The meek shall not inherit South Africa

F.A. Mouton, *Prophet without Honour. F.S. Malan: Afrikaner, South African and Cape Liberal*

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South Africa's political landscape, past and present, is populated by a rich and colourful cast of characters. Unfortunately, the dearth of political biographers has meant that save for a few exceptions, prime ministers and presidents have monopolised scholarly attention. These men have come to embody the eras under their rule, while their allies and rivals have been reduced to a near-faceless mass of minions.

Alex Mouton has bucked this trend by writing the biographies of dissident insiders, such as Margaret and William Ballinger, Schalk Pienaar and now, Francois Stephanus (F.S.) Malan. His subjects personify Michael Walzer's model of the connected critic, insiders who are nevertheless critical; voices of conscience who nullify claims of an overarching, homogenous morality. Taken in this light, a biography of F.S. Malan is certainly merited, since it not only adds to the historiographical texture of early twentieth-century politics, but also records the life of that rare breed of Afrikaner who was not a nationalist; a member of the establishment who also challenged its racism and the expedience with which African rights were traded for the sake of white compromise.

F.S. Malan was a contemporary of Jan Smuts at the Victoria College and Cambridge, a protégé of "Onze" Jan Hofmeyr, and the editor of the Afrikaner Bond mouthpiece, *Ons Land*, who was gaoled for libel during the South African War but who emerged from prison to plead for a united South Africa and for the preservation and even extension of the Cape franchise. As one of the South African Party's (SAP) leading lights, Malan came within reach of the premiership, but could never seize it. He failed to recover from the SAP's exile

to the political wilderness in the 1920s and became a marginalised figure who faded from the political scene and disappeared into historiographical oblivion.

Malan was a paradoxical figure whose defence of the Cape franchise made him a remnant of a bygone era to his contemporaries, but a revolutionary in the eyes of historians with the benefit of hindsight. Mouton reflects his subject's Janus face in the book's title, *Prophet without Honour* and in the title of its final chapter, "Keeping the Old Cape Flag Flying in the Last Ditch". Whether Malan was indeed a political prophet, or merely the personification of the fate of the Cape Liberal tradition, is hard to tell. His political fortunes seem to follow those of Cape Liberalism in twentieth-century South Africa. In the new post-Union political parties and parliament, the three Northern provinces formed a power bloc which systematically suffocated the south's liberalism[9] and whittled away its non-racial franchise. By the time Hertzog's Native Bills were passed in 1936, F.S. Malan had been reduced to a political non-entity. He became a voice in the desert.

By writing the biography of a man who rose to high office, but could never quite reach the pinnacle, Mouton inadvertently demonstrates the dynamics of early twentieth-century Afrikaner politics and the characters of the men who did indeed reach the top. F.S. Malan is portrayed as a tortured soul, a man who struggled to reconcile his principles with the realities of political life. He dissented, but yielded for the sake of compromise, and struggled to reconcile his idealism with his political impotence. The rough-and-tumble of political life seemed to overwhelm him: every slight was a blow; every insult left a bruise. In contrast, the men who rose to power were those who were thick-skinned enough to deflect

9. Nationalism followed the same fate as liberalism. In his biography of J.H. Hofmeyr, Alan Paton noted that it "is one of the remarkable facts of South African history, that while it is commonly accepted that today we are ruled by the ideology of the North rather than of the South, of the Transvaal rather than of the Cape, it was in the Cape that modern Afrikaner Nationalism was born and nurtured". See A. Paton, *Hofmeyr* (Oxford University Press, London, 1964), p 284.

the viciousness of white politics.[10] They were ultimately pragmatists; master strategists who built support on the basis of compromise and political alliances. F.S. Malan, while a thoroughly admirable human being, did not seem to possess these qualities. As a youth and an established politician, he was determined not to stand in Jan Smuts's shadow. However, he failed to match Smuts's persona and alienated himself from Smuts and the SAP's strategically important inner circle, which doubtless contributed to his political demise.

Mouton's empathetic portrayal of this sensitive but admirable character brings us to the relationship between the biographer and his subject. Biography is essentially the biographer's interpretation of the biographical subject – it is impossible to divorce the two. It has become common practice for biographers to acknowledge their presence in the text and, if they admire the main character, to admit to it. Good, critical biographers then use a number of safeguards to ensure that their accounts do not degenerate into the realm of hagiography. The most important of these are thorough primary research and the acknowledgement of their character's failings, however unflattering these may be. By this measure, Mouton succeeds with flying colours. His veneration for Malan is clear (and there are times when his description of Malan's life work reads like a laudation), but his research is meticulous and he has provided a warts-and-all portrayal of his subject. F.S. Malan may have been a beacon of liberalism and political conscience, but Mouton reveals that he was also a man who neglected a depressed and insecure wife – even during her pregnancies – and who would rather keep an appointment with a political luminary than be present at the birth of his child (p 77). When it came to the political arena, Malan may have been a voice of dissent, but when faced with a *fait accompli*, he chose to toe the party line where a more courageous individual would have resigned his cabinet position (pp 121, 140) – as Jan Hofmeyr, the era's more famous liberal authority, indeed did in 1938.

10. A notable exception was Louis Botha, who found it difficult to deal with the Nationalists' mockery. However, Mouton portrays Malan as an excellent strategist and bridge-builder, which explains his rise to power.

While this biography certainly makes a valuable contribution to post-apartheid Afrikaner historiography, I would have liked to see a more literary approach to the text itself, which would have brought its rich sources to life. Although biographers, unlike novelists, may not stray from their sources, they – and any other historian for that matter – do have license to present their material imaginatively and to utilise the narrative form to tell a gripping tale. This is the reason why biography is such a popular and accessible genre to lay audiences. In the case of this biography, the author clearly favoured a more conventional academic style of writing. This, coupled with the brevity of the text, means that the reader struggles at times to get under the main character's skin and to understand his thought processes and important turning points, which are stated as fact, rather than explained.

A case in point is Malan's transition from a shy, uncertain youth to a firebrand politician in the wake of the Jameson Raid. The change is introduced rather abruptly by quoting Mordechai Tamarkin's description of Malan (p 31). The author's own impression would have carried more weight. The sparseness of the text (whether by choice or on the insistence of the publisher) also means that the supporting cast of characters remain in the shadows, with the result that Malan's relationships, such as his mentor-protégé bond with "Onze" Jan Hofmeyr, are unexplored. By harnessing the biographical genre to its full extent and by writing a longer biography, Mouton could have added even more and richer layers to his narrative and characters.

That being said, Mouton's work is nuanced and original and it demonstrates the contested nature of early twentieth-century South African politics and of Afrikaner identity. In the bipolar milieu that followed Union, F.S. Malan's imprisonment during the South African War branded him in the eyes of the English community as a treasonous anti-British intriguer, while his pleas for conciliation and a united South Africa under the Union Jack made him an Imperial lackey in the eyes of Afrikaners. In such an environment, a voice of reason would not be heard – but at least it has not gone unrecorded.

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