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How Can Man Die Better: Sobukwe and Apartheid
by Benjamin Pogrund. Peter Halban, £14.95

How Can Man Die Better: Sobukwe and Apartheid could be subtitled "Sobukwe and Pogrund". Pogrund knew Robert Sobukwe well; he regarded him as a brother. Benjamin Pogrund has for many years been a pillar of the liberal press in South Africa. He makes it clear that he sees Sobukwe as the towering figure of African liberation policies. Certainly for a brief time he held South Africa in his hand and his influence on Biko and others was immense. Yet his Africanist movement has lost ground and his tactics at the time of Sharpeville were probably mistaken.

There can be no doubt, however, that Sobukwe was a man of spellbinding charm and intellect. He endured with great fortitude his long imprisonment on Robben Island, where he was kept year after year by successive parliaments in defiance of justice. The reverence in which he was held by other prisoners is quite extraordinary, as is the ambivalence of his custodians. But this book is perhaps most fascinating for its sensitive account of Sobukwe's feelings about individuals, history, politics, literature and the nature of ideas.

These deeply human preoccupations appear to have superseded his earlier, narrower, belief in Africanism. And Pogrund often points out the central irony of Sobukwe's life, namely that he was completely colour blind, while being regarded by whites as the devil incarnate. The scenes at Sobukwe's funeral where the comrades prevented both Helen Suzman and Pogrund speaking, despite the wishes of his family (and incidentally came very close to murdering Chief Buthelezi), would have offended Sobukwe deeply.

The essence of Africanism is that cooperation with the whites will lead inevitably to compromise. It is a theoretical position which in practice is as impossible to maintain as apartheid. Certainly Sobukwe's life shows this. South Africa will never know what it may have lost with his early death from lung cancer.

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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