

Biography falls short of penetrating myth surrounding ANC leader

Mandela—The Authorised Biography

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Mandela—The Authorised Biography, by Anthony Sampson, Harper Collins 1999

Nelson Mandela has become an icon of the late twentieth century. His release from prison on 11 February 1990, after more than a quarter of a century of incarceration, seemed to many to offer the prospect of progress after a decade dominated by the reactionary policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. An estimated 200 million people watched the televised pop concert from a packed Wembley Stadium that celebrated his seventieth birthday while still a prisoner in 1988.

Many of them had not even been born when Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1962. Few of those who were swept up in the wave of enthusiasm for Mandela's release followed the developing events in South Africa closely. Some were not even sure where South Africa was. Writing to her father from America, where she was studying, Mandela's daughter Zeni noted, "Some think it is somewhere in the Caribbean." Yet Mandela's name and, once he was released, his face were to become known around the world. With his release Mandela, the most famous prisoner in the world, came to be regarded as the president who single-handedly saved South Africa from a bloodbath and managed to achieve a peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. This near saintly figure is the subject of Anthony Sampson's authorised biography of Mandela which appears this year to coincide with his retirement from the presidency.

For all that he professes his desire to write about the man behind the icon, Sampson never succeeds in penetrating the myth that surrounds Mandela because it is too much a creation of the liberal media circles from which Sampson himself comes. This is not to say that Sampson's biography is poor one. On the contrary, it is a rich source of information about Mandela, the ANC and South Africa. Sampson writes in an accessible style, never allowing the book to become bogged down in detail, which is an accomplishment in a well researched and documented work such as this. But for all his craftsmanship as a writer Sampson lacks the historical perspective that would have been necessary to see beyond the halo of limelight that still surrounds Mandela as he steps down from the presidential stage. Such a historical perspective does not have to wait on the passage of time, nor is it a question of character assassination, but rather of setting the individual in a historical context and drawing out the interconnections between the character and actions of an historical figure and the times and circumstances that made them and which they in turn helped to shape.

One of the best ways of detaching Mandela the historical figure from the media creation that is the Mandela myth is to consider the legacy that he leaves to South Africa. His personal reputation remains high, but the bright hopes of reform that accompanied him into office have been dimmed as his country has become mired in poverty and crime. The rise

in crime is a product of the levels of poverty which are unprecedented in a developed industrialised country. Those living in third world poverty have Western levels of wealth flaunted in front of them daily. The World Bank calculates that income inequality in South Africa is amongst the highest in the world. Only Brazil has a worse record. Monthly household incomes for black households average R757 compared to R4,695 for whites. The ANC inherited this level of poverty from the apartheid system, but it has done nothing to reduce the gulf between rich and poor. Even the comparatively modest programme of social reforms that the ANC set for itself has fallen by the wayside to be replaced by a scramble for wealth on the part of leading ANC members. In addition to the poverty inherited from apartheid an increasing disparity has emerged among black households as a black middle class has emerged.

The starkest figure of social inequality in South Africa is the infant mortality rate. Between 70 and 100 black infants die out of every thousand born, a figure comparable to that in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, while only 9 per 1,000 white infants die. Yet under the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme health spending has been pegged at existing levels. Sampson does not attempt to hide the failure of Mandela's social policies, but absolves him from responsibility, attributing it to the operation of the world market. He pictures Mandela's government as being overwhelmed by economic forces which were outside its control. It was merely Mandela's misfortune to come to power at a time when the world economy was becoming ever more globalised and national governments were losing their ability to pursue economic policies in relative isolation from international markets.

Yet as his own book shows the ANC recognised these changed circumstances even before the election when they made their promises of social reform. They had already agreed a secret letter of intent which, as Sampson explains, "committed them to reducing the deficit, to high interest rates and to an open economy, in return for access to an IMF loan of \$850 million, if required" (p. 473). Contained within this agreement was the unspoken guarantee that Mandela's government would not carry out any major social reforms because the international markets would regard the provision of adequate health care for black infants as an unwarranted extravagance.

Even though accepting the implications of the globally integrated economy meant ditching large parts of the ANC programme, such as nationalisations, Mandela was well prepared for it, because he had never been in favor of anything other than pro-capitalist measures. Supporters of apartheid often accused Mandela of being a communist. The truth is that he was always a nationalist whose ambition was to allow black Africans the opportunity to become capitalists. This goal was explicitly set out in the ANC's 1955 Freedom Charter, which was to remain the movement's main statement of principles and programme.

Mandela reiterated the nationalist and capitalist character of the Freedom Charter in an article he wrote in 1956. He explained that the intention of the ANC was not to overthrow capitalism but to break the hold of the big corporations that dominated the South African economy. "The breaking up and democratisation of these monopolies will open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class. For the first time in the history of this country the non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right mills and factories and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before" (p. 95). Mandela continued to argue throughout his imprisonment that the ANC's struggle was to allow the black middle class access to capital. During the late 1970s a fierce ideological debate went on among the prisoners on Robben Island about the character of the Freedom Charter. Against other prisoners who argued that the Freedom Charter was a socialist document, Mandela held that its purpose was to establish a bourgeois democracy and to maintain the capitalist system. That is precisely what his government has achieved.

Although every other aspect of the ANC's programme has been dropped, its central plank—creating black capitalists—has been adhered to with religious fervour. The government-backed New Africa Investment Limited (NAIL) has provided the capital for black businessmen to buy up peripheral companies from the giant mining corporations that still dominate the South African economy. Under the new economic conditions that prevail in the world market the unwieldy conglomerates have been forced to unbundle their activities to maintain the profitability of their core business. Meanwhile ANC officials have been co-opted onto the boards of major companies with a handsome wad of share certificates to smooth their passage from the liberation struggle. The form of the transition might be somewhat different from that which the ANC's old rhetoric used to suggest, but the content is precisely what the Freedom Charter envisaged in 1955 and Mandela has consistently advocated.

The enthusiasm with which white South African businessmen have embraced the ANC is often attributed to Nelson Mandela's personal charm and statesmanlike sagacity. Sampson certainly fuels this myth. He describes how, shortly after Mandela's release, British Ambassador Robin Renwick took him to a fashionable restaurant with some trepidation about the reaction of the wealthy businessmen who were its usual clientele, "but Mandela made a point of touring the dining-room, shaking hands and co-opting them to his cause. 'It was a bravura performance,' said Renwick" (p. 412). Whatever Mandela's political skill, South African businessmen had good reason to welcome him into their restaurants and to run their government. They had extended their hands to him while he was still in prison because he seemed to offer their only salvation from economic disaster and social upheaval.

The changes that took place in the world economy during the 1980s had a powerful impact on the apartheid regime because the South African economy was so isolated from the world market. The National Party had created a highly regulated economy in which 30 percent of productive capacity was state-owned and high tariff barriers protected industry from competition. This grossly inefficient system seemed to be successful for short periods when the price of gold was high, particularly in the 1960s, but had achieved no real growth in GDP per capita since 1964. The apartheid system imposed heavy financial burdens on business which had to support a vast civil service and sustain the soaring cost of war in the border states and domestic repression. Sanctions added to the isolation at a time when capital was becoming increasingly mobile.

By the 1980s South African businessmen were pressing the government to reach a settlement with the ANC. In 1985 Gavin Relly, chairman of Anglo-American, the giant mining corporation, flew to Lusaka in Zambia with a group of other leading businessmen to meet with the ANC. Their impressions of the ANC leadership were favourable. In the words of one of the businessmen, "A more attractive and genial group it would be hard

to imagine" (p. 340). Sampson documents how the contacts continued. In 1986, the Rockefeller Foundation, David Astor and Shell set up the South African Advanced Education Project to prepare leading young ANC members for government and business and Gold Fields, the company founded by Cecil Rhodes, financed secret meetings between Afrikaner intellectuals and the ANC at the Compleat Angler Hotel at Henley in Oxfordshire (pp. 362-63).

While the ANC was cultivating this close relationship with big business the black working class were becoming more militant. By the middle of 1985 the police could no longer control the townships and the government declared a state of emergency. Foreign banks and investors lost confidence in the Botha government's ability to control the situation and pulled out their money. The ANC had to struggle to put itself at the head of the movement that had broken out largely independent of it. As so often in its history this conservative organisation found itself tailing behind its supposed followers. Its militant rhetoric was just that. The strategy of armed struggle had, as Sampson notes, proved entirely ineffective. Ultimately, it was not the ANC that forced the apartheid regime to the negotiating table but the movement of the black working class in the townships.

Mandela offered the South African capitalists their one chance of controlling the black working class. When he was found to need surgery for an enlarged prostate gland in 1985 the authorities were terrified that he would die and that civil war would follow. Mandela perfectly understood his vital role. In June 1986 when the townships were besieged by armed police, and the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group had left in dismay after South Africa had launched air strikes on neighbouring capitals, Mandela wrote to General Willemse, the Commissioner of Prisons, whom he had known as governor of Robben Island and demanded to see him "on a matter of national importance" (p. 352). Willemse flew to Pollsmoor, where Mandela was held, and arranged for him to meet Kobie Coetsee, the Minister of Justice. Coetsee had made a point of visiting Mandela in hospital after his operation the previous year and had been impressed by him.

As the situation worsened, leading Afrikaners within the regime like Coetsee and Niël Barnard, the head of the National Intelligence Service, increasingly recognised that they could not defend apartheid by military force and at the same time maintain a profitable environment for business in South Africa. They turned to Mandela who offered them the best prospect of protecting capitalist interests. Once in office Mandela justified their hopes. Under his presidency it has proved possible for South African capitalism to begin the process bringing once protected industries into line with the demands of the world market by cutting jobs and real wages without provoking an uncontrollable mass movement. Mandela goes into retirement having shown his worth as a bourgeois leader.

Much of Mandela's supposed radicalism was derived from his connection with the Communist Party. This is one of the weakest parts of Sampson's biography since he takes the Communist Party's revolutionary credentials at face value. But his book makes it possible to trace how that relationship developed. Before 1950 Mandela was actively hostile to the Communist Party. He had joined the ANC when he came to Johannesburg in 1941. From its foundation in 1912 the ANC had appealed to London for help against the white regime in South Africa and had asserted the traditional authority of the chiefs.

Mandela was himself from a chiefly background. He had been educated to act as an adviser to the future Tembu king, but like many other young men of his generation life in the town offered a more powerful attraction than being even a prominent man in a rural backwater. Under wartime conditions, with an increasing demand for labour, the urban black population grew by 50 percent from 1,142,00 in 1936 to 1,689,000 in 1946. In Johannesburg Mandela met a young estate agent named Walter Sisulu who found him a job as an articled clerk in a lawyer's office.

Mandela and Sisulu were among the group who set up an ANC Youth League in an attempt to bring the organisation into line with the more militant movements developing among urban blacks for whom tribal loyalties were of diminishing significance.

The importance of the working class as a political force was brought home to Mandela in 1950 when a May Day strike brought out half of Johannesburg's black workers. Mandela and Sisulu found themselves pinned down under police fire as security forces rampaged through the black districts. Eighteen workers were killed. Mandela later remembered, "That day was a turning point in my life both in understanding through first hand experience the ruthlessness of the police, and in being deeply impressed by the support African workers had given to the May Day call." From that point on Mandela moved closer to the Communist Party, although he had played a prominent role in breaking up their meetings in the run-up to the May Day strike.

By 1955 Rusty Bernstein, a member of the Communist Party, was drafting the Freedom Charter. There was no anomaly in a supposed communist drawing up a nationalist document which advocated the creation of black capitalism. Since the 1920s when Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union representing the interests of a privileged bureaucratic layer, the Communist Party had developed a two-stage theory of revolution that bore no relation to the conceptions of Lenin or Trotsky, which had been the theoretical basis of the Russian Revolution. According to this two-stage theory the first objective was to achieve bourgeois democracy in South Africa and only at an unspecified later date to go on to socialism. During the 1950s the Stalinist parties turned increasingly to support for national liberation struggles like the ANC as part of the Cold War conflict with the imperialist countries. But they had no intention of promoting socialist revolutions which would have destabilised the position of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

The association with the Communist Party made the ANC seem far more left-wing than it really was, which proved invaluable as the South African working class grew. By the 1970s the majority of black South Africans had left the land and were workers. When the South African economy went into recession in 1984, throwing millions out of work, the growing unrest of the 1970s, which had been manifested most sharply in the Soweto uprising of 1976, developed into an insurrectionary movement. This movement took the ANC by surprise. Had it not been for the Stalinists it would have been more difficult for them to assert their leadership of it. They used their positions in the trade union bureaucracy to keep workers within the bounds of political protest sanctified by the churches and liberal opponents of apartheid.

Sampson makes it clear that Mandela took a conscious decision to look for alliance with the Communist Party rather than turning to the Fourth International, which represented the genuine tradition of the Russian Revolution. In 1948 Mandela met the South African Trotskyist Isaac Tabata, who made a considerable impression on him. Sampson writes, "Mandela was in some awe of Tabata: 'It was difficult for me to cope with his arguments.... I didn't want to continue arguing with the fellow because he was demolishing me just like that.' He was shocked that Tabata seemed more hostile to the ANC than to the government. Afterwards Tabata wrote him a very long letter, warning him against the 'collaborators' of the ANC, and pressing him to base his actions on principles, to 'swim against the stream'" (p. 50). Although Mandela could not, as he admits, answer Tabata's arguments, he instinctively rejected the Trotskyists' call for the black workers to take the lead in the struggle for national liberation on the basis of a socialist programme.

For Sampson Mandela is a statesman who represents an entire people regardless of class. Once this media created image is stripped away the man that is left has still some justifiable measure of claim to historical greatness, but not in an amorphous classless sense. He rather emerges as a great figure among capitalist leaders, standing head and shoulders above

the run of modern politicians because he comes from an earlier era. Mandela's education in mission schools equipped him with a higher level of culture than is customary among today's political leaders and he made good use of his time in gaol to build on this foundation. The steadfastness which he showed in prison further marks him out as a man of exceptional personal qualities.

It was the good fortune of the capitalist class to have a man of that calibre to save South African capitalism when it faced insurrection. But even Mandela could not achieve stable conditions for continued capitalist exploitation in South Africa as the world economy becomes ever more disturbed. As world commodity prices fall the mining industry has contracted creating 50 percent unemployment among black workers. Added to that the government must destroy 30 percent of jobs in the public sector in the immediate future even to maintain the present low levels of foreign investment. The developing economic crisis is preparing the conditions for a greater social explosion than that which shook the apartheid regime. The capitalist class will need more than a Mandela to extend the life of a system that is incapable of meeting the most basic needs of the mass of the population.



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