## South African history through the prism of friendship

**D. Lavin (ed.),** ***Friendship and Union: The South African Letters of Patrick Duncan and Maud Selborne, 1907–1943***
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The post-Union, pre-apartheid era, which spanned the years 1910–1948, is one of the most undervalued and misunderstood phases in South Africa's political history. It is often treated as part of the "inevitable" march towards apartheid – or it is contrasted as a period of relative moderation, under leaders such as Smuts, in comparison to what was to follow. Neither of these perspectives does any justice to the only period in twentieth-century South Africa when no single political party could dominate parliamentary politics, a time when the future was anything but certain.

Few publications convey the *zeitgeist* of this complicated era as effectively as Deborah Lavin's *Friendship and Union: The South African Letters of Patrick Duncan and Maud Selborne, 1907–1943*, published by the Van Riebeeck Society. This aptly titled source publication consists of the correspondence conducted over a period of 36 years between the man who came to South Africa as a member of Milner's Kindergarten and who later became the first South African citizen to be appointed governor-general; and the daughter of a British prime minister and spouse of the high commissioner who presided over the formation of Union in 1910, a woman who shone as a political activist in her own right. Their weekly correspondence dealt with a myriad of topics (one of the most interesting is the Conservative Lady Selborne's campaign for women's suffrage), but at its core was South Africa, as viewed through the prism of a challenging, yet enduring friendship.

Their friendship began in 1905, when Lady Selborne, the wife of Milner's successor, took the young men who made up the Kindergarten, Milner's young Oxford-educated administrators, under her wing. A bond between her and Duncan soon developed, based on shared interests in music, literature, religion and philosophy. The classically educated Duncan had a special love for Plato and, indeed, *The Republic* forms a golden thread throughout their lengthy correspondence. The nature and value of democracy is often discussed, as the institutions of state soon reveal themselves beholden to the immediate, and often petty, interests of party politics. Duncan's descriptions of parliamentary debates reveal the extent to which political alliances, rather than grand visions, shaped legislation. In such a prosaic environment, Duncan resembled Plato's philosopher-king. He was, at best, a reluctant politician, who easily became despondent about the futility of the exercise. In the early years of his political career, Selborne acted as his mentor, advising him on persons and tactics. As the years progressed and his familiarity with the workings of the political machine grew, Duncan showed himself to be a pragmatist who used co-operation rather than ideology to achieve his objectives.

From the very first elections held after Union, one of the key features of South African political life to emerge from Duncan's descriptions was the animosity between the two white communities – English and Afrikaans. It dominated public discourse and kept parliament and cabinet in its grip. Its ability to hamper all attempts at rational

politics became the proverbial thorn in Duncan's flesh and in his political alliances, first with Smuts, and later with Hertzog, he sought to foster political parties that would bridge the divide. However, his correspondence also reveals the clumsy political animals the South African Party of the 1920s and the United Party of the 1930s turned out to be, as they sought to be a catch-all for members ranging from Natal jingoes to Transvaal farmers. Legislation could only be passed after prolonged and painful negotiation – Hertzog's Native Bills were a case in point – and emerged from the process transformed, but not necessarily improved.

For all his pragmatism, Duncan had his own political ideals and concerns. In the first place he sought to maintain South Africa's ties to the British Empire – which would be transformed into the Commonwealth. This priority, tied in with his abhorrence of English-Afrikaans rivalry came into play when, as war broke out in Europe in September 1939, Duncan, as governor-general, refused Hertzog's request for the dissolution of parliament and paved the way for Smuts to become prime minister and lead South Africa into the Second World War. While he was able to justify his decision on constitutional grounds, Duncan knew that granting Hertzog's request and dissolving parliament would have led to a general election fought on South Africa's ties to the Empire and its participation in the war. It would also have played on the festering bitterness between the two communities at a time when Afrikaner nationalism, especially in the aftermath of the Great Trek centenary, was on the rise. As the first South African governor-general, Duncan who by this time had a long political career behind him, understood the dynamics of South African politics as none of his predecessors could have.

Duncan's second political concern was about the position of Africans as a determinant of South Africa's future. It was on this point that his and Selborne's most lively, and often most sharply-worded letters were written. As children of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their racial prejudice goes without saying. Their letters fit neatly into a Social Darwinist framework and their terminology and comments sound archaic and offensive to a modern ear. Yet, while they regarded it as self-evident that Africans were incapable of ruling themselves, their letters bear testimony to the dilemma debated by South African whites throughout the twentieth century: how to be just towards a subject people whom one fears.

Their first letter sets the tone for what would become a dominant theme throughout their exchange. "I confess I always feel my national conscience pricking when I think of how we behave to the natives here. Don't you sometimes have qualms?", Lady Selborne wrote to Duncan (p 8). Duncan, in turn, was sceptical of ideas of segregation as the answer to South Africa's race relations:

> Hertzog … has begun to talk vaguely about segregation … What he means by it no one knows – possibly himself as little as any one It is an attractive word, however, the very sound of which seems to relieve the minds of people who are vaguely troubled about the present state of things" (p 136)

And in a later letter Duncan lamented:

> The trouble is that our most serious questions here do not admit of treatment by a cut and dry policy The idea that there is somewhere a 'solution' of the Native problem, as if it were a problem in geometry and that we have to find it, has a strong hold on the public mind (p 351)

Duncan's descriptions of the quest (and failure) to formulate a coherent policy of segregation throughout the 1920s bear such a striking resemblance to the early years of the apartheid policy that it strengthens the need for historians to establish more continuity between segregation and apartheid.[16]

By the latter half of the 1930s Duncan, as a member of Hertzog's government, found himself on a tightrope between his sense of justice towards Africans and his desire to maintain the cohesion of a government that represented the ideal of co-operation between the English and the Afrikaners. When a few years later Jan Hofmeyr rocked the boat with his pronouncements on the equality between black and white, Duncan noted in his diary that "from a political leader, and a member of a Cabinet composed as this one is composed, greater economy of principle is expected and indeed is necessary…" (p 643). Selborne, on the other hand, was by this time scathing in her criticism of South Africa's treatment of its African population: "I cannot think you should be satisfied to be the white community that treats its black subjects the worst in the world", she wrote to Duncan (p 578). He, in turn, felt compelled to defend South Africa on the basis of its uniqueness. Nowhere else in the world, he pointed out, was there a settled white population that was outnumbered by a black majority. Yet, he could not foresee that such a situation could be maintained indefinitely (p 580).

Patrick Duncan and Lady Selborne's exchange, which was ended only by Duncan's death in 1943, reveals how debate shaped but did not sway either party's opinions. As the editor notes, Duncan's letters were often of a more descriptive nature; South African political history unfolds itself through his pen. Selborne's letters were generally more analytical and she revealed an uncanny ability to cut through the layers of political rhetoric to the core of the matter under discussion.

Deborah Lavin's introduction and contextualisation of the publication's nine parts are excellent and provide a well-written and concise background to the correspondents' discussions, which makes the text accessible to readers who are not overly familiar with the history of this era. The selections of correspondence are superb, because the conversation between these two spirits flows freely. While the selections are concerned with their political dialogue, well-chosen and often humorous titbits on life and family also bring their humanity to the fore. Characters around them, such as Leander Jameson and J.B.M. Hertzog, are brought to life and the reader is pulled into the tug and flow of political life, with all its complexities and unpredictability. The latter, especially, defies all notions of the inevitable march of history.

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16. For more details on the incoherence of the early apartheid years, see D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961: Conflict and Compromise* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991); D. Posel, "The Meaning of Apartheid before 1948: Conflicting Interests and Forces within the Afrikaner Nationalist Alliance", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 1, October 1987, pp 123–139; L. Koorts, "An Ageing Anachronism: D.F. Malan as Prime Minister, 1948–1954", *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 36, November 2010, pp 108–135.