

HOMAGE TO SMUTS: OUR MAJOR PROPHET

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AT the age of 12, Jan Christiaan Smuts could not read; at the age of 16 he memorized a Greek grammar in one week; a few years later he headed both parts of the Law Tripos at Cambridge University, and wrote a 70,000-word book on the philosophy of Walt Whitman. Thus began not only one of the greatest military statesmen produced by the British Empire, but also the major political prophet of our times.

The marvel intensifies, however, on closer examination. That twelve-year-old boy had not a single modern advantage save the inheritance of a free spirit from his parents and Dutch ancestors who had emigrated to South Africa, not for gold, but for freedom. Born on that primitive farm at Bovenplaats, near Riebeeck West, on May 24, 1870, he experienced an early childhood like that of Olive Schreiner's Waldo. It was only the intense desire for knowledge—and the scholarship system—that lifted him out.

But even then the promise might have dissolved for lack of opportunity. He had to return to South Africa after Cambridge (1895). Admittance to the Cape Bar and the establishment of a petty lawyer in Johannesburg were dry enough paths for ambition. A singularly happy marriage to his old college sweetheart, Sybylla Margaretha Krige, seemed to complete the typical stultification with over-much domestic contentment. Then President Kruger chose the pale young scholar (aged 28) to be his State Attorney for the Transvaal. It was a remarkable appointment, and the youthful Smuts probably regarded it as a testimony to his legal scholarship. What a chance to be the pioneer lawgiver of a new community!

But the shrewd "Oom Paul" had other designs. He had foreseen the coming clash with Britain, and wanted able henchmen. Young Smuts's first work would be to reorganize the police system, prepare the ground for tomorrow's trouble. That came a year later, when the South African War began. Actually Smuts was the only Boer voice to urge moderation at the fruitless Bloemfontein Conference between Kruger and Milner. Then all the solid burghers, phlegmatic farmers and black-hatted politicians were in the saddle and away, fighting for homestead,

kopje and village street. The pale-faced Smuts, versed only in books and legal forays, rode bravely with them.

The development of the man in those flaming days will always be a problem to biographers and a solace to citizen soldiers. Not only spiritually, but also physically, Smuts changed in the brief space of that war from pallid clerk to dashing guerilla, from prolix arguer of little causes to military strategist of the order monopolised till then by long-trained professionals. He rode successfully at first with the more sensational leaders, Botha, De La Rey, De Wet. Towards the end, however, he observed before the others that the fight was almost hopeless, and took a leading place suddenly in organizing the last resistance. It was Smuts who wanted to recapture Johannesburg, who saved the Republican gold before the final retreat to Pretoria, and who, when old Paul had fled to Europe for a grave, other burghers were laying down arms, and Kitchener was drawing his fatal cordon round the last commandos, conceived that grandiose scheme to strike right at the heart of the British in Cape Colony. So he rode across the Orange River with 250 young men, dodged Kitchener's blockhouses and cut his barbed wire, appeared like an avenging spirit among the comfortable homesteads of the Cape to raise a new standard of rebellion there. Ten thousand British troops lay in wait for him, but soon he had increased his own force to 3,000, and the world awoke to headlines of his fame. Only the sudden Peace Conference terminated activities that would surely have brought the straight-nosed young man an immortal fame without any further spur.

Yet Smuts reacted to that peace most characteristically, like a philosopher. The last to be fighting, he was the first to collaborate with the British for real peace. He used his intellectual equipment to prepare the National Convention which led to the Union of 1910. He said that he worked with the British only because they, with the Boers on the ground before them, had deliberately put out a hand to help them to rise again. As the Union's first Minister for War, he organized its first army—and he continued his writings and philosophical studies in the profound hope of millennium.

If the greatest generals are disappointed philosophers, Smuts must be taken as a prime example. Just as he was getting his shoulder behind the building of a new South Africa, the First German War broke out—and again the call to arms brought him at one bound through the study window. First he acted

at home as Prime Minister while Botha fought in South-West Africa, and he was largely responsible for putting down rebellion at home. Then the Imperial Government paid this remote Dominion politician the unparalleled compliment of appointing him Lieutenant-General in the British Army and Commander of the Allied forces in East Africa. He went there to face Von Lettow, one of the best generals of that war, and drove him steadily back to defeat.

That campaign afforded many instances to illustrate the character of the man, who in previous ages might well have been a sword-girt monk. A friend found him in his H. Q. tent just as a vital engagement was about to begin. Smuts was reading a book, and preferred to discuss this rather than the pending battle, saying his plans were laid, and nothing remained to be done. That battle was won. Another time he terrified his staff by taking a short cut in his car right through enemy-occupied country.

His reputation was now international. He was summoned to England, and retained as a member of the War Cabinet after other Dominions statesmen had gone home. The extent of his contribution to the winning of that war has never been appreciated. Is it realized that Smuts was largely responsible for the formation of the Royal Air Force, for the plan which rescued London from air attack in 1918, for the 1917-1918 Western Front offensive, for the idea of the League of Nations, and for the policy which led to the formation of the Irish Free State?

During the interval between wars he laboured for two things—first South African, then world unity. The variation of his life during this period was typical: for half the year he would be lecturing in the United States on the League of Nations, or visiting universities in the Old World; the other half he would be botanizing, reading, mountaineering round his beloved Table Mountain. To form a United Government with Hertzog in 1933 he deliberately jeopardized his career, hoping that Boer and British in South Africa would be finally fused by the act. So the years passed, and in 1939 he reached his seventieth year. The Second German War made its final claim.

How Smuts brought South Africa loyally into the conflict then—smashing all his dreams to break with Hertzog—how he organized an army for fighting Italy within a few months of the day when he had been told that only the cadres of an army existed—how he donned the commanding uniform again and

flew tirelessly from front to front, visiting every single battalion of his forces—how he assisted in the plan which rolled up Mussolini's empire and finally became a Field-Marshal of the Army he had once so bitterly fought—how he came to London again and played the 1917 part once more—that is all recent and still-obscure history.

But the record of Smuts the major prophet is startlingly clear, as a few quotations from his utterances may soon show. Thus he referred to the terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty: "They are such that I personally would hesitate before I subscribed my name to them . . . The fires will be kept burning and the pot be kept boiling until it again boils over, either in a new war, or in the breakdown of the European system under the onslaught of social and industrial anarchy." And again: "This Peace may become an even greater disaster to the world than the war was."

He also said after the last war: "If we look to world peace, we must do nothing to alienate Japan . . . I am anxious that we should avoid that, because Japan is the danger of the future." Then: "The only path of safety for the British Empire is the path in which she can walk together with America . . . instead of being an ally of France . . ."

During those uneasy "peace" years Smuts was not heeded, not even in 1936 when he predicted that because France and Britain had not "stood firm and seen the League through" (over Abyssinia), the position in the Mediterranean had become dangerous. Now he was continually warning his country: "The world is passing through a most dangerous period. Preparations for war have never been so great in the history of humanity. South Africa must stick to her friends."

In June, 1940, General Hertzog wanted South Africa to withdraw. Said Smuts: "It might be your opinion that the war has been hopelessly lost by the Allies, but in the last war, too, the supporters of Germany hoped and expected that it would be hopelessly lost by the Allies. They were disappointed . . ." And later that desperate year: "I am confident in ultimate victory and the great opportunities it will provide . . . Perhaps a United States of Africa."

Then he was consistently confident that America would join the forces of freedom, and declared long before Pearl Harbour: "I have always felt that America will never let us down. She will come even more prominently forward and make

her contribution, a very great contribution indeed, to the Battle of the Atlantic, the greatest battle in history."

After this the North African campaigns gave this veteran oracle a chance continually, and with uncanny accuracy, to predict the next move. Taking note of Smuts's speeches, one could invariably foresee the course of events and retain one's optimism. He was continually insisting that "Africa is the destined springboard." And he declared after Tunisia: "When full victory comes, it will come just as suddenly. There will still be the appearance of an imposing front of enormous strength on the side of the enemy, but it will go in so many weeks or so many months."

But his prescience also insisted upon the recent warning: "What worries me is not what is going to happen during this war, but what will happen after the war, when we have to live together."

Has he no more inspiring message than that? Yes, Smuts has devoted the "leisure" of a lifetime to working out a scheme of philosophy which can be measured beside those of the greatest religious and academic minds. This is his theory of Holism, the study of nature's tendency to form wholes that are more than the sum of the parts by creative evolution. It was, and is, Smuts's belief that this tendency, working in international affairs, will model the political future through the medium of great confederacies of like-minded States.

Perhaps democracy has sometimes been unhappy in its political representatives. We should, however, take care before we assume that the system is wholly unproductive of great and wise leaders, and surely a useful corrective to any such dangerous and fallacious pessimism is contained in the review that has been given of this notable South African's career. Few major prophets of old either acted or spoke with such sustained sapience as Jan Christiaan Smuts has done in our time. There is an example and an inspiration here, as well as fine ammunition for those who debate in favour of the civilization we defend.

Indeed, we might recognize that in Smuts, and some others, we have the only real justification for the human order that we are now prostituting ourselves to retain.