

Afrikaanse misdaadhistorici en selfs kriminoloë verhoog soos wat die jare ná Haynes se verdwyning dekades en eeue word.

Jan Smuts: Son of the veld, pilgrim of the world

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Jan Smuts: Son of the veld, pilgrim of the world, is undoubtedly a pervasive and comprehensive review of the life and times of Jan Smuts (1870-1950). The primary question, however, is whether it is indeed a reappraisal of Jan Smuts the scholar, politician, and militarist as suggested by the sub-title. Reappraisal implies that a new, contending interpretative narrative is juxtaposed with previous knowledge. As a scholarly endeavour, a reappraisal insists on adding the continuity of time to interpretation. Events and narratives are filtered through the confluence between new knowledge and interpretation. It cannot merely be a complete review of an existing narrative.

The book is divided into four themes. The first theme, written by Ockert Geyser, Pieter du Toit, Dalene Heyns, Hennie Pieterse, and Bronwyn Strydom, deals with Smuts the intellectual. A remarkable diversity of scholarly disciplines, which include botany, evolution, archaeology, religion, and literature, inspired the academic curiosity of Smuts. The second theme deals with the military career of Jan Smuts. Fransjohan Pretorius and André Wessels interpret the evolution of Smuts' role in three wars as a natural intellectual progression from republican to political reconciler, and eventually as an international statesman and vocal supporter of the British Empire. The third theme of seven essays authored by Gert van den Bergh, Kobus du Pisani, Pieter Labuschagne, Dan Kriek, Ockert Geyser, At van Wyk and HDG Viljoen reviews the party political contests of the time, as well as Smuts' role as prime minister of South Africa. The final theme authored by James Barber, Dan Kriek, Christof Heyns, Willem Gravett and Deon Geldenhuys deals with Smuts in the international political arena and the strategic role he played through war and peace.

Curiously, the authors expressed the desire for the text to introduce younger scholars to Smuts. While the book is compiled in such a way as to provide extensive historical detail, it is not clear in which way the text will distinctly appeal to younger scholars. An interesting revisionist context to the book, however, has emerged with the revolt of the rather youthful Black Lives Matter movement in during 2020. This revolutionary “reappraisal” of historical figures which originated in the death of American, George Floyd, has embedded revisionism as an unavoidable feature of how the founding fathers of modern democracies, the slave traders of labour migration, and explorers of new frontiers will in the future be understood and explained.

Martin Legassick similarly expressed the urge to reappraise “Smuts the man” in a revisionist context. He rightly asks, what legacy is left by a political and military leader that “presided over the bombing of the Namibian Khoekhoe (115 killed in 1922), the slaughter of the Israelites at Bulhoek (163 killed in 1921) and the bombing of white mineworkers (81 killed in 1922)” and “brutally crushing two strikes by black mineworkers, in 1920 and 1946”.¹⁷ This book, a rather capacious scholarship, however, is not aimed at reviewing the moral context in which Smuts lived and worked, and will certainly not satisfy the urges of Legassick, the Marxist activist and historian, as it might not necessarily expose Smuts for “who he was”.

The question of whether history should be viewed in the moral context of its time is not uncontroversial (cf. Steyn, 2015). If history is a descriptive task, the question is settled, but history shapes whatever follows. Most, if not all, historical policies, institutions, conflicts, settlements, and agreements contributed to varying measures to the South Africa in which we live today. Avoiding scrutiny of heroes and villains in the context of the contemporary ignores the continuity of consequences and evade judgment of malevolence. It is a valid question to ask whether Smuts was an exponent of the moral dispositions of his time without the free will to question the justifications for repressive systems.

What exactly was the “context” in which Smuts held his expressed political views of the ‘native question? Science historian, Michael Shermer, argues, “... the theological and philosophical defences for slavery were rationalisations for what they [slave traders and politicians] knew was an immoral act”. Smuts knew his abhorrent anthropological views of blacks as “... barbarians, who

17 M Legassick, “Review: Jan Smuts: An illustrated biography”, *Kronos*, 22, 1995, p. 141.

[...] cannot possibly govern themselves” were immoral.¹⁸ He knew or should have imagined that the repressive, segregationist policies of South Africa were morally reprehensible. The most obvious question would be if Smuts was aware that black South Africans found their exclusion from a human rights regime to be unfair, unjust, immoral, and repressive.

At Versailles in 1918, ignoring the expressed wishes of his close confidant, US president Woodrow Wilson, Smuts refused to acknowledge the presence of the ANC’s Solomon Plaatje, dismissing him as unrepresentative. Similarly, when Smuts and Alfred Xuma, President of the ANC, arrived at the same press conference in New York in 1946, Xuma remarked, “I have had to fly 10,000 miles to meet my prime minister. He talks about us but won’t talk to us”. Given where we are today, is it still appropriate to appraise Smuts in a context that assumes universal moral justifications?

Smuts’ secularised understanding of the religious orthodoxies typical of South Africa’s national politics at the time is an indication that he managed to distance himself, at least intellectually, from the dominant narratives of his contemporaries and political adversaries. Historian, Saul Dubow reminds us that “... while operating on horseback behind British lines, [Smuts] carried a copy of Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” and the New Testament (in Greek) in his saddlebag”.¹⁹ The political and intellectual contradictions of the Cambridge educated Smuts remains a mystery to non-revisionists.

In the essay on Evolution, Holism, and Religion, Heyns, like so many previous biographers of Smuts, states the obvious, “... as an intellectual he was ahead of his time and most of his contemporaries”.²⁰ His complex operationalisation of holism might well be a conceptualisation of his secularisation, which is an indication that religion itself most likely did not provide for his views on humanity. Smuts’ political philosophy was to some extent sculpted by the influence of American poet, Walt Whitman. Smuts suggested that Whitman’s conception of freedom is embedded in pantheism and human potential and not in religiosity.

Smuts’ son, ironically, describes his father’s views on Christ as remarkably revisionist: “He certainly did not believe in a supernatural being [...], but

18 M Shermer and M Twitter (available at: <https://twitter.com/michaelshermer/status/1259137919035424768>, as accessed on 24 June 2020).

19 S Dubow, “South Africa’s racist rounding rather was also a human rights pioneer, *New York Times*, 30 June 2020.

20 R Steyn, *Jan Smuts – Unafraid of Greatness* (London, Jonathan Ball, 2015), p. 77.

he did believe in some deity, some overall holistic personality, some supreme law. That Christ had lived he had no doubt, but he thought of him as a very remarkably gifted young man, rather than as the Immaculate Son of God”.²¹ Smuts, indeed, was not an orthodox Christian, and it is highly unlikely that he found justification for his views on black people – as did the National Party government and the apartheid regime – on biblical grounds.

Adding new information to a historical narrative might not necessarily qualify as a reappraisal. University of Oxford physicist, David Deutsch, in reference to the ideas of Karl Popper, postulates that information has to evolve into new knowledge and such knowledge needs to provide “new explanations”, for a contemporary text or narrative to constitute a reappraisal of history.²² This voluminous work of 571 pages may well be the complete periodical on Smuts the statesman, militarist, and intellectual. The question that lingers is whether the book reappraises the historical events and “Smuts the man” sufficiently to “revise” our understanding of one of the most important military leaders and statesmen in South Africa’s history.

Knowledge is the understanding of the relational tissue between facts or postulations of any number of realities. This relational tissue might not always be apparent and is dependent on interpretative reasoning (new explanations) to transform information and facts into new knowledge. Most of the authors of this reappraisal are senior scholars and attempted to reimagine the relational tissue between known facts and/or information. The master-narrative, or revisionist context, within which Smuts lived his remarkable life is examined, to some extent.

21 JC Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts – by his son* (London, Cassell, 1952), p. 292.

22 D Deutsch, *The beginning of infinity: Explanations that transform the world* (London, Penguin Books, 2012), p. 78.