

BOOK
REVIEW**GRAHAM DOMINY**

is a South African historian and archivist who has worked in museums, archives and cultural bureaucracy since the late 1970s. Beginning his career in the museum space, he was part of a small team of activists pushing for transformation in the South African heritage sector in the lead up to 1994. He was appointed National Archivist of South Africa in 2001 and served on the International Council for Archives (ICA), where he was a member of the Human Rights Working Group. Dominy is a Research Fellow of the Helen Suzman Foundation.

Richard Steyn

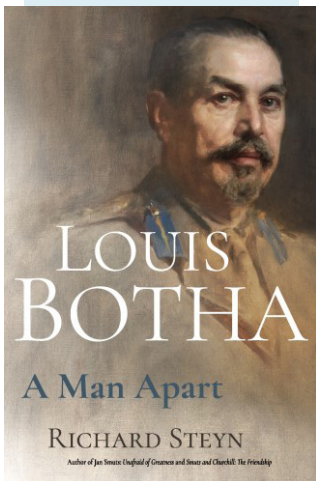
Louis Botha: A Man Apart

For reasons that will become clear below, I am going to take a rather personal approach to this review. One of the problems I had to deal with during my time as National Archivist of South Africa was the disappearance of documents and their later reappearance on sale in London auction houses. Some of these houses bore illustrious names, but I found them to be petty and predatory in the extreme. There were fortunate exceptions, and one of my most pleasant surprises came when a London auctioneer contacted the National Archives to inform us that he wanted to return a letter from Winston Churchill to Jan Smuts, expressing his deep condolences at the death of Louis Botha, to the National Archives in Pretoria. The historic importance of this letter cannot be under-estimated, nor, unfortunately, can its enticing value to manuscript and signature collectors of dubious morals. Richard Steyn quotes this letter in *Louis Botha: A Man Apart*.

In a way this biography completes a trilogy, Steyn has already written a biography of Jan Smuts and an account of the relationship between Smuts and Churchill. This new work focuses on the man who established, albeit for a very brief period, a unified white South African ruling partnership and who was a significantly greater general than Smuts. Furthermore, his political partnership with Smuts built the Union and kept it together through a rebellion and a world war. Botha was not an imperial partner of Churchill's the way Smuts became, but the future British Prime Minister boasted that Louis Botha had captured him during the Anglo-Boer War. Steyn points out that the origin of this myth was in a joke Botha had made and that the real captor was a burgher called Sarel Oosthuizen from Krugersdorp. However, Botha was in effective command of the overall force that Oosthuizen was serving in.

This is a popular history and it is a well-written easy read. The chapters are sub-divided into catchily captioned short sections – a useful application of Steyn's journalistic expertise. Steyn relies on earlier biographies of Botha and on an extensive range of other secondary sources. He has also explored important series of papers in London and Oxford. There are some editorial weaknesses: the illustrations have clearly been selected from online photographic archives which makes them appear unconsidered. British titles are not always accurately given, for example, Steyn should have described Field Marshal Roberts either as Viscount or Lord Roberts, but not as both.

Growing up in Greytown in the then Natal Midlands, where my father had established the local museum in the one-time home of Louis Botha's sister, I have long been aware of Botha's towering presence in South African history. His birthplace, a few kilometres outside the town, is marked by a stone memorial. This small square of land was bought and presented to the nation in the 1930s by a local Indian business family, the Lakhis; a fact that enraged some *verkrampte* officials in the heritage world in the dire days of racial "own affairs", as the abominable concept was described in PW Botha's TriCameral Constitution. But this simple act was a measure of the respect that was felt towards Louis Botha by South Africans of all races and Richard Steyn is right to re-examine his life in the context of his times. This book is a significant attempt to save Botha's name from being "traduced" (as Steyn puts it), by members of a modern generation more intent on "apportioning blame for historical injustices" than in making allowances for the circumstances of the times.



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Louis Botha: A Man Apart is a much-needed new assessment of the life of this distinguished Boer general and first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa. Why is this so timely? Now, towards the end of the 20-teens, South Africa is still wrestling with constitutional and land issues that were bequeathed to us by the white political leaders who founded the unified South Africa in 1910. Land is the issue that current political parties are rallying around and Botha presided over the passing of the now notorious 1913 Native Land Act. He also persuaded British ministers and parliamentarians to trust the white Union Parliament to settle the black franchise issue; an issue that remained unresolved until 1994. Yet Louis Botha was a man respected by black and white, Boer and Brit. Richard Steyn calls him the Mandela of his time. In Botha's case, he strove to unite English and Afrikaners whereas Mandela strove to unite blacks and whites. Both men demonstrated a generosity of spirit and a depth of understanding that set them apart from many of their contemporaries and that won the admiration of their former foes. Another quick aside: Until the rise of Jacob Zuma to the Presidency, Louis Botha was the only South African head of government to have been born in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. Both men lacked formal education, but what a difference in moral character.

Steyn describes Botha as a great, but flawed, man who must be judged within the context of his times. This point is stressed in the Preface and given further emphasis in carefully selected quotations by three well known historians, including Professor Charles van Onselen, all of whom stress the relationship between historical actors and the contexts and structures of their period.

However, the late Gilbert Torlage, former Natal Parks Board ranger-historian at Spioenkop, used to recall that Botha was not averse to lashing his sjambok across the backs of Boers and blacks alike to get and keep them in line, shooting or digging as he ordered.

Botha's beginnings were modest. He had but a few months of formal school education at Deutsche Schule Hermannsburg near Greytown, but was always uncomfortable speaking English in public. However, unlike the similarly under-schooled Paul Kruger, Botha was not a reactionary: he was far more open-minded, far-sighted and inclusive than the old president. He cut his teeth in public life in 1884 by joining the founders of the *Nieuwe Republiek*, with its new capital in Vryheid. This is when he first met Prince Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, the heir to the Zulu throne, with whom he maintained a

lifelong friendship. However, one of Botha's first government jobs was as a veld cornet dividing up Zulu territories into farms for the Vryheid Boers. Perhaps the first signs of the political instincts that led to the 1913 Native Land Act?

It was also during his Vryheid days that Botha met and married Annie Emmett (an English-speaker of Irish extraction). It is a pity that Steyn does not give us more information about Annie who seems to have been a spirited and fascinating woman. Although Steyn does not mention it, the South African Emmetts (spelt with a double "m" not a single "m" as Steyn mistakenly does) have claimed descent from Robert Emmet, an early 19th Century Protestant Irish Republican who was executed by the British for high treason in 1803.

Given the temper of the times, Botha can hardly be described as a liberal (Although staunch liberals such as WP Schreiner placed their faith in him despite the racist blemishes in the foundation of the Union of South Africa). Humane and decent in his dealings with individual blacks, he could be ruthless when the situation required it. A good account is given of Botha's leadership at the Battle of Spioenkop, where he turned a potential disaster into a Boer victory. Steyn describes how he exhorted exhausted burghers to make one final, fateful, effort. However, the late Gilbert Torlage, former Natal Parks Board ranger-historian at Spioenkop, used to recall that Botha was not averse to lashing his sjambok across the backs of Boers and blacks alike to get and keep them in line, shooting or digging as he ordered.

Spioenkop was a great victory that is rightfully attributed to Louis Botha's leadership, but Steyn also shows how skilful a tactician Botha was in adversity, conducting guerilla warfare across the veld, despite the privations of his people, until his enemies sought peace. With the Peace of Vereeniging, Botha's greatest victory was to convince his fellow burghers to lay down their arms and accept the peace terms offered by the British.

Steyn confidently deals with the politics of the pre-Union period as Botha and Smuts developed their dominance of the South African political scene and won the admiration of British politicians and generals. One of Botha's first acts as prime minister of the Union of South Africa, on the very first day the union was formed, was to order Dinuzulu's release from the unjust imprisonment he had been subjected to by the Natal colonial government. Botha went further and arranged for him to live out his days on a government-provided farm near Middelburg in the Eastern Transvaal, now Mpumalanga. Yet, three years later, Botha presided over the passage of the Native Land Act of 1913, a piece of legislation that later became the foundation of the apartheid Bantustan policy.

We can all be grateful that it was Botha, rather than Rhodes, who became the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa.

Perhaps the most moving section of the book deals with the Afrikaner rebellion in 1914, after the outbreak of the First World War. This was the greatest political trauma in Louis Botha's life. His constitutional duty required him to support the British Empire actively in its war with Germany, but this was at a tremendous cost. Many of Botha's former Boer comrades in arms saw things differently and the famous old General Koos de la Rey was one of the most conflicted. Botha's emotional agonies are movingly described, but Steyn also shows how Botha kept a level head and put down the rebellion through astute political and military tactics, using Afrikaner troops loyal to him. Botha then proceeded to manage a textbook campaign of conquest in German South West Africa. Nevertheless, the rebellion haunted Botha to the premature end of his days and seriously affected him emotionally and physically, undoubtedly hastening his deterioration in health.

Botha and Smuts attended the post-war peace talks at Versailles where Botha's was a voice of reason, urging a peace that did not totally humiliate Germany. Alas, his health was failing him fast and he died shortly after his return to South Africa, having failed to ameliorate the conditions of the punitive peace.

I disagree with Steyn's depiction of Botha as a flawed man. His lack of formal education cannot be described as a personality flaw and his emotional and generous nature emphasised, rather than detracted from, his qualities as a leader. His inability to foresee a future for South Africa wherein all people would be equal was entirely in keeping with the times. Botha may have overseen the passage of the seriously discriminatory and flawed Native Land Act, but this cannot be counted as a personal flaw. Steyn shows how the Land Act rested on proposals and documentation drawn up by British officials in the pre-Union period. The British figure who loomed larger than life over turn-of-the-20th Century Southern Africa was Cecil Rhodes who has been described by Brian Roberts, one of his biographers, as a "flawed colossus". This is a far more appropriate application of the term "flawed" than Steyn's application of it to Louis Botha. We can all be grateful that it was Botha, rather than Rhodes (who also died prematurely, in this instance in 1902), who became the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa.

It was Smuts, the highly educated "Slim Jannie", who succeeded Botha as Prime Minister, and who mused that rights for blacks should be left to future generations – a seriously flawed judgement, if ever there was one. Had Louis Botha lived into the 1940s, who knows how his philosophy would have evolved? What Richard Steyn does in *Louis Botha: A Man Apart* is to demonstrate that Botha had the intellectual ability and moral standing to move forward in his thinking. His premature death in 1919 ensured that he was never able to do so.