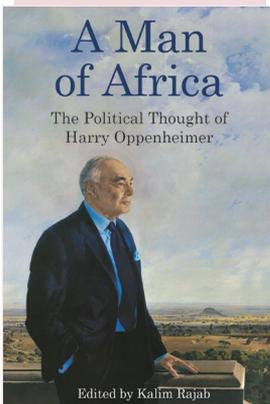


## BOOK REVIEW

**Gary Ralfe** retired from active business life in 2006 after forty years of service firstly with Anglo American Corporation, and then with De Beers where he was Managing Director for eight years. In addition to the HSF he chairs the Board of Governors of Michaelhouse, the fund-raising arm of the Alexandra Education Committee, the fund-raising arm of Business Against Crime and the Beyond Foundation which does community work in rural areas.



**A MAN OF AFRICA: THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF HARRY OPPENHEIMER**  
 Edited By Kalim Rajab  
 Publisher: Penguin  
 Random House  
 ISBN: 9781776092116

# *A Man Of Africa : The Political Thought of Harry Oppenheimer* Edited by Kalim Rajab

*My forty-year career with Anglo American and De Beers developed under the benign shadow of Harry Oppenheimer (HFO). To generations of managers and staff in what used to be called the greater group HFO was more than a chairman and leader. He was a living icon. I was not the first or the last young man or woman to join Anglo American because it was a force for good in Southern Africa, the most important engine of economic growth, industrialisation, urbanization and a better life for all. I associated with the credo attributed to HFO's father Sir Ernest Oppenheimer that "the purpose of large corporations such as Anglo American is to make profits for its shareholders, but to do so in such a way as to make a real and lasting contribution to the welfare of the communities where it operates".*

It is surprising that seventeen years after HFO's death there is still no biography. I know that the family wisely wanted time to elapse before commissioning one. We now wait for Michael Cardo to produce that biography. In the meanwhile we have *A Man of Africa*, subtitled the Political thought of Harry Oppenheimer, under the editorship of Kalim Rajab. Kalim himself is close to the Oppenheimer family having been assistant to Nicky Oppenheimer in De Beers. But this is no hagiography. Kalim has produced a deft book, of which Part 1 is an "historical assessment" of Harry Oppenheimer. This is an original essay by Kalim. Part 2 is entitled "The Speeches" and consists of speeches by HFO, interviews, and excerpts from his Anglo American chairman's statements, in their day considered an alternative commentary on the state of the nation. These are arranged under various subjects and followed by commentaries by notable South Africans in the public domain – not all of whose political values coincided with HFO's. People like Heribert Adam, Ann Bernstein, Clem Sunter, Albie Sachs, President Kgalema Motlanthe, Jonathan Jansen, Xolela Mangcu. There is also a beautifully tailored piece by Tony Bloom.

Kalim's essay starts off with a sentence: "What role can moderates play in a society calling out for revolution?" He finds an apt metaphor for HFO in the so-called Rashomon effect. This is taken from the Japanese film *Rashomon*; what appears to be a straight-forward murder of a Samurai is witnessed by four people each of whom describes the event in equally plausible but mutually contradictory ways. Thus one's views of HFO depends on one's stance.

I fitted easily into Anglo American as an English-speaking privileged white male believing in liberalism, capitalism and the free market. Following the *Rashomon* line, Kalim contrasts the admiration of this group with the invective against

*Juxtapose that with the closing sentence of Kalim's essay: "Assessing Harry Oppenheimer requires nuance, appreciation and generosity. Let us hope future generations possess it."*

HFO by Afrikaner nationalism and the accusation of African nationalists that HFO was a hypocrite in the fight against racial oppression. The charge of black trade unions (which ironically HFO had helped to recognise) was that he and Anglo American had created their wealth through the exploitation of black workers. For me as an admirer of HFO and the old Anglo American, the most challenging part of Kalim's essay is the section headed "Original Sin". It is a stinging criticism of Anglo American's treatment of

hundreds of thousands of black workers particularly in its underground gold mines. The mines were run on migrant labour. The men were crammed into single-sex compounds and subjected underground to dangerous and insanitary conditions, resulting in deaths from rock-bursts and, in frequent cases, of silicosis. Kalim concludes that "the greatest threat to Oppenheimer's legacy will be ... in future assessment of his willingness to reform conditions underground".

Juxtapose that with the closing sentence of Kalim's essay: "Assessing Harry Oppenheimer requires nuance, appreciation and generosity. Let us hope future generations possess it."

Helen Suzman acknowledged that her parliamentary career and the Progressive Party would have been stillborn had it not been for the financial and moral support of HFO. About twenty years ago there was an appalling accident at Anglo American's Vaal Reefs gold mine when a locomotive jumped its rails and plunged down the men and materials shaft. It hit an upcoming lift and a hundred men were killed. Helen Suzman was invited to join the group which set out to commiserate with the families of these men. The most common response from the bereaved families was to ask if another member of the family could take up the job of the man who had died in the accident. This illustrates that what Kalim calls the "original sin" is also complex and Rashomon-like.

My review concludes with the following words from Nelson Mandela's tribute to Harry Oppenheimer on his death, appropriately reproduced at the beginning of the book:

"The preamble to our founding constitution speaks of honouring those who suffered for justice and freedom in our country, and respecting those who have worked to build and develop our country. Chief amongst the latter must stand Harry Oppenheimer and his family; that they also fought in a particular manner for the former sets them apart in the gallery of South African patriots."