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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE WAS, THE IS AND THE MIGHT-HAVE-BEEN: POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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Nelson Mandela: A Biography. By PETER LIMB. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2008. Pp. xvi + 144. No price given (ISBN 978-0-313-34035-2).

Teacher and Comrade: Richard Dudley and the Fight for Democracy in South Africa. By ALAN WIEDER. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. Pp. vii + 174. No price given. Paperback (ISBN 978-0-791-47430-3).

Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred. By MARK GEVISSER. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007. Pp. xliii + 892. No price given. Paperback (ISBN 978-1-86842-101-5).

Cyril Ramaphosa. By ANTHONY BUTLER. Johannesburg and Oxford: Jacana and James Currey, 2007. Pp. xvi + 442. £18.95, paperback (ISBN 978-1-84701-315-6).

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APARTHEID-ERA political biography or autobiography has mostly depicted a drab troop of doughty Dutchmen or a skinny squad of well-intentioned English liberals, all doing their individual best to rescue the country from a mess of one kind or another. Since the 1990s, the post-apartheid genre, much influenced by the vindicatory mood of a successful liberation struggle, has been producing memoirs and personal assessments of what by now amounts to a battalion-size roll of resistance personalities. Taken together, these writings are not necessarily easily categorized or characterized. A great many of the life stories are neither fully personal memoir, nor completely biography, nor reliable history, although they may contain elements of all three. Most of the 'comrade in the struggle' autobiographies of the past decade or so are, predictably enough, narrow activist tracts which tell us how individuals operated in exile and what they did once they got back to life at the head of their country's struggling anti-apartheid masses. Nearly all of these works are polemical or politically partisan to a greater or lesser degree. And it goes more or less without saying that most resistance life histories have focused on the great and the good within the ANC fold.

Some of the books within this corpus of heroic autobiography and biography are richly informative as well as deeply moving, providing unforgettable pictures of the courage, the energy and the indomitable spirit of protagonists who never wavered in the lengthy, bitter and costly battle with the apartheid enemy. These include works such as the vivid story of the no-nonsense Communist labour organizer and feminist, Ray Alexander, a major figure in South African resistance history from the 1930s until her recent death.[1] Other stories are so fearsomely brave and self-regarding that they hover on the edge of being faintly ludicrous,

[1] R. A. Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength* (Johannesburg, 2004).

portraying characters as titanic scourges of the apartheid state. Thus, more sceptical readers may well find that *Armed and Dangerous* can bring to mind, if inadvertently, the silliness of Spike Milligan's *Adolf Hitler: My Part in his Downfall*.[2] Naturally, it is surely still too soon to get the individual doings and achievements of various leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle in proper historical perspective. Any reasonably even-handed appreciation of their place in history is unlikely to come from a record provided by zealous autobiography or the flattery of licensed biography. Still, as underlined by the clutch of books under consideration here, more detached scholarly analysis of the lives of leading resistance figures will gradually make it possible to appreciate them as flesh and blood, doing some things right while making a hash of others. Beyond that, in time it will also gradually become possible to appreciate these top dogs as substantive, even problematic, African historical personalities, rather than merely as impeccably disciplined and right-minded comrades or cadres of the continent's last unfinished anti-colonial business. For, as yet, even where independent biographies are not uncritical in their overall evaluation of eminent South African democrats, they continue to embody – entirely understandably – an essentially admiring attitude of tone and content.

The figure for whom that esteem is virtually Olympian in standing is obvious. Hermann Giliomee, the distinguished historian of Afrikaner society, has described him as 'a consummate politician', able to create a decent new climate of opinion around his symbolic role as 'an imaginative unifier of people across racial lines'.[3] On the opening page of his concise and highly accessible new biography of Nelson Mandela, Peter Limb declares him to be the most famous African today. That seems fair enough, although Colonel Muammar Gaddafi may well have another view. Dr. Limb's volume is one of the latest in a seemingly unending procession of admiring, even saintly, studies of this legendary ANC leader and first president of post-apartheid South Africa. Whether making resistance history in the 1950s or just being fawned over by the late wife of the Prince of Wales in the 1990s, Mandela continues to be esteemed, his spell-binding presence and human achievements appearing all the greater when set beside the pedestrian turns of his presidential successor. In Mandela biographies, as probably nowhere else, it is possible to glimpse most clearly Ben Pimlott's notion of classic political biography as almost theological in construction, resting on 'the notion of the model life, the perfect individual'.[4]

A modern biography in a hip Greenwood series which includes the lives of Madonna and Johnny Depp, *Nelson Mandela* is aimed at younger students and sets out to present the basic and fairly well-known outlines of his long life and times to a new and youthful readership. At a time when the Mandela marketing industry is churning out bulky coffee- table epics and a pungent account of his eating experiences called *Hunger for Freedom*[5] (to be followed, presumably, by 'Thirst for Freedom', a biography of his drinking), Peter Limb's study is a conscientious, compressed, and clearly written assessment of his pivotal role in the struggle to free South Africa from white minority rule and his presidential performance following

[2] R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: From Underground Struggle to Freedom* (London, 1993).

[3] H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, 2003), 648.

[4] B. Pimlott, 'Is political biography an art?' in W. Roger Louis (ed.), *Still More Adventures with Britannia* (London, 2003), 164.

[5] L. Callinicos, *The World that Made Mandela* (Johannesburg, 2006); A. Trapido, *Hunger for Freedom: The Story of Food in the Life of Nelson Mandela* (Johannesburg, 2008).

the transition to majority rule. It does what it sets out to do. In other words, this biography is a re-telling of the Mandela life story, not a re-evaluation of his heroic status in African and world history. Nor, even less, is it a conceptual examination of the basis of his semi-mythic leadership stature, the focus of Tom Lodge's recent incisive study, which examines how Nelson Mandela's great democratic aspirations were shaped by moral capital, charismatic authority, messianic prowess and the winning ability to cultivate a new multi-racial patriotism.[6]

As such, Dr. Limb's *Mandela* is the fairly familiar story, with no real surprises along the way. Always setting the personal narrative carefully in a wider historical context, Mandela's growth to greatness is traced through its main stages, starting with his well-connected birth and rural Xhosa childhood, before heading towards the widening horizons of mission school and college education, and lingering immersion in a 1940s Witwatersrand of political militancy, work and recreation. There follows his rise in the throbbing 1950s to national leadership in the ANC and core involvement in anti-apartheid protests, several years of slithering underground resistance in the following decade, and the dignified resilience of his lengthy island incarceration through the wilderness years. Following the end of his imposed hibernation, an undaunted Mandela returns to see out the weary end of the apartheid order, to play his key part in negotiations and transition, and to become the national saviour of the new South Africa which emerged from the historic common elections of April 1994.

When it comes to the most recent past, this latest Mandela life story is not without some revision of the familiar majestic interpretation. After all, almost a decade after the end of his celebrated presidency, it is hardly surprising that his post-apartheid political career and achievements should be looked at not entirely in a gushing light. Thus, personally, he was less than crusading in the campaign against the HIV-AIDS pandemic in the 1990s. Mandela also acquiesced in the adoption of conservative economic policies which may have kept the champagne corks popping in boardrooms, but at a severe social cost in spiralling unemployment and continuing widespread poverty. In the same vein, Peter Limb argues that the Mandela administration's market conversion to privatization of state provision led to a cruel irony in which 'poor Africans who had finally received clean water and electricity for the first time in their lives soon lost this access due to their inability to pay for newly privatized services' (p. 114).

For old critics to the left of the ANC and its allies, such predicaments were always the logical consequence of a nationalist transition in which, far from looking to combat imperial capitalism, a compromising new regime would be getting into bed with it. One of the most consistent and caustic of those resistance voices has long been that of a remarkable if minor figure in the national struggle against apartheid oppression. In 1993, the ANC sounded out the outstanding Cape Town educationist and political activist Richard Dudley, about the possibility of him serving as minister of education in the country's first majority-rule government. Unsurprisingly, nothing came of it. R. O. Dudley, as he has always been better known, would in any event have made an odd ministerial appointment in a Mandela government. Studious and dignified, this formidably articulate socialist intellectual of independent mind and intransigent spirit had not even joined the voting queues in South Africa's 1994 elections. Instead, Dudley and other cultivated radicals of the Trotskyist, anti-imperialist Unity Movement, a 1980s variant of the 1940s Non-European Unity Movement, stayed at home on political principle. Quite simply, the dividend of a universal franchise was insufficient.

[6] T. Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford, 2006).

As Professor Alan Wieder points out in his absorbing and insightful *Teacher and Comrade*, it was, after all, ever thus. For over half of the twentieth century, a snooty sub-culture of non-collaboration, spawned and nurtured by the Unity Movement tradition, has endured as a gritty local presence in the history of South African dissent. Although non-collaborationist influence has been shrinking ever more rapidly since the demise of apartheid, the fact that it is still visible and audible is in no small measure due to its obstinate and authoritative embodiment in Richard Dudley, a man of some consequence even now, in his eighties.

The ethos of non-collaboration, non-racialism and anti-imperialism carried by Dudley was never something for intellectual faint-hearts or those inclined towards wavering or compromise. Indeed, in paying homage to its school-teacher subject and his life of remarkable political consistency, *Teacher and Comrade* stresses both the distinctiveness and the logic of the Unity Movement's ideological conditioning. For decades, non-collaboration and a contemptuous disavowal of race had been an identifying badge of ultra-respectability in the ranks of anti-apartheid opposition. It had signified a total rejection of cooperation or negotiation, not only with the earlier segregationist and later apartheid regimes, but also with other resistance bodies which talked the language of multi-racialism and popular ethnic alliances. Alan Wieder is, therefore, right to stress that this 'foundational belief' was bound to outlive the death of apartheid. In the 1980s, R. O. Dudley and his coterie had not supported parleying between the ANC, the National Party and Anglo-American corporate capitalism; a decade later, that momentum was being maintained in a call to boycott the first common election. Given 'that the ANC had ignored working people in their rush to capitalist collaboration with de Klerk, the IMF and the World Bank' (p. 144), the New Unity Movement declared that the vote was not worth the bother.

The swift realignment and absorption of autonomous tributaries of political dissent into a dominant liberation movement was, of course, very much on the cards in a post-1994 political culture. It was this game which brought Mandela together with Dudley. Towards the end of 1998, R. O. and his spouse, Iris, were invited to dine with the president. As Dudley recalls, having been identified by Mandela 'as a very prominent … coloured political leader and so on', he wanted to know 'if it would be possible for us to make use of the influence that we had … in getting in the vote for the ANC'. His response was courteous yet unequivocal. He would never define himself as 'a coloured person', nor as 'a coloured leader', for he 'had for the past fifty years been associated with a political movement that does not accept these classifications'.

Therefore, 'conflict with the ANC' was inevitable, as Dudley would 'never want people to vote as coloured persons. I said I appeal to them to vote for a completely non-racial South Africa'. Entirely in keeping with what Peter Limb and other biographers would say of his attentive and courteous instincts, Mandela understood why he could not transfer his support 'to any political party' that was 'not completely non-racial' (p. 149) and respected his candour. Equally, it was no less in keeping with the earnest consciousness of Richard Dudley that he relished the opportunity of an exchange with Mandela. A small left-wing fish in a big nationalist pond, this compulsively talkative high school teacher was always teaching through 'dialogue'; for, as his biographer emphasizes, 'talk with other human beings, even the opposition – had democratic possibilities' (p. 152).

Notwithstanding a little crop of misspellings and minor factual errors, *Teacher and Comrade* gives us an accomplished account of Richard Dudley's personality and rooted way of living, set convincingly in the localized historical perspective which is essential to the proper understanding of his sort of anti-apartheid struggle – the dense and complex political culture of Cape Town and the intellectual

and subversive doctrines that held sway over crusading teachers and their students in several of that city's leading schools for those classified as Coloured.

In the mid-1980s, New Unity Movement members in the Eastern Cape had been in contact fleetingly with one of Mandela's oldest struggle comrades, the left-leaning Govan Mbeki. His son, Thabo, the current president of South Africa since 1999, is the subject of a mammoth biography by Mark Gevisser. To pass from Professor Wieder's book to Mr. Gevisser's is to move on from the life of a quixotic leader who was checked and harassed under apartheid, and who was destined to remain out of power and out of office even after it had ended. It is to consider the treatment of a serving head of state who, as the cover of *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* proclaims modestly, 'has attempted to forge an identity for himself as the symbol of modern Africa'.

That, in turn, raises the challenging issue of interpretation for biographies of this sort. To write contemporary biography of a speechifying and fairly controversial political leader is bound always to be tricky. Part of the problem is choosing either an advocacy or an adversarial vantage point, or the dangers of polemic – whether as venomous criticism or as excessive praise. Moreover, it goes almost without saying that there are matters that cannot be said, to say nothing of things that cannot be known. Then, in the present case, the fact that Mbeki is still in power means that this can never really be more than an interim kind of biography. Granted, his position as Mandela's successor means that he is already a strand of South African history; but *The Dream Deferred* is still short of representing a complete account, even of his official life. Even more, it will surely take at least a couple of decades before one can hope to get Thabo Mbeki's full measure as a significant South African – and a postcolonial African – historical personality. Nonetheless, Mr. Gevisser has produced an imposing book which largely transcends the usual ephemeralities of political journalism, although it has its fair measure of hyperbole. Such is Mbeki's command of English grammar, we are told, that even when obliged 'to tell a lie or two', he would never commit the 'grammatical indiscretion' of 'splitting an infinitive' (p. 336). There is also an insistence on presenting even the most humdrum activity as political gesture, so that playing Monopoly as a student exile at Sussex in the 1960s becomes a cheeky act of apostasy, a 'most un-socialist pastime' (p. 194). As this suggests, the author has digested everything that has been written on or uttered about Mbeki, including whatever the president has said himself. He has conducted over 200 extensive interviews with politicians, advisers, family members, acquaintances and commentators who have known him at all stages of his life, and he has had the obliging ear of the subject himself. Mbeki's life has been placed in a broad and illuminating historical sweep, from Transkeian childhood, through a 'Swinging Sixties' exile in Britain, liberation movement organizational manoeuvrings in Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, and on to homecoming and ascendancy into office. Throughout, Mark Gevisser strikes a delicate balance between Mbeki the public and political figure and Mbeki the personal man, enduring the psychological pressures of exile and homecoming, handling family and friendships, and grappling privately with the fraught twists and turns of a return from exile to a carefully orchestrated high position at home. The result is a scholarly, empathetic and probing life story. It is also conveyed in readable prose, with some telling turns of phrase: thus, the author depicts the ANC's quaint leadership culture, in which its tribunes of the people are never ambitious, but merely loyal 'cadres' who await the summons of 'deployment' to office, as 'that peculiar mission-school-meets-Lenin-Institute-way of the ANC' (p. 791).

In its own way, *Thabo Mbeki* looks set to become essential, for purposes of reference, to scholars of the anti-apartheid struggle and post-apartheid South

Africa. This is because in essence it is biography as compilation, meaning an elephantine pile of information and argument. For most of its total life of over 1,200 pages, the volume is a tide of one incident, accident and reflection after another, pouring through, churning ever thicker as it becomes a record of incoming governance and party aspiration, achievement, fumbling and malaise. While not uncritical in tone, the author's general depiction of Mbeki remains too elevated. Invoking an uhuru lineage for his 'African Renaissance' mantra, and bracketing him with Nkrumah and Kenyatta as a reincarnation of 'the liberating philosopher-king' (p. xxv) is odd for an awkward, esoteric and aloof politician whose frequently evasive or dismissive judgements seem invariably to have been cooked up off-stage.

For all that it has won South Africa's top literary prize, the Alan Paton Award, in 2008, it is difficult to overlook a fundamental question about this book's excessive detail. Leaving aside their contrasting democratic and autocratic political paths, Mbeki's touch has never been that of a Nkrumah or even, perhaps, of a Hastings Banda. As a starring performance in the theatre of politics, it has been fairly wooden. In that regard, does Mbeki-in-office merit this fat, absorbent, sponge of a life story? Neither a naturally skilful nor a consistent politician, he may most usefully be seen as Robert Ross sees him, as 'merely the most prominent of a ruling class of upwardly mobile black professionals, many schooled in the struggle'.[7]

Domestically, Mbeki's rule has been tainted by crises such as AIDS, rampant crime, a suspect arms deal and other corruption scandals, a fondness for placemen – however suspect – and a paranoid identification of critics as threats to the new order. Externally, a showy diplomacy engineered to promote African regeneration has been a lamentable failure close to home, where Mbeki's limp, blind-eye dealings with Robert Mugabe did little to arrest the degradation and ruin of Zimbabwe. In 2008–9, the final stage of his presidency, his administration has entered the doldrums. Outsmarted by bloody-minded enemies within his own movement, it remains to be seen whether the country's liberal constitutional and judicial order will survive the collision between Mbeki the governing guardian and an acrimonious party that has turned upon him, anxious to take another course.

In the game of getting into top office in the new South Africa, it is doubtful if Cyril Ramaphosa ever really got more than half-way, although, as Professor Anthony Butler's assured biography suggests, there are good grounds for the respect and attention that he continues to command. Ramaphosa rose to national prominence in the 1980s as secretary-general of the National Union of Mineworkers, a big fish in the sea of 'Mass Democratic Movement' politics, and one of the best and brightest of United Democratic Front leadership figures. As a student in the 1970s he had been 'a Christian brother whose closest political affiliations were with the black consciousness movement'. At the start of the next decade he had, in all likelihood, 'still never knowingly met an ANC member' (p. 218). Thereafter, this steely and able mine labour organizer and trade union negotiator drifted away from a black consciousness movement which he has subsequently termed sectarian, and squirmed secretly into bed with the ANC. But this was more of a pragmatic alliance than a love match. For he had not been raised in the bloodstream of reflex ANC loyalism. Nor, for that matter, did his mid-1970s detention and solitary confinement as a black consciousness activist carry the lure of exile. There were also whisperings about the nature of his fate behind bars, in view of the fact that his father was a Soweto policeman. And that would become the nub of the Ramaphosa problem. Tactful, forceful and flexible, he displayed a 'smooth performance as a union leader' (p. 321) in piloting through the 1985

[7] R. Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 2008), 217.

workers' alliance that became the robust Congress of South African Trades' Unions. While remaining acutely aware that he was captaining an independent labour constituency, in so doing Ramaphosa 'had helped to create a federation that could serve as a vehicle for the ANC's ambitions', even though it was somewhat lukewarm about him. Indeed, although he swung more or less fully behind the movement thereafter, his rise towards the centre of things irritated influential and bossy exiles who considered post-apartheid governing to be their rightful destiny. Beyond any doubt, Cyril Ramaphosa's reserves of tactfulness and toughness were crucial to the success of the tricky constitutional negotiations that led to a democratic settlement of the South African crisis, as was the high order of his political judgement in winning not just the consent, but also the confidence, of old apartheid-order adversaries. This most urbane and skilled negotiator for the ANC and its allies was, according to Tertius Delport, one of the National Party's hardest heads, 'in the ANC … superior by far to Mbeki, for instance, in terms of sheer force of personality, the sheer presence' (p. 291). By the end of the transition he had won golden accolades. Symbolically, he did not forget the origins of that Midas touch. Ramaphosa voted with Witwatersrand workers at Kloof Gold Mine, the first pit organized by his union in 1982.

With his stock well up, to many people on the mixed left it only seemed a matter of some short time before he notched up the first deputy presidency and became the natural successor to an ageing Mandela. Although the evidence is a little equivocal, the president at times was partial to Ramaphosa, conscious of the desirability of diluting the Xhosa stamp of ANC leadership with a man of ambition from Venda, and wary of Mbeki's rigidity and intolerance of criticism. Yet Ramaphosa's destiny was to be the coming man who never made it, whereas Mbeki's was to be the coming man who trumped him. For the cards stacked against him were too strong. Earlier, Ramaphosa's stand on moral principles in political campaigning had trodden on the corns of too many ANC hot-heads and their exciteable constituencies, such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and the Youth League. Then, he lacked the ethnic lubricant of Eastern Cape Xhosa 'political and familial networks' (p. 315). The ANC secretary-general also became the victim of grubby smears about his personal character and political reliability. Most of all, by 1994 the wobbly political balance between the broad domestic left and returned exile power had swung squarely towards the disciplinary culture of loyalty, conformity and furtiveness forged in liberation movement outposts in Zambia and Tanzania. Two years later, the ANC's leaden house magazine reported preposterously that a chance domestic shopping trip had enticed Comrade Cyril to try his hand at business.

Over the past decade, Ramaphosa's smooth and speedy initiation into big capitalism has seen him make a pile. He has also used his position as a wealthy magnate to champion Black Economic Empowerment, a state strategy to increase ownership, management and control of South African business by black citizens which, in practice, has tended mainly to deepen the pockets of a well-connected new elite. Yet, beneath it all, he has remained 'a natural politician who gravitates towards and embraces power' (p. 396), a figure who has continued to keep a chameleon eye on the reins of government. In a strangely subdued and intriguing way, what a much admired Cyril Ramaphosa represents perhaps most is a lost national leader, under whose authority the history of early post-apartheid South Africa might well have been different – and might well have been better, or at least less mucky. In that sense, as the author suggests, the notion of Ramaphosa in presidential office remains a question that will hover over his country's steamy political landscape.

Unlike Mark Gevisser, Anthony Butler encountered more courtesy rather than charity in his pursuit and even teases his subject gently for 'not actively

obstructing the biography' (p. xvi). But his *Cyril Ramaphosa* is little the worse for that. Utilizing a good range of written sources, and having induced many of Ramaphosa's associates, friends and contemporaries to talk candidly, Professor Butler sketches a revealing, judicious and convincing portrait of the complex personal life and public conduct of a self-assured, ambitious, adroit and pragmatic individual, a consummate fixer for times of trouble and crisis. It is he, far more than Mbeki, who must surely be the truly elusive enigma among the mandarins of post-1994 South Africa.

Ultimately, of course, individual personalities do not explain history. As leaders, sometimes they may well make history, as the impact of at least one of the lives here makes plain through its legacy of meaning: what Xolela Mangcu has called the 'usable history of Mandela'.[8] Yet, it is perhaps far more the case that history happens to them, and that the true measure of their stature is how they shoulder its weight. In that respect, as these volumes demonstrate, survival up the greasy pole of politics turns as much upon luck as upon willpower and opportunity. It is not for nothing, as Mbeki's chronicler has acknowledged elsewhere, that the twitchy leadership of so controversial a character has turned him into a 'lightning rod' for the everyday fears, uncertainties and confusions of South Africa's people, counting on luck.[9] If historical precedent is any guide, luck, too, will undoubtedly play its part in deciding whether a flawed Jacob Zuma, now ANC president, will eventually remake South Africa in a more cavalier image and what the price of that might be for its future.

Author's postscript. At the time of writing, Thabo Mbeki was still President of South Africa and not, as he is now, the has-been of that country's recent political leadership.

[8] *Weekender*, 12–13 July 2008.

[9] *Sunday Times Lifestyle*, 15 June 2008.