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Mandela: A Critical Life

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To say that the lives of prominent political leaders are symbolic of the political culture of their time is, of course, a truism. Nelson Mandela is one of the handful of 20th-century leaders for whom this statement holds true in global terms, illustrated by the recent unveiling of his statue in London's Parliament Square. At the event, the veteran campaigner Tony Benn described the former South African leader as 'president of the human race'(1) - most would be happy to indulge such hyperbole. However, behind the headlines, plans for the Mandela statue were hamstrung by wrangling: London Mayor Ken Livingstone had unsuccessfully battled with Westminster Council to have the statue placed in Trafalgar Square, adjacent to South Africa House, while the statue itself was subject to criticism from within the art establishment. It was, moreover, the second depiction of Mandela by sculptor Ian Walters, whose earlier bust was unveiled by Oliver Tambo on the London South Bank in 1985. It is important to recall that this earlier version was modelled on speculation, for Mandela's actual physical appearance remained a mystery until his dramatic release from prison in 1990.

While we remind ourselves that Mandela was a somewhat obscure figure only a few years before his release, it is also worth recalling that his statue now shares a public space with that other South African leader who became a world statesman during the 20th-century: General Jan Smuts, 'handyman of empire'. Like Mandela, the statue of Smuts was beset by political rows before its unveiling some eight years after Smuts' death, ironically in the spot previously occupied by anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Fowell Buxton. In his fascinating analysis of the genesis of the Smuts memorial, Bill Schwartz notes that the General served as a 'philosopher of race', for post-war Britain, an individual whose image could symbolically cast notions of racial superiority in terms of the 'essential liberality' of the imperialist past.(2) Mandela had joked, when visiting London in 1961, that one day he might replace Smuts. They now share Parliament Square and

Mandela has indeed replaced Smuts in the pantheon of heroes, having become a symbol of a 'post-imperial' global discourse that seeks to transcend the language of race.

For there can be no more familiar figure in South African history than Nelson Mandela, whose own personal narrative is inextricably bound up in the public imagination with that of the broader struggle against apartheid. This is, in part, testament to the power of life stories within politics, of the role played by a narrative of leadership in generating and sustaining popular support. In Mandela's case, his deliberate cultivation as an icon of the African National Congress (ANC) cause was conceived initially as a way of focusing attention on the campaign for the release of South African political prisoners, but developed during the 1980s into the symbol of the ANC's legitimacy as a post-apartheid government. But his iconic status was secured by his leadership in the negotiations preceding South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, and then (if one needs to be reminded) as the country's first black president.

Given his mythic status, it is understandable that some have questioned the need for a new biography of Mandela - is it not (to invoke the cliché) too soon to judge his long-term significance of Mandela?(3) Furthermore, Lodge's biography can be added to an array of works covering the life of Mandela, including some very weighty tomes indeed. Mandela's first biographer, anti-apartheid campaigner Mary Benson, sought to explain how he had come to embody the liberation struggle and interwove the story of his life with that of the history of the ANC's struggle - hers is a story of the evolution of a political leader, drawing substantially on Mandela's political writings and speeches.(4) The first authorised biography was published two years later. Written by academic Fatima Meer, whose friendship with Mandela and his wife Winnie, provides a more personal focus, it is illustrated by extensive extracts from Mandela's prison letters.(5) Yet, it was Mandela's autobiography (written in collaboration with the journalist Richard Stengel) that saw the first attempt to provide an exhaustive account of his life.(6) Following his retirement from political life in 1999, a second authorised biography, written by journalist and political commentator Anthony Sampson provided, through its use of substantial new documentary sources, an immense and detailed portrait that sought to unravel the public and private persona of Mandela.(7)

So what does this new biography bring to the scholarship on Mandela that earlier accounts have missed or neglected? Lodge himself suggests a number of points of departure from earlier assessments of Mandela, arguing that there was greater continuity in the development of his political beliefs from the 1950s until his release from prison - 'between the young Mandela and the older veteran of imprisonment'.(8) Lodge also places emphasis upon the performative character of Mandela's politics - his deliberate construction of a public persona that projected what Lodge describes as a 'messianic leadership role'.(9) What underpins such questions are the critical instincts of one of the leading scholars of late 20th-century South African politics, which provide a biographical account located within both the broader history of liberation movements and wider theoretical approaches to political thought.

Perhaps inevitably, the structure of the book follows a familiar pattern: we move from Mandela's childhood in the Transkei to his life in the city, his development as a 'notable' in Johannesburg society and metamorphosis into resistance leader; from the theatre of his trials to the story of his survival - in both human and political terms - in prison in the 1970s and 80s; through the narrative of his return as leader, initially within prison, and then as the head of the ANC as it negotiated (in all senses of the term) its progress towards power in 1994; and finally, to his elevation to embodiment of the 'new' South Africa and world statesman. In dealing with Mandela's childhood, Lodge invests crucial significance in the complex interaction between the structures of Xhosa tradition and the mission-school, both of which helped to shape - but not to determine - his later political life. Lodge's account then takes us to Johannesburg, where it was through his relationships with individuals like businessman and ANC activist Walter Sisulu, that Mandela began to engage with politics. Lodge shows how contacts with individuals like Gaur Radebe, Anton Lembede and Oliver Tambo helped to establish Mandela as a significant figure in black political circles. His association with both communists and the young Africanists who founded the influential ANC Youth League in 1944, placed Mandela in a key position just as black politics was becoming simultaneously more assertive and more precarious in the wake of the National Party's election victory in 1948.

Through a closer inspection of Mandela's developing role in the ANC during the 1950s, Lodge examines the variety of ideological influences at work upon the individual who would become ANC 'volunteer-in-chief' during the Defiance Campaign of civil disobedience during 1952. His early antipathy to communism was tempered by a friendship with Moses Kotane, general secretary of the Communist Party - a development that has not been satisfactorily explored according to some critics.(10) Lodge provides a vivid account of Mandela's political career during the 1950s, balancing the personal narrative with discussion of the development of the ANC's campaigns against apartheid, set against an increasingly repressive State. It is the early 1960s, however, that Lodge regards as the turning point when Mandela was recast as messiah of the liberation struggle, as underground leader of the ANC (itself banned following the Sharpeville massacre of 1960), and, in the following year, as founding member of its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. While his career as guerrilla leader lasted less than a year, coming to an end with his arrest in 1962, Mandela's status was cemented at his trial alongside other Unmkhonto leaders in 1964, during which he gave a statement that concluded with the famous assertion that the ideal of democracy was one for which he was prepared to die.

Lodge then pieces together a narrative account of Mandela's 27 years as a political prisoner, drawing (as he acknowledges) on recent studies of the Robben Island prison community and its place within the wider history of South African liberation movements.(11) Lodge pieces together an account of Mandela's life in prison, outlining how he both maintained and developed his authority, both amongst veteran ANC activists like himself and with younger prisoners associated with the Black Consciousness Movement. Lodge also pays due attention to the personal aspects of Mandela's incarceration, and the importance of the relationship with his second wife Winnie. The narrative then moves, somewhat rapidly, through the 1980s and the development of covert discussions with members of the South African security services to Mandela's ultimate release from prison in February 1990.

It is the final two chapters that provide some of the most valuable analysis, offering both a detailed account of Mandela's role in the transition to democracy and a close examination of the nature of his political authority as President from 1994 to 1999. Using the concept of 'moral capital', accumulated through leadership by example and the deliberate performance of actions that symbolise the aspirations of a wide constituency of followers, Lodge concludes with the suggestion that Mandela used such tactics to inspire an ideal of citizenship rather than to hold sway through popular adoration; and that his position as 'democratic hero' - both within South Africa and worldwide - rested upon the extent to which his own personal experiences had become part of the public history.(12)

As suggested above, this new biography has not been without its critics, and aspects of the political life of Mandela do require further attention, especially the intricacies of the relationship between Mandela and the ANC, between man and organisation. However, the strengths of this account, not least that it is written by a leading expert in the field of black politics in South Africa, far outweigh its weaknesses. On balance, it probably is too soon for a definitive critical analysis of the significance of Mandela's life, nevertheless, this work provides both a concise and careful account of the life of one of the 20th-century's most important public figures.

Notes

1. *The Guardian*, 30 August 2007 Back to (1)
2. B. Schwartz, 'Reveries of race: the closing of the imperial moment' in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964*, ed. B. Conekin, F. Mort and C. Waters (London, 1999). Back to (2)
3. P. Chabal, review of *Mandela: A Critical Life*, *International Affairs*, 87 (2007), 819-20. Back to (3)
4. M. Benson, *Nelson Mandela* (Harmondsworth, 1986). Back to (4)
5. F. Meer, *Higher Than Hope: The Authorised Biography of Nelson Mandela* (Harmondsworth, 1988). Back to (5)
6. N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London, 1994). Back to (6)
7. A. Sampson, *Mandela* (London, 1999). Back to (7)

8. T. Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford, 2006), p. viii. Back to (8)
9. Lodge, *Mandela*, p.ix. Back to (9)
10. R.W. Johnson, *The Times*, 23 July 2006. Back to (10)
11. See F. Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* (Cambridge, 2003). Back to (11)
12. Lodge, *Mandela*, p. 225 Back to (12)

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