

Sobukwe: making of a hero

Benjamin Pogrund's biography of Robert Sobukwe, the founder president of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), is the product of a friendship of over 30 years, and one, moreover, which has lasted well beyond the grave.

In the 12 years since Sobukwe's untimely and, it is suggested, avoidable death from lung cancer in February 1978, Pogrund has been committed to preserving his memory and ensuring that Sobukwe's deserved place in the pantheon of South African political heroes is secured.

"Sobukwe and Apartheid" is an important and successful milestone in this crusade: no one who reads this book can fail to be impressed by the palpable qualities of leadership and the sheer intellectual grasp which Sobukwe brought to bear in both his political and personal dealings.

Mistreatment

The tremendous force of Sobukwe's personality is underscored by the fact that although, as a free man, he led the PAC for less than a year from its launch in April 1959 until his arrest for incitement in March 1960, and then spent the remainder of his life either in prison or banned, he remained both the embodiment of the Africanist movement, and the inspiration of two generations of young black activists.

Against this must be set the tragic irony of his neglect and mistreatment by the South African authorities which comes across with particular force and poignancy today when, for the first time, there is an opportunity for leaders of his calibre to shape the future of this country.

Pogrund treats Sobukwe's early life in a few brief chapters which succeed in conveying both the influence of his parents' probity on Sobukwe's moral outlook, as well as the atmosphere of Fort Hare University where he was a student

BOOK OF THE WEEK
How Can Man Die Better? Sobukwe and Apartheid by
Benjamin Pogrund (Jonathan Ball)
Reviewed by **MATTHEW KENTRIDGE**

leader, active in the ANC's Youth League in the late 1940s.

An attempt has been made, through a series of interviews with Sobukwe's contemporaries at university, to recreate his political awakening and rapid maturity, but these are in the main unilluminat-

ing, being effusive tributes to Sobukwe's leadership qualities, but which say little about the nature of that leadership or the precise form it took.

In fact, Pogrund's comments and speculations are more interesting and perspicacious than his interview material, and indicate his preference for placing his own skilful gloss on the events of Sobukwe's life.

In 1957, when Sobukwe was 32 and a language assistant in the Department of Bantu Languages at Wits University, he and Pogrund met for the first time and soon became close friends. Here the book changes gear and becomes less a biography than the record of a consuming and introspective friendship.

This immediately raises the ques-

tion of the relationship of biographer to subject, especially when the former is so integral to the life of the latter.

Graham Greene, for one, expressed satisfaction that his authorised biographer had never met him before taking on the project and there are few people more competent than Greene to assess the value of some detachment when setting out to create an honest character portrait.

However, the case of Sobukwe and Pogrund is so exceptional that these considerations recede. For the last 18 years of Sobukwe's life, Pogrund was (with the exception of Sobukwe's wife, Veronica) his primary link with the outside world and a uniquely privileged correspondent, privy to Sobukwe's concerns and reflections as he observed (through the distorted lens of security police censorship) the unfolding of political events in South Africa after Sharpeville.

The intimacy of their friendship is both a strength and weakness in the writing of this biography.

There is strength in Pogrund's moving affection for Sobukwe and this lends power to his fierce indictment of the National Party which in 1963 saw fit to pass the so-called "Sobukwe clause" which empowered the government to keep Sobukwe in prison, in solitary confinement, for six years after the completion of his jail sentence.

However, there is also a sentimental streak which pervades the writing as Pogrund remorselessly lays bare intimacies which one feels are best left unspoken, or devotes pages to the minutiae of the (very

substantial) material help which he gave Sobukwe during the latter's time on Robben Island and afterwards as well.

A further effect of Pogrund's commitment to the memory of his subject displays itself in a possessive and protective attitude towards any behaviour which he perceives as insufficiently thoughtful or respectful towards Sobukwe. He seems positively to relish the chance to settle old scores, laying bare in cold print each slight.

Almost assassinated

Some are trivial, but others are more telling, such as the coldness displayed towards Sobukwe by Anglo-American and De Beers when Sobukwe was restricted to Kimberley, and in a sense, on their turf. Now, with corporate social responsibility loudly in vogue, it is worth remembering that there was a time in the not too distant past when liberal corporations were either indifferent or insensitive to apartheid and its effects on the black population.

The book concludes with Sobukwe's death and his funeral in Graaf-Reinet at which Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, an admirer but not a friend of Sobukwe's, was almost assassinated by a mob out of control.

Some critics have deplored Pogrund's lack of analysis of contemporary developments in the PAC, particularly at a time when that organisation has the potential to make a great impact on the political map of South Africa. However, such criticisms are incidental. This is a book primarily about Sobukwe, and to a lesser degree about the organisation.

It is, after all, always the prerogative of a biographer, no matter what developments have taken place subsequently, to enclose his chronicle within the finite parameters of the subject's life.



Robert Sobukwe
... qualities of leadership and sheer intellectual grasp.

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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