in her Introduction to this fresh new biography, Lindie Koorts acknowledges that D. F. Malan (1874–1959) was the father of apartheid but asserts that “twenty years after apartheid ended, a space has opened up for a new generation of historians to explore the past in its own right.” She writes, she says, “without any attempt at apology or justification”. This is a very welcome sign of maturity in South Africa’s strife-torn cultural landscape, for evaluating Malan is more difficult than it might at first seem.

When asked at the end of his career what he had achieved, Malan said “That I could serve my nation, that I could unite my people. The Lord has granted me that” – it being understood, of course, that the people and nation in question were white Afrikaners. In the eyes of a majority of Afrikaners, Malan was the man who put together the fragmented and defeated remnants of Boer society and brought it triumphantly to power, making its language and culture central to South Africa. Many who were passionately anti-apartheid – such as the great Afrikaner historian, Hermann Giliomee – nonetheless could not but approve of this act of national self-assertion. Today, a great row is going on over attempts to rename the D. F. Malan building on the campus of Stellenbosch University. No one minds if buildings named after Verwoerd, Vorster, Strijdom or Botha get renamed, but the Malan building is a memorial to the Afrikaner Oliver Cromwell: a devout Puritan who led his people to victory. The building was, after all, funded by public subscription: he was the Pilgrim Father.

Non-Afrikaners find it difficult to grasp this. Malan was a bigoted Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) minister – hardly an attractive figure. He was immensely studious and theologically knowledgeable and remained single until an advanced age. He seemed to have little time for ordinary life and his simple country congregations regarded him with awe as a devout intellectual giant. His devotion to the DRC was almost matched by his dedication to the Afrikaans language; indeed, he felt the two things were virtually co-terminous. And both were essential if there was to be any hope of rebuilding the Afrikaner nation which had been left in pieces and in poverty by the Anglo-Boer War. His early missionary work took him into what are now Zimbabwe, Zambia, and the Congo, where he was shocked to find Afrikaner trekkers who were in the process of losing their language, religion and, he suspected, their national self-respect.

Hence Malan’s overriding concern was with poor whites. Most Afrikaners were extremely poor and many lived cheek-by-jowl with Coloureds or even with blacks. It would be all too easy for them to slip into an acceptance of poverty, idleness, alcoholism and miscegenation – and thus the end of their nation. So the fundamental challenge was to solve the poor-white problem: that would build self-respect and character. He felt that those who, out of concern with the Swart Gevaar (Black Peril) wanted to oppose the Africans’ access to education or the franchise, were barking up the wrong tree. African advancement was natural – but so was white superiority if only whites displayed the right spiritual and moral character. The White Peril (of whites sinking down into the coloured masses below) was a hundred times more important than the Black Peril, and it was also the answer to it.

Malan expressed no animosity towards Coloureds or blacks: he felt they would naturally accept white leadership provided whites deserved that respect. His animosity was reserved for the hated British imperialists. He was, naturally, furious that South Africa should enter the First World War on the British side and sided with General Barry Hertzog against that. This in turn led to his accepting the editorship of the new Afrikaans newspaper, Die Burger, in 1915, which in turn led on to a career as an MP in Hertzog’s National Party. Soon he became the leader of the Cape provincial section of the party, buoyed as always by the huge popular respect for his intellect which made him a prophet of his people. At the age of fifty-two he married for the first time and, after his wife’s death, married again at sixty-four.

The crux of Malan’s career came in 1932.

He had loyally supported Hertzog in government, but when Hertzog’s ill-judged decision to stay on the gold standard collapsed and he was driven into a coalition with Jan Smuts and his English-speaking followers, Malan disent. Coalition with Smuts – Fusion, it was termed – meant welcoming into government the English-speaking middle classes, the mining companies and thus the imperial interest. No true Afrikaner nationalist could accept that and Malan led his Cape followers out to form a “purified” National Party.

There were many ironies to the stance adopted by Malan. First, the Cape Afrikaners had always existed happily under British rule and had no difficulty accepting it; but his NP supporters in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were all-out republicans. Balancing these disparate interests tested Malan to the limit and his relations with the Transvaal NP leader, Hans Strijdom, became increasingly difficult. Strijdom – “the lion of the north” – rightly saw himself as the NP’s next leader and chafed under Malan’s more moderate leadership.

Second, when war broke out and Smuts – who had long foreseen it – succeeded Hertzog as premier, Malan now found himself facing the man who had been at school with him and who had, indeed, been his Sunday school teacher. Their whole lives had been lived in parallel, building towards this moment. Smuts, perhaps the most brilliant intellect ever produced by South Africa, doubtless regarded Malan as a lesser brother – but increasingly it seemed Malan was the more protective brother. Yet the oddity was that ever since 1910 the new country of South Africa had always been ruled by Boer War generals – first Louis Botha, then Smuts, then Hertzog, then Smuts again. And yet Malan was now challenging Smuts in the very Afrikaner nationalism that the Boer republics had stood for.

The Second World War was Malan’s hardest test. His more radical youth wing sympathized with the Nazis and wanted to sabotage the war effort and help the Germans. Malan had taken a hard look at the Nazis, didn’t like what he saw and opted for neutrality, a stance which set him against his own Young Turks and the Smuts-led majority. Yet by 1948 Malan, after so many years in the wilderness, led his party to power at last. By then he had discovered that nothing worked so well as Swart Gevaar (black threat) – the worst sort of populist opportunism – and he campaigned against concessions to the Kafirs and coolies (Indians). There is little doubt, however, that for him this was merely a means and not an end in itself. Yet he was not apartheid but the entrenchment of Afrikanerdom after “a century of wrong”. By the time he came to power he was a rather tired seventy-four and it was really his ministers, particularly Strijdom and Klasie Havenga, who called the shots. In 1953 Malan triumphantly led the Nats to an even greater electoral victory but he was exhausted and in 1954 he had to see Strijdom, backed by Verwoerd, take over. Malan finally died in 1959.

Lindie Koorts’s achievement is considerable: she has been painstakingly thorough and carefully avoids taking any position of her own, her aim merely being to understand and explicate. A young historian still at an early stage of her career, she has produced a work of astonishing maturity and promise. She also deserves credit for choosing such a politically disfavoured subject, for understanding Malan’s career remains of capital importance. He led not only a national movement but, effectively, a labour party for poor whites, one which achieved unparalleled success over the white working class; finally vanished as its members universally migrated into the bourgeoisie. Thus Afrikaner nationalism was the most successful African nationalist movement that the continent has ever seen – and there is no doubt that today’s ANC government in Pretoria is trying hard to ape its example. The tragedy is, of course, that any sectional nationalism, whether of the whites or blacks, necessarily defines itself over and against other groups, so South Africa has moved from anti-black to anti-white racism. Briefly, under Nelson Mandela, there was a glimpse of an inclusive vision embracing all South Africans but it was quickly gone. South Africa has thus suffered three waves of sectional nationalism – a jingoistic British nationalism and now African nationalism. There is no short cut and the country simply has to endure these waves, though there is now at least the knowledge that once this last wave exhausts itself – as it is rapidly doing – there can be no further such movement and the country may at last become a place for all its citizens.

White uniter

R. W. JOHNSON

Lindie Koorts

D. F. MALAN AND THE RISE OF AFRIKANER NATIONALISM


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