyn deftly etches in for those who are unfamiliar with that history. Steyn follows Smuts, the supremely intelligent but initially socially maladroit descendent of seventeenth-century Dutch settlers in the Cape Swartland – he was never to lose his distinctive Malmesbury 'brei' – to his lonely time at Christ's College,

Cambridge, to the Transvaal where he was President Kruger's young but effective State Attorney, and through the South African War of 1899–1902 where he forged a formidable reputation as a guerilla general. Steyn then takes us through the post-war period when Smuts shared with General Louis Botha a grand vision of Afrikaners and English living united under the protection of the British Empire and became the architect of the Union of South Africa in 1910. However, as Steyn makes clear, these efforts at nation-building only earned Smuts the abiding mistrust and hatred of unreconciled Afrikaners who labelled him a sell-out to the British. The First World War, which was the making of Smuts on the international stage, only exacerbated these bitter sentiments. But Smuts could afford to ignore the parochial cavillers because, in 1916, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the Imperial forces in East Africa and joined the Imperial War Cabinet in 1917. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Smuts enjoyed perhaps his greatest hour when it was his vision that inspired the founding of the League of Nations.

Smuts, Steyn writes, impatiently mistimed the calling of a general election in 1948, and the Oubaas was defeated at the polls, ceding the country to the Nationalists who immediately asserted Afrikaner dominance and began constructing the apartheid state.

Between the two World Wars, Smuts served as prime minister from 1919 to 1924, and, after a long period in opposition, as deputy prime minister in Dr Hertzog's coalition government from 1933 to 1940. As Steyn ably shows, this ill-fated epoch of economic and social tension that saw the radicalization of politics and the forming of the purified National Party was draining for Smuts who, nevertheless, saw it as his duty to carry on, even though excoriated as the betrayer of Afrikanerdom. The Second World War made these divisions even more acute. Herzog's government fell in 1940 over the question of South

Africa entering the war. Smuts, once again prime minister, rallied South Africa for the war effort and re-entered the world stage as a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, becoming one of the most influential leaders on the Allied side. It was his inspiration that was paramount in establishing the United Nations in 1945. Yet the greater his stature grew internationally, the more he was held in suspicion and contempt at home by the Nationalists under Dr Malan. Smuts, Steyn writes, impatiently mistimed the calling of a general election in 1948, and the Oubaas was defeated at the polls, ceding the country to the Nationalists who immediately asserted Afrikaner dominance and began constructing the Apartheid state.

The second section of the book takes a thematic approach, fleshing out various elements suggested in the preceding narrative of Smuts' career with sensitivity and insight. Steyn investigates the mainsprings of Smuts's character, his self-possession, religious sensibility, physical courage, stoicism, sense of purpose and service, and his tendency to believe that what he did was always best for his country. He shows us Smuts' patriarchal life at home at Doornkloof, his Spartan farm, with his extended family, his children and Isie, his wife, the Ouma so beloved by the troops in the Second World War. Her relationship with Smuts was always secure, though she had to put up with his constant absences and with his close friendships with a relay of intelligent, beautiful, and sophisticated women whom he found to be his most sympathetic companions. He was the confidant and wise adviser of kings and statesmen. Walking in the mountains or the veld was his recreation, and he became an expert botanist, specializing in veld grasses, and as a synthesiser of various branches of scientific knowledge, a pioneer ecologist. That pursuit was part of his quest to find order in complexity in his philosophy of Holism (made much

clearer by Steyn than in Smuts' dense and complex book, *Holism and Evolution*) in which Smuts saw the disparate elements of the universe contributing to mankind's evolution into a whole greater than its individual parts.

Yet – and this is the truly damaging proviso – Smuts, as Steyn uncompromisingly points out, was unwilling to confront the huge issue of race in South Africa. True, he threw himself into trying to reconcile Boer and Briton in the bitter aftermath of the South African War, but this was at the expense of blacks, and in 1910 he successfully advocated that the 'native problem' should be shelved for future Union parliaments to solve. It never was while he was in government. This failure seems to fly directly in the face of Smuts' recognition of human rights as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations he had been so instrumental in framing. Yet, as Steyn explains, Smuts never believed that human rights were synonymous with political or racial equality. He clung to the values of his youth that saw it as the paternalistic duty of the advanced nations (by definition Western and Christian) to assist the backward nations along the path to civilization. So, while he considered ways of ameliorating the conditions of South African blacks, Smuts never envisaged their being elected to parliament or running the country.

This major failure of vision and, ultimately political common sense must tarnish Smuts' otherwise indubitable greatness. Even so, for much of his lifetime, segregationist views were perhaps too entrenched in white society and in political parties to be seriously questioned, let alone revised. But challenged they certainly were in the aftermath of the Second World War by emerging nations and liberation movements. Perhaps, if Smuts had been a younger man, and had he held on to power in 1948, South Africa would not have had to endure apartheid rule. Wisely, Steyn does not speculate. Rather, he leaves us in contemplation of an extraordinary man, a giant figure, and one of South Africa's very greatest sons – despite his flaws.