

“THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY”: PROFESSIONAL HISTORIANS AND POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF SOUTH AFRICAN PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS, 1910-1990

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Abstract

Biography strengthens the historian's attempts to decipher the behaviour of individuals and also provides a historical window on a certain era, contributing to our knowledge and understanding of the past. Biographical studies of those who were involved in parliamentary politics between 1910 and 1990, the prime ministers, presidents, cabinet ministers, party leaders, humble backbenchers and unsuccessful parliamentary candidates can help to explain why the white minority, after decades of acquiescing the abuse of South Africa's limited democratic tradition, decided to peacefully surrender its political power. And yet, despite the proven value of political biography in the United States and Britain, the library shelves of South African universities are bare of biographies on pre-1990 parliamentary politicians by professional historians. This article explains the reasons for this dearth of biographies, as well as the reasons why it is essential for professional historians to write them and concludes with a recommendation on how such biographies should be written.

1. INTRODUCTION

By deciphering the behaviour of individuals, providing in the process a historical window on societies of the past, the historian as biographer plays a crucial role to convey knowledge and understanding of our history to the reading public. Biographical studies of the lives and careers of parliamentary politicians between 1910 and 1990 are for example essential to comprehend South African history in the twentieth century. And yet, despite the internationally proven value of biography, the library shelves of South African universities are bare of biographies by professional historians on pre-1990 parliamentary history. This article investigates the various factors responsible for the low status given by South African professional historians to parliamentary political biography. In the process the shortcomings of biographies by amateur historians, with the exception of Alan Paton's *Hofmeyr*, are analyzed. Lastly the rich potential of scholarly biographical studies of parliamentary

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politicians to explain the rise and fall of the apartheid state, as well as guidelines for the writing of such a biography are discussed. Ultimately this article argues that parliamentary political biographies by professional historians have the ability to counter ignorance and indifference of South Africans about our past.

2. POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY AND PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS 1910-1990

Political biography, whole life – “cradle-to-grave” – studies investigating the complexity, ambiguity and contradictions of a life, especially of those who were involved in parliamentary politics between 1910 and 1990, can play an important role to widen an understanding of our turbulent past. With the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910 Parliament represented the interests of the white minority. For decades it passed discriminatory and oppressive legislation designed to control the voiceless black majority. Most white parliamentarians were determined to remove the last vestiges of black political rights. At the National Convention between 1908 and 1909, which framed the South African constitution, the Cape Province was allowed to retain its non-racial franchise, allowing black and “coloured” voters on the common voters roll but preventing them from standing as parliamentary candidates. In 1936 blacks were removed from the common voters roll and placed on a separate roll with the right to elect three whites as “native representatives” in the Cape Province. As Cape blacks kept on electing outspoken opponents of apartheid, this system was abolished in 1959. In 1955 in its determination to remove “coloureds” from the common voters roll the National Party (NP) circumvented the constitutionally prescribed two thirds parliamentary majority by enlarging the Senate, the nominated upper house, packing it with Nationalists. After serving its purpose the Senate membership was promptly reduced. Ironically the Senate was abolished in 1980 when, in an attempt to bolster white minority rule, PW Botha instituted the Tricameral Constitution of 1983 which added parliamentary chambers for the “coloured” and Indian communities.

Over the years a succession of governments, but especially the NP after 1948, undermined the rule of law by introducing draconian security legislation which prohibited organizations such as the Communist Party of South Africa, the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress and allowed detention without trial. An autocratic state was created in which anti-apartheid activists were tortured and murdered with impunity. Parliament, however, also provided a small group of white liberals and until 1950, even communists, with a public platform to oppose intolerance and oppression. The Communist Party made use of parliamentary elections to secure exposure for the party. In the 1929 “black peril” election the prominent communist Brian Bunting stood in the Tembuland constituency in the Eastern Cape Province.

Although he lost heavily, his campaign secured a reputation amongst rural blacks for the Communist Party as the champion of the underdog. The communists used the system of “native representation” to secure Sam Kahn’s election to Parliament. He was so effective that the apartheid government amended the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 to prevent communists or former communists from becoming members of Parliament. Kahn was expelled from Parliament in 1952. LB Lee-Warden of the Congress of Democrats, a far left all-white organization, was eventually elected as Kahn’s replacement. Through the system of “native representation” the liberal Margaret Ballinger entered Parliament where she had titanic clashes with Premier HF Verwoerd in exposing the follies of apartheid. Liberal Progressive Party (PP) members of Parliament such as Helen Suzman, Colin Eglin, Zac de Beer and Van Zyl Slabbert used Parliament to champion the rights of the individual and the rule of law. Between 1986 and 1989, however, Parliament was marginalized when PW Botha governed the country with the aid of the military. And yet, it was in Parliament that FW de Klerk made his dramatic speech on 2 February 1990 which brought the apartheid era to an end by unbanning the liberation movements and announcing the release of political prisoners.

3. POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY AND THE DECIPHERING OF INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR

Biographical studies of the prime ministers, presidents, cabinet ministers, party leaders, humble backbenchers and unsuccessful parliamentary candidates can throw light on political events and help to explain why the white minority, after decades of acquiescing in the abuse of South Africa’s limited democratic tradition, decided to peacefully surrender its political power. Politics is about power, ideas and conflicting ideologies. It is about class or group interests and economic forces. Ideas depend on individuals and can only prosper through the men and women who champion them. John Campbell, a distinguished British political biographer, argues that every age has a small number of dominating personalities who embody the contending philosophies of the moment, and that the biographer can expose the egos, human strengths and weaknesses of those individuals who shape arguments and determine historical outcomes.² For Phyllis Lewsen, John X Merriman’s biographer, the biographer has a very intimate relationship with a subject, and that “biography gives a sense of life and positive identity which is sometimes lacking in more abstract historical analyses. These qualities can be lost in learned history.”³ Robert Skidelsky, acclaimed British biographer of John Maynard Keynes, believes

2 J Campbell, *Pistols at dawn. Two hundred years of political rivalry from Pitt & Fox to Blair & Brown* (London, 2009), pp. 1-2.

3 Sara Pienaar, “Interview with Phyllis Lewsen”, *South African Historical Journal* 28, May 1993, p. 29.

that the biographer is best placed to bring out the influence of personality, as history and political science tend to treat the activities of politicians as deriving from necessities and forces in the public domain.⁴ This is evident in the admission of Shula Marks, who, despite never feeling any great affinity for Jan Smuts, discovered while writing a biographical essay on him for the *Oxford dictionary of national biography* that he was more of a riddle than she had believed him to be.⁵

Biography thus strengthens the historian's attempts to decipher the behaviour of individuals. Eben Dönges's career as a cabinet minister between 1948 and 1967 provides an example of how biography can explain the influence of a personality on a political career. Dönges was responsible for placing apartheid acts such as the Mixed Marriages Act, the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act on the statute book and the attempts to circumvent the constitutionally prescribed two-thirds parliamentary majority to remove "coloureds" from the common voters roll with controversial and ultimately unconstitutional legislation. His public image was that of a highly intelligent, confident, powerful and upwardly mobile politician with a high opinion of his own abilities who was unflappable under the pressure of fierce domestic and international protests against his legislation. But in reality Dönges was, as Anton Bekker explains in *Eben Dönges. Lewe en loopbaan tot 1948* (1988) and *Eben Dönges: balansstaat. Historiese perspektief* (2005), a highly strung person, easily wounded by criticism, frustrated in his political ambitions and badly bruised by the humiliations he suffered at the hands of Hans Strijdom and HF Verwoerd, while many in his own party disdained him as too clever by half. Dönges's personality must be taken into account to understand why his hopes to become prime minister were dashed in 1958 and 1966.

4. BIOGRAPHY AS A HISTORICAL WINDOW

Biography provides a historical window on a certain era, contributing to our knowledge and understanding of the past.⁶ For the American historian, Barbara Tuchman, biography is a prism of history as it encompasses the universal in the particular. It is a focus which allows the writer to narrow his field to manageable dimensions while allowing the reader to comprehend the subject more easily. In her book *The proud tower. A portrait of the world before the war 1890-1914* published

4 R Skidelsky, *Interests and obsessions historical essays* (London, 1994), p. 424.

5 S Marks, "Before 'the white man was master and all white men's values prevailed': Jan Smuts, race and the South African War", Lecture given on the invitation of the Institute of Economic and Social History and the Institute of Africanistic Studies, both at the University of Vienna, and of the Southern African Documentation and Co-operation Centre (SADOCC) on 24 October 2000 in Vienna, p. 2.

6 N Hamilton, "Political biography: a defence (2)", *Contemporary British History* 10(4), Winter 1996, pp. 75-80.

in 1966 she explores the United States of America at the turn of the twentieth century through the political biography of Thomas B Reed, Speaker of the House of Representatives.⁷ What Tuchman does for the United States is applicable for any country. A biography of Hitler is indispensable for understanding Nazi Germany, Lenin and Stalin the Soviet Union, Gladstone and Disraeli Victorian Britain, Churchill Britain during World War II and Lincoln the United States and the Civil War.

With regard to South African biographies such as Lewsen’s *John X Merriman: Paradoxical statesman* (1982) and Sir Keith Hancock’s *Smuts: The sanguine years 1870-1919* (1962) and *Smuts: The fields of force 1919-1950* (1968), or JP Brits’s *Tielman Roos – political prophet or opportunist?*⁸ (1979) are important historical windows on our past. *Merriman* is an outstanding study of a Cape liberal, prime minister of the Cape Colony between 1908 and 1910, an influential delegate at the National Convention and a leading member of the Union Parliament. He dominated South African politics for decades and was unfortunate not to become the first South African prime minister. In his review of *Merriman* in the *Times Literary Supplement* (29 October 1982) Kenneth Ingham lauded it as “a brilliant evocation of white politics in South Africa”. Brits’s study of Tielman Roos, a maverick and powerful former Nationalist politician whose return to politics in an attempt to bring about a coalition government and the devaluation of the South African pound in 1933, is essential reading for those interested in the early years of the NP and the political effects of the Great Depression in South Africa. WL Hancock’s *Smuts*, a majestic study of the South African War hero and prime minister between 1919 and 1924 and 1939 and 1948, deals with all the great events of the first half of the twentieth century, the effect of the two world wars on South Africa, the Afrikaner rebellion of 1914, the Rand uprising of 1922, treatment of the black majority by a succession of governments and the apartheid election of 1948. It is one of the most cited works on South African history and will, according to a critical evaluation of the Smuts biography by Shula Marks and Saul Dubow, continue to be studied with profit.⁹ William Roger Louis, a highly respected American historian, regards Hancock’s *Smuts* as “one of the outstanding biographies of recent decades”.¹⁰ *Smuts* is so good that it is difficult to find any copies in second hand bookshops. It is only once an owner has died that they find their way into the market.

Hancock’s *Smuts* substantiates David Cannadine’s philosophy that the essence and appeal of history is that it encourages “an unending dialogue between the living

7 B Tuchman, *Practising history selected essays* (London, 1989), pp. 80-84.

8 This is a translated and revised version of *Tielman Roos sy rol in die Suid-Afrikaanse politiek, 1907-1935* (Pretoria, 1979).

9 S Marks and S Dubow, “Patriotism of place and race: Hancock on South Africa” in DA Low (ed.), *Keith Hancock. The legacies of an historian* (Melbourne, 2001), p. 173.

10 Wm. Roger Louis (ed.), “Introduction”, *Still more adventures with Britannia. Personalities, politics and culture in Britain* (New York, 2003), p. 6.

and the dead".¹¹ By evoking the past through Smuts, Hancock makes it easier for the general public to understand our history. For Ben Pimlott, a giant amongst modern political biographers, with masterly biographies of British politicians such as Hugh Dalton and Harold Wilson,¹² the value of biography in explaining the past is that the idea of a single human span is easy to comprehend as it is fundamental to the course of life. All of us are instinctive biographers. For example, any press account of a murder trial will begin with a biographical sketch of the accused, all applicants for a job present resumes to prospective employers and even historians who disapprove of biographies have short biographies of themselves on the dust jackets of their books.¹³

5. SOUTH AFRICAN PROFESSIONAL HISTORIANS AND THE LOW STATUS GIVEN TO PARLIAMENTARY POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

And yet, despite the proven value of political biography in the United States and Britain, the library shelves of South African universities are bare of biographies on parliamentary politicians by professional historians. By professional historians the author means salaried historians attached to tertiary institutions or research institutions whose profession is the writing of scholarly history. Applying the philosophy of the British historians and biographers JH Plumb¹⁴ and David Starkey¹⁵ that history must be a public craft, the author refers to published biographies. This excludes master and doctoral dissertations. It also excludes tributes to politicians such as for example Helen Suzman¹⁶ and Sir De Villiers Graaff¹⁷ as they are too fragmented and superficial to qualify as biographical studies. It can however include a number of outstanding essays in the *Dictionary of South African biography*, the *New dictionary of South African biography* and the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Dan O'Meara, for example, regards FJ du Toit Spies's dispassionate essay on HF Verwoerd as one of the best biographical studies of the apartheid leader.¹⁸ The majority of dictionary entries are, due to word limits upon authors, too thin and superficial.

11 D Cannadine, *History in our time* (London, 1998), p. x.

12 P Hennesey, "Benjamin John Pimlott 1945-2004" in *Biographical memoirs of fellows VI. Proceedings of the British Academy* (Oxford, 2008), p. 169.

13 B Pimlott, "Is political biography an art?" in Louis, pp. 163-164.

14 Quoted by Simon Schama in the foreword to a reprint of JH Plumb, *The death of the past* (New York, 2004), p. xv.

15 D Snowman, *Historians* (Chippenham, 2007), p. 122.

16 R Lee (ed.), *Values alive. A tribute to Helen Suzman* (Johannesburg, 1990).

17 L Barnard and D Kriek (eds), *Sir De Villiers Graaff* (Pretoria, 1990).

18 D O'Meara, *Forty lost years the apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948 - 1994* (Johannesburg, 1996), p. 92.

The lowly status professional South African historians ascribe to political biography is evident when the nine prime ministers and executive presidents between 1910 and 1990 are taken into account. There are no scholarly biographies by South African historians on Louis Botha, Jan Smuts, John Vorster, PW Botha or FW de Klerk. JBM Hertzog is the only one to have been accorded a whole life study by JH le Roux, PW Coetzer and AH Marais’s *Generaal J.B.M Hertzog. Sy strewe en stryd*, published in 1987. DF Malan, JG Strijdom and HF Verwoerd were the subjects of partial biographies. Bun Booyens’s, *Die lewe van DF Malan: die eerste veertig jaar*, published in 1969 deals with Malan’s career up to his decision to enter politics. HB Thom’s *DF Malan* of 1980 astoundingly omits the years between 1929 and 1941, the most crucial period in Malan’s political career during which he found the “Purified” National Party. JL Basson’s *J.G. Strijdom: sy politieke loopbaan van 1929 tot 1948*, which also appeared in 1980, does not deal with Strijdom’s years as a cabinet minister or his premiership. Henry Kenney’s *Architect of apartheid. H.F. Verwoerd – an appraisal* (1980) hardly touches upon Verwoerd’s private and personal life.

With regard to cabinet ministers there is Brits’s *Tielman Roos*, JCH Grobler’s *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler (1873-1942)* (1988) and Anton Bekker’s two volumes on Eben Dönges. No scholarly biographies have been written by South African historians on the leadership of the Labour Party, Unionist Party, United Party, Dominion Party, Conservative Party or the Progressive parties. There are only a handful of biographies on ordinary members of Parliament. EA Walker, *W.P. Schreiner. A South African* (1937), David Scher, *Donald Molteno. Dilizintaba – He-who-removes-mountains* (1979), Lewsen’s *John X. Merriman*, Andrew Duminy and Bill Guests’s *Interfering in politics: a biography of Sir Percy Fitzpatrick* (1987) and the author’s own *Voices in the desert. Margaret and William Ballinger. A biography* (1997). This is a disappointing total for the hundreds of MPs and senators who sat in Parliament. Even less was published on those who participated in parliamentary politics, but were never elected. The exceptions are Allison Drew’s *Between empire and the revolution: a life of Sydney Bunting, 1873-1936* (2007) and Jonathan Hyslop’s *The notorious syndicalist: J.T.Bain. A Scottish rebel in colonial South Africa* (2004) on the early years of the Labour Party.

Various factors are responsible for the low status given by South African professional historians to parliamentary political biography. An important one is the perception, as articulated by EH Carr in *What is history?* and GR Elton’s *The practice of history* that biography is a lesser form of history. To Carr the biographers’ assertion that the character and behaviour of individuals mattered in history was childlike and characteristic of the primitive stages of historical consciousness. He mocked this assertion as “the bad King John theory of history”.¹⁹ For Elton it did not matter how influential a person may have been; no individual ever dominated

19 EH Carr, *What is history?* (London, 1973), pp. 45-49.

his age to the point where the history of the age could be written around him. Elton was forthright in rejecting the belief that history could be written as biography.²⁰

Although *What is history?* and *The practice of history* were both written in the 1960s, the books reflected a deep divide amongst historians on biography dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century with the start of the professionalization of history writing. In the 1840s one of Britain's leading historians, Thomas Carlyle, saw biography as the only true history,²¹ arguing that the past was peopled by living people, "not abstractions ... not diagrams and theorems; but men in buff coats and breeches, with color in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men".²² To Carlyle, "the History of the world is but the Biography of great men" and in biographies of Oliver Cromwell and Frederick II of Prussia he attempted to capture the drama of the past. His passionate and colourful writing style, combined with his hero-worshipping, eventually resulted in his biographies degenerating into an admiration for despots.²³ This alienated many historians, especially the disciples of Leopold von Ranke who wanted the study of the past to be recognized as a scientific discipline pursuing objectivity. This meant, as John A Garraty explained in his study on the nature of biography, repudiating biography: "The icy objectivity they advocated was destructive to the biographer's aim of *understanding* and to the whole task of portraying personality."²⁴

Yet despite Carr and Elton's strictures, biography continued to have its adherents in both Britain and the United States of America. JH Plumb, a bitter rival of Elton, was a highly respected historian and evocative biographer. He was a protégé of G M Trevelyan, a prominent British historian of the first half of the twentieth century who, inspired by Carlyle, although he rejected his fixation with despots, had written a succession of highly regarded scholarly biographies.²⁵ In turn Plumb's protégé, David Cannadine, is a leading biographer. Ironically David Starkey, Britain's most popular biographer who focuses on Tudor England is a former Elton protégé.²⁶

In South Africa, however, biography remains a neglected genre amongst professional historians. From the 1930s the desire by Afrikaner historians to be seen as "scientific-objective historians"²⁷ saw them ignore contemporary history because of the lack of reliable sources and the absence of a critical distance. Until

20 GR Elton (Afterword by Richard J Evans), *The practice of history* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 123-124.

21 Hamilton, "Political biography..." , p. 84.

22 F Stern (ed.), *The varieties of history. From Voltaire to the present* (New York, 1973), p. 90.

23 For Carlyle's career see S Heffer, *Moral desperado a life of Thomas Carlyle* (London, 1995).

24 JA Garraty, *The nature of biography* (London, 1957), p. 98.

25 D Cannadine, *GM Trevelyan. A life in history* (London, 1992), pp. 29-31.

26 G Whitell, "Exclusive interview with David Starkey", *The Times*, 9 October 2008.

27 A Grundlingh, "Politics, principles and problems of a profession: Afrikaner historians and their discipline, c.1920-c.1965", *Perspectives in Education* 12 (1), 1990, pp. 1-19.

the 1960s the Universities of Pretoria and Stellenbosch offered no courses on South African history after 1910 on the grounds that it was too contemporary.²⁸ Pre-Union biographies such as HB Thom’s *Die lewe van Gert Maritz*, published in 1947, and DW Krüger’s *Paul Kruger*, which appeared in 1961, were acceptable. By contrast GD Scholtz’s enthusiasm for contemporary political biographies was viewed with disdain. Scholtz received his doctorate in history at the Gemeentelike University of Amsterdam in 1936 and was a journalist and editor of *Die Transvaler* newspaper between 1937 and 1970. He was a dedicated and prolific historian. In 1941 he for example spent his honeymoon in the Cape Town National Archive with his bride assisting him in his research. Professional historians, however, always regarded him as a journalist, while to journalists he was a historian and a poor newspaper editor.²⁹ Scholtz believed that writing biographies of contemporary Afrikaner leaders was a patriotic duty if the *volk* was to honour its great men.³⁰ In doing so he was emulating Gustav Preller, an Afrikaner journalist, whose 1906 biography of the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief was written as propaganda to fuel Afrikaner nationalism and to restore self-respect after the defeat of the Boer republics in the South African War. His *Piet Retief* was so popular that it had 11 imprints.³¹

The professionalization of history writing meant that Scholtz’s biographies did not have the same impact as Preller’s *Piet Retief*. Professional historians regarded his work as highly suspect. It was unacceptable for example for AN Pelzer, a fiery Afrikaner nationalist historian at the University of Pretoria,³² for Scholtz to publish a biography of the prominent NP politician, Dr NJ van der Merwe, only four years after Van der Merwe’s death, as history demanded long years of labour to ensure scientific and well-reasoned studies. In a contemptuous review of *Dr Nicolaas Johannes van der Merwe 1888-1940* Pelzer took Scholtz to task for doing a disservice to the discipline by being too prolific, going as far as to dismiss the book as not history. He concluded that most of Scholtz’s books would have to be

28 FA van Jaarsveld “Drie departementshoofde vir geskiedenis aan die Universiteit van Pretoria, 1908-1970” in FA van Jaarsveld, *Afrikanergeskiedskrywing verlede, hede en toekoms* (Pretoria, 1992), pp. 65-67; P Kapp and H van Aswegen. *Verandering & vernuwing in geskiedenisbeskouing. 'n Gesprek oor die ervaringe van twee tydgenote* (Vanderbijlpark, 2006), pp. 13, 21.

29 FA van Jaarsveld, “G.D. Scholtz: historikus van en vir die Afrikaner” in *Die evolusie van apartheid* (Cape Town, 1979), pp. 90-121; D Richard, *Moedswillig die uwe. Perspersoonlikhede in die noorde* (Johannesburg, 1985), pp. 91- 98.

30 GD Scholtz in the introduction of his *Generaal Christiaan Frederik Beyers 1869-1914* (Johannesburg, 1941).

31 FA van Jaarsveld, “Gustav Preller” in FA van Jaarsveld, *Afrikanergeskiedskrywing verlede, hede en toekoms* (Pretoria, 1992), pp. 18-40; K Smith, *The changing past trends in South African historical writing* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 66.

32 For more information on Pelzer see FA Mouton, “A.N. Pelzer: a custodian of Afrikanerdom”, *South African Historical Journal* 37, November 1997.

rewritten.³³ Scholtz also had to endure hostile reviews from other professional historians. In 1959 Maria Hugo condemned his *President Johannes Hendrikus Brand* as a failed biography.³⁴ MCE van Schoor, in an overview of biography by Afrikaner historians in the same year, concluded that Scholtz's biographies were too journalistic and that they did not comply with the high standards this genre demanded.³⁵ Even FA van Jaarsveld, Scholtz's protégé and friend, was lukewarm about his abilities as a biographer.³⁶

Despite harsh reviews Scholtz remained settled in his ways. His *Dr. Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, 1901-66*, published in 1974, is a classical example of a loving hagiography. It was said that the subtitle of the book should have been: "The man who was never wrong".³⁷ The open disdain professional historians expressed for Scholtz's biographies must have discouraged apprentice Afrikaner historians from attempting contemporary biography. They would also have been discouraged by warnings on how challenging the craft of the biographer was. In their writings on the nature of biography, Hugo, Van Schoor and Van Jaarsveld all emphasized the high demands biography placed on the historian as he had to be artistic and imaginative to recreate a life.³⁸ Van Schoor with great effect used the warning of Dutch historian, Jan Romein, in his *De biografie* (1956): "Zo opgevat is de biografie niet alleen van het boeiendste, maar ook al mee van het moeilijkste werk, dat er op het gebied der historie te verrichten valt."³⁹ It was especially contemporary history's lack of critical distance that was seen as inhibiting. JL Basson compared the writing of his Strijdom biography to shoving his head into a beehive as so many of the controversial premier's contemporaries were still alive and all held strong opinions on Strijdom.⁴⁰

Since 1990 the market place has played its part in inhibiting the publication of Afrikaans political biographies. Afrikaans literary biography flourished, for example Jaap Steyn's biographies on NP Van Wyk Louw and Maria Elizabeth Rothmann (MER) and John Kannemeyr's works on Dirk Opperman, CJ Langenhoven, Louis Leipoldt, Uys Krige, Jan Rabie and Ettiene Leroux.⁴¹ While interested in their cultural past, however, Afrikaners have no desire to read about conservative and racist pre-1990 politicians whose lives have the potential of being a source of embarrassment and discomfort in the new South Africa. When the historian At van

33 *Historiese Studies* 5(2), 1944, pp. 124-126.

34 M Hugo, "President Brand: 'n onbekende bekende", *Standpunte*, June 1959, pp. 43-53.

35 MCE van Schoor, "Die biografie in die Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing", *Historia* 4(1), March 1959.

36 FA Van Jaarsveld, "G.D. Scholtz: historikus van en vir die Afrikaner", pp. 105-107.

37 H Kenney, *Architect of apartheid. H.F. Verwoerd – an appraisal* (Johannesburg, 1980), p. 7.

38 Hugo, pp. 43-53; Van Schoor, pp. 3-18; FA van Jaarsveld, "Biografieë van die Groot Trek" in *Lewende verlede* (Johannesburg, 1962), pp. 99-100.

39 Van Schoor, p. 4.

40 JL Basson, *J.G. Strijdom sy politieke loopbaan van 1929 tot 1948* (Pretoria, 1980).

41 H Giliomee, "Die merkwaardige opkoms van die literêre biografie", *Die Burger*, 2 August 2008.

Wyk asked the publishing house Human & Rousseau in 2001 whether it would be interested in an in-depth biography on Louis Botha the reaction was a blunt refusal as it would not be a financially viable publication.⁴² The only published scholarly political biography of an Afrikaner politician in this period is Anton Bekker’s *Eben Dönges: Balansstaat. Historiese perspektief* published in 2005.

English-speaking historiography is just as barren of the political biography of white parliamentary politicians. In opposing Afrikaner nationalist historiography and apartheid liberal English-speaking historians were determined to reflect the history of all South Africans. They followed the approach of WM Macmillan, one of South Africa’s greatest historians and the founder of the “liberal school” of South African historiography who reinterpreted South Africa’s past in *The Cape colour question. A historical survey* of 1927, *Bantu, Boer and Britain: the making of the South African native problem* published in 1929 and *Complex South Africa* which appeared in 1930.⁴³ English-speaking historians placed the focus on the structural determinants of social and political change. Walker’s *WP Schreiner* and Lewsen’s *Merriman* were exceptions, especially Lewsen, who dedicated her academic career to researching Merriman’s life and times.⁴⁴ The radical or neo-Marxist historians of the 1970s and 1980s emphasised the structure of the state and class function. Writing history from below, they wrote biographies that focused on the lives of ordinary people such as criminal gangsters, share croppers and mine workers.⁴⁵ Shula Marks, in addressing the University of Texas British Studies seminar on Jan Smuts in 1999, made it clear that she had spent most of her career avoiding “the great White Fathers” of South African history.⁴⁶ Despite changing circumstances since 1990, English-speaking historians and the growing number of black historians have not seen biographies of former white parliamentarians as a priority.

6. AMATEUR HISTORIANS AND PARLIAMENTARY POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

In the absence of professional historians amateur writers have dominated political biography. Biographies cannot simply be dismissed for not being written by professional historians. The novelist Alan Paton’s biography of JH Hofmeyr,

42 Kerneels Breytenbach – At van Wyk, 20 June 2001. (Letter in the possession of At van Wyk.)

43 C Saunders, *The making of the South African past major historians on race and class* (Cape Town, 1988), chapters 5 and 6; Smith, pp. 104-112.

44 For biographical detail on Lewsen’s career see her autobiography, *Reverberations – a memoir* (Cape Town, 1996), a tribute in the *South African Historical Journal* of May 1993, and Chris Barron’s obituary, *Sunday Times*, 28 January 2001.

45 See for example Brian Willan on Sol Plaatje, an early ANC leader, Charles van Onselen on Kas Maine, a sharecropper and Jeff Guy on Bishop Colenso.

46 Louis, p. 6.

Hofmeyr (1964), is proof of this. Hofmeyr, a brilliant classical scholar, was the Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand at the age of 25, provincial Administrator of the Transvaal at 29, a Cabinet Minister between 1933 and 1948, and Deputy Prime Minister in the 1940s. Hofmeyr's attempts to counter racism and uplift the black majority in the 1940s led to many whites fearing him as a threat to white supremacy. By portraying Hofmeyr as a dangerous liberal, the NP played on this fear and was able to defeat the ruling United Party (UP) in the 1948 parliamentary election. Hofmeyr died shortly after the election at the age of 54. What made the book so gripping was that although he loved and admired Hofmeyr, Paton painted a warts-and-all portrait. In the process he conveyed Hofmeyr's difficult position as a liberal-minded person in a conservative and racist society. As Paton phrased it in his introduction of the abridged edition of *Hofmeyr*, "How does the ruler rule justly when he is afraid of those he rules?"⁴⁷

Paton's *Hofmeyr* is, however, the exception to the rule and the dominance of journalistic and filial biographies has entrenched a tradition in which political biographies have served to become hagiographies. As the main purpose of the overwhelming majority of amateur biographies is to eulogise, praise or vindicate, their work tends towards factual distortion and myth making, limiting their usefulness as history. In Bettie Cloete's filial *Die lewe van senator F.S. Malan (President van die Senaat)* (1946) she for example claims that her father was offered the Cape premiership in 1908 and describes in detail an interview her father had in 1919 with an anguished and flustered Governor General Lord Buxton who was wrestling with the difficult choice of offering the premiership to Smuts or Malan. She describes Buxton's relief, gratitude and admiration when her father made the decision for him by recommending Smuts as the next premier. In fact, Cloete was inventing these episodes. Malan had not been offered the Cape premiership nor was he considered in 1919 for the Union premiership.⁴⁸ In 1963 HC Hopkins used *Maar een soos hy. Die lewe van kommandant C.A. van Niekerk* to create a portrait of CA van Niekerk, President of the Senate between 1948 and 1960, as the embodiment of all that was noble in the Afrikaner. In doing so he ignored events such as the packing of the Senate to remove "coloureds" from the common voters roll. Louis Botha was particularly badly served by amateur biographers. In 1919 Harold Spender, a struggling journalist whose attempts to make a living writing "chatty biographies" were not highly regarded,⁴⁹ claimed in *General Botha: the career and the man* that Botha had voted against Paul Kruger's decision in 1899 to declare war against the

47 The abridged version was published by Oxford University Press in 1971.

48 Lord Milner Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Milner dep. 380, Lord Buxton – Lord Milner, 4 September 1919; FA Mouton, "The burden of empathy: John X. Merriman, F.S. Malan and Phyllis Lewsen's quest for biographical authenticity", *South African Historical Journal* 55, 2006, pp. 125-143.

49 J Sutherland, *Stephen Spender the authorized biography* (London, 2004), pp. 29, 62.

British Empire. In 1924 Lord Buxton, the retired Governor General and a Botha acolyte, repeated this claim in his *General Botha*. There is, however, no proof that Botha had opposed the ultimatum.⁵⁰ In the absence of a scholarly biography, Louis Botha remains one of the great unknowns in our history.

Another shortcoming of most amateur biographies is that because of their lack of in-depth historical research, they do not provide historical windows on the past. This is evident in biographies on prominent NP leaders in the apartheid era, for example John D’Oliveira, *Vorster-the-man* (1978), Dirk and Johanna de Villiers, *Paul Sauer* (1979) and *PW* (1984), JJ van Rooyen, *PW Botha 40 jaar* (1976), Piet Meiring, *Hilgard Muller* (1985) and Freek Swart’s *Stormwinde of droogtes. Die storie van Hendrik Schoeman* (2002). Those interested in the history of the apartheid state will find little of the political philosophy of these politicians, the internal dynamics of the NP or the South Africa of the time in these books as they consist of warm and glowing anecdotes about their subjects’ sense of humour, decency, integrity, brilliance as parliamentarians and administrators. In effect these biographers allowed their subjects to determine what their portraits should look like.

South Africa has not been much influenced by the debunking approach to biography, the ruthless destruction of a person’s reputation based on hatred or resentment of the subject. This approach was introduced by Lytton Strachey in 1918 with his *Eminent Victorians* in which he with mocking irony exposed the hypocrisy and dishonesty of Victorian grandees.⁵¹ HC Armstrong’s *Grey steel. J.C. Smuts: a study of arrogance* published in 1937, the 1967 biography of Verwoerd by the anti-apartheid activist and exile Alex Hepple, and Kenney’s *Architect of apartheid* are rare South African examples of this form of biography.

7. PARLIAMENTARY POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY AS A MEANS TO EXPLAIN THE RISE AND FALL OF THE APARTHEID STATE

As a result of the aloofness of professional historians and the shortcomings of the amateur biographers the field of biography on parliamentary politics is lying fallow, especially that of the apartheid era. As indicated earlier the only scholarly biography of a NP leader in the apartheid era is Thom’s *DF Malan* which is very much a product of its time. Thom had a close relationship with Malan and the NP and the party commissioned him to write the biography. In 1974 he received the party’s DF Malan medal for loyal service. Unsurprisingly *DF Malan* is marred by excessive piety.⁵² Scholarly biographies on DF Malan, JG Strijdom, HF Verwoerd, BJ Vorster,

50 At van Wyk, “Gewaande botsing tussen boereleiers is ‘n mite”, *Die Burger*, 7 Desember 1999.

51 Garraty, pp. 107-108, 117-118; *H Lee, Biography: A very short introduction* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 75-78.

52 PH Kapp, *Verantwoorde verlede – n historiografiese studie. Die verhaal van die studie van geskiedenis aan die Universiteit Stellenbosch, 1904-2004* (Stellenbosch, 2004), pp. 54-55.

PW Botha and FW de Klerk are needed to connect South Africans with this part of our history. Through such studies the evolution of apartheid from crude *baasskap* under Malan and Strijdom, “national self-determination” with the homelands system with Verwoerd and Vorster, “healthy power-sharing” with the Tricameral Parliament in the Botha era, and the eventual collapse of the apartheid state during De Klerk’s presidency can be explained. Verwoerd as the symbol of white supremacy particularly requires a measured biography to explain his driven, stern and unbending personality and his impact on apartheid and South Africa. Vorster and Botha, Verwoerd’s successors, were committed white supremacists, but they realized that Verwoerdian apartheid was not a panacea for the racial situation. An in-depth explanation of Vorster’s life is necessary to explain why, despite his public image of a strongman and his leadership of the NP at the height of its power when in the 1977 election it had won its biggest parliamentary majority, his premiership was marked by stultification, black resistance, a demoralized NP and state corruption. Similarly, a scholarly biographer can explain PW Botha’s self-confidence and arrogance, epitomized by his nickname “Groot krokodil” (“Big crocodile”), and evaluate his political philosophy as well as the impact of his policies, a volatile mixture of reform and repression.

Astonishingly the only biographical study of De Klerk is Wimpie de Klerk’s superficial *FW de Klerk: the man in his time* published in 1991 which does not explain his sibling’s motive and actions in February 1990. Did black resistance, the strangling effect of diplomatic isolation, sanctions and disinvestment, the financial bankruptcy of the apartheid state, and military defeat in Angola leave De Klerk with no choice but to legalize the liberation movements and free political prisoners? Under the same conditions of international isolation, bankruptcy and military defeat, Slobodan Milosevic, the recalcitrant and ultranationalistic Serbian leader, refused to make any concessions to the suppressed Albanians in Kosovo. As a result NATO planes bombed Serbia, bringing the country to its knees with Milosevic dying in prison during his trial for war crimes. The historian as a biographer is in a position to provide the answers why De Klerk, despite generations of Afrikaner leaders promising to fight to the bitter end to maintain white supremacy, did not follow the Milosevic path.

Biographical studies of NP parliamentary backbenchers can furthermore help to explain why most whites saw apartheid as a just and Christian policy, ignoring the warnings about its repressiveness. They could not plead ignorance as liberals such as Ballinger and Suzman used Parliament to expose the horrors of influx control, the Group Areas Act, the Immorality Act and the torture of detainees without the protection of the rule of the law. Biographies can also cast light on the reasons why the ultraconservative Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP), the Conservative Party (CP) and the neofascist Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) were unable to convince

the majority of whites, especially Afrikaners, to reject reforms to the apartheid system. Here studies of participants in the emotional and bitter struggle for the soul of the Afrikaner between the ultraconservative *verkrampptes* and the *verligtes* (broad-minded people) who favoured a more tolerant outward looking Afrikanerdom in the 1960s and 1970s are essential. The basis of this conflict was the attempt of *verligtes* such as Piet Koornhof, Pik Botha and Piet (Weskus) Marais to face the challenge raised by NP van Wyk Louw, Afrikanerdom’s leading intellectual, in his book *Liberale nasionalisme* (1958), that if the struggle for Afrikaner survival was not based on justice it would crumble from within. For *verkrampptes* such as Albert Hertzog and Jaap Marais, eventual leaders of the HNP, and AP Treurnicht, future leader of the CP, any reforms to apartheid, for example to allow Maori rugby players to tour South Africa with the All Blacks rugby team in 1970, was the thin end of the wedge leading to black majority rule. A biography of Eugene Terre’Blanche, a defeated HNP parliamentary candidate in the election of 1970 in which he secured only 9,6 per cent of the vote in the Heidelberg constituency, can indicate why some whites turned to neofascism. Terre’Blanche founded the extremist AWB in 1973 as he was disillusioned with the inability of parliamentary democracy to counter the Nationalist betrayal of the *volk* (nation) after the demolition of the HNP at the polls.

On the political left biographies on Kahn and Lee-Warden could cast light on the role of the Communist Party and Congress of Democrats opposing apartheid. They could also indicate why in a conservative and racist society in which the overwhelming majority of whites, and especially Afrikaners, saw liberalism as the enemy of religion, authority, traditions, conventions and patriotism, there were whites such as Jan Steytler, Afrikaner founder and leader of the Progressive Party (PP), who were liberals. In the same way biography can expose the reasons why in the 1960s there were a handful of liberals who saw no alternative to the formation of the African Resistance Movement and to acts of sabotage. Biography can also explain the resilience and continuity of South African liberalism. From 1910 liberals were a small, peripheral and powerless group. The Liberal Party, formed in 1953, was never more than a splinter party, suffering crushing defeats in elections. Liberals ironically mocked that if someone would contest an election as a candidate of the party even Christ would have lost his deposit in the Free State province. The PP, founded in 1959, limped from election defeat to election defeat with only one parliamentary seat until 1974, Helen Suzman’s Houghton. And yet, in the new South Africa the Democratic Alliance (DA), a direct descendant of the PP, is thriving while the once mighty United Party (UP) and NP faded into oblivion. A biography of Helen Suzman could evaluate the role of liberalism in the anti-apartheid struggle. While the apartheid state saw liberalism as a dangerous Trojan horse for communism, many in the liberation movement attacked liberalism for participating in the parliamentary system, for criticising the armed struggle and for opposing international sanctions and

the disinvestment campaign. Those actions, they believed, labelled liberals as racist agents of apartheid working to blunt the struggle.

The reasons why “coloureds” and Indians were prepared to serve in the Tricameral Parliament must be investigated by biographers. Were they merely apartheid lackeys benefitting from parliamentary perks, and was the participation of the “coloured” Labour Party a strategy to bolster apartheid structures? The motives and actions of Allan Hendrickse, leader of the Labour Party, reflect a much more complex situation, but students of our past have to make do with Piet Coetzer’s *Allan Hendrickse, awaiting trial*, a journalistic campaign biography to boost Hendrickse’s image in the 1984 tricameral election.

8. THE WRITING OF POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

How should biographies of apartheid era politicians such as Verwoerd be approached? Paton doubted if a true biography of Verwoerd could ever be written.⁵³ Although there is no definitive formula for such an undertaking, South African historians will benefit from Pimlott’s example. For him the essence of any biographical study is the understanding of the subject’s life, based on rigorous attention to evidence and sources. In doing so, without acting as an advocate or prosecutor, the biographer can understand the forces that shaped that life, the motives that drove it, and the context in which it is placed.⁵⁴ Hancock’s *Smuts* provides an excellent example of how the historian as biographer, using the rules of historiography, can explore and explain a subject. As Hancock phrased it, “Every biographer who has had any training as an historian knows that he has to fight a never-ending battle against over-simplification and bias ...”⁵⁵ Realizing that bias creeps in when historians conceal their points of view he made no attempt to conceal his love for Smuts, but did his utmost to avoid the danger most biographers have to face, the distortion of the historical record by becoming his subject’s advocate. His approach was to understand Smuts’s behaviour by engaging Smuts in an ongoing debate with his enemies, with his friends and within Smuts’s own mind.⁵⁶

In addition Pimlott and Hancock investigated their subjects’ youth thoroughly as it is in these years that an individual’s character and personality are moulded. Hancock believed that he had to investigate Smuts’s childhood if he was to understand how Smuts’s mind ticked.⁵⁷ Nigel Hamilton, a British biographer and

53 H Strydom and D Jones (eds), *A Paton, save the beloved country* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 20.

54 For Pimlott’s philosophy on biography see “The future of political biography” in *Frustrate their knavish tricks. Writings on biography, history and politics* (London, 1994), pp. 149-161 and “Is political biography an art?” in Louis, pp. 159-174.

55 WK Hancock, *Attempting history*, p. 21.

56 WK Hancock, *Professing history* (Sydney, 1976), pp. 61-64.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

theorist on the writing of biography, concurs that for the biographer, the childhood and early years of any individual are the repository of many clues to the later character and achievement of the individual's life.⁵⁸ To comprehend Verwoerd's driven personality and fanatical pride in his Afrikaner identity it is essential to know that his parents emigrated from the Netherlands to South Africa when he was a little boy, and that a substantial part of his youth was spent unhappily in the former Southern Rhodesia where he received an English school education.

The success of Paton, Lewsen and Hancock's biographies is furthermore based on the rejection of the distinction between public and private facts. Pimlott correctly argues that in the biographer's quest to understand the forces that shaped his subject's life, public and private facts cannot be separated as real life accepts no such partition. A political life is thus always a package in which the public and private are intertwined.⁵⁹ FS Malan's career provides an example of this. As leader of the Afrikaner Bond in the Cape Colony he had entered the Union as one of South Africa's most influential politicians, but by the mid-1920s his political career imploded after the South African Party (SAP) had lost the 1924 parliamentary election. His liberalism and support of reconciliation with the British Empire were important factors in his own electoral defeat in Malmesbury, but the debilitating effect of personal tension related to his marriage was a contributory reason for his faltering political career. Malan and his wife, Johanna, were temperamentally unsuited as a couple. Johanna also suffered so acutely from depression that Malan occasionally feared for her sanity. Unresolved personal tensions left him with little energy to deal with the high level of stress a political career imposes. Then, after Johanna's death in 1926, he was filled with a self-flagellating grief that he had not shown her the necessary love and support.⁶⁰ Lapsing himself into depression, he temporarily withdrew from frontline politics. Although Malan was able to overcome his depression and make a political comeback as a senator, he was unable to recover his former influential position in the SAP. The political career of DF Malan is another example as the biographer will have to determine the influence of Maria Louw, his much younger and dominating second wife, in fuelling the intrigues and feuding in the NP during his premiership.

The biographer must furthermore never lose sight of the fact that the writing of history is a public duty and has no practical value if it is written for fellow scholars. The success of Hancocks's *Smuts* and Lewsen's *Merriman* is based on their belief that scholarship has to be accessible to the wider reading public. As Lewsen defined the task of the biographer, “To write biography, you've got to be

58 N Hamilton, *How to do biography a primer* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 156-157, 168.

59 Pimlott, “The future of political biography”, pp. 157-158.

60 NA Cape Town, MC, Vol. 22, Diary 2 October 1910; Vol. 23, Diary 1 December 1926.

able to write. You must be able to communicate with people at a simple, and not a technical esoteric level.”⁶¹

9. CONCLUSION

One will not go as far as Thomas Carlyle to whom biography was the only true history, or with Benjamin Disraeli, one of Britain’s most distinguished Victorian premiers, who advised that people should “read no history, nothing but biography for that is life without theory”.⁶² Without biographical studies of parliamentary politicians, however, it will be difficult to understand pre-democracy South Africa. The crucial contribution of biography is that it humanizes history as it reflects life – its heroism, nobility, endurance, folly, ignorance, weaknesses and brutality. For the British biographer, Michael Holroyd, biographers are the messengers of the dead calling to us out of the past, asking to be heard, remembered and understood.⁶³ As GM Trevelyan hauntingly summarized it:

“The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once on this familiar ground walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.”⁶⁴

To counter indifference and ignorance about our recent past we need professional historians to write history with individual human voices. The voices of pre-democracy politicians, “the good, the bad and the ugly”, to quote the title of Sergio Leone’s classic spaghetti Western, those of leaders such as FS Malan, Sam Kahn, LB Lee-Warden, Helen Suzman, Jan Steytler, Zac de Beer, Allan Hendrickse, FW de Klerk, John Vorster, PW Botha, AP Treurnicht, Jaap Marais and HF Verwoerd must be heard to make sense of our turbulent past.

61 Pienaar, p. 29.

62 Pimlott, “The future of political biography”, p. 149.

63 M Holroyd, *Works on paper the craft of biography and autobiography* (London, 2003), p. 19.

64 Cannadine, G.M. *Trevelyan*, p. 190.