

Dear Keith,

I read the Mandela autobiography in a couple of days. It was very interesting to me, especially those parts of his youth and of his prison experiences which were more or less new to me. Less interesting to me those parts of his "outside" political life, before and after prison, which I knew well enough to spot the errors and lapses of memory.

The part that interested me especially was his account of how he wrote his memoirs of his youth up to the time of his arrest and Rivonia, while serving time on Robben Island. Since you haven't read the book: he wrote it nightly, secretly, in his cell. As each night's screed was finished, it passed to Kathy and Walter to check the validity of his memory; and then to Mac Maharaj who transferred the manuscript "to his almost microscopic shorthand, reducing ten pages of foolscap to a single small piece of paper." There is a lot in the book about how they concealed it in the prison, how they buried - and lost - bits of it, how part of it was discovered by the authorities and had to be redone, etc. And then he writes:

"After Mac was released in December (1976) he sent the notebooks overseas to England. He spent the next six months under house-arrest in South Africa before slipping out of the country... to London. He stayed there for six months; with a typist he reconstructed the manuscript and put together a typescript."

Well that started me remembering something I had long forgotten. Around that time, I had received a phone call from a man who said he had a parcel for me, and wanted to hand it over. He wouldn't give me his name. He proposed we meet in a cafe in Hampstead in broad daylight. I seemed safe enough. I said "How will I know you?" He said he would know me. So we met. He claimed to be a cousin of Mac's. (I only got to know him some years later; he was Jay Singh, a school teacher from South Africa, who died in Britain a couple of years ago. He might well have been Mac's cousin.) He handed over a brown paper parcel which he said contained some of Mac's books which he had been instructed to hand over to me. The whole thing should be kept absolutely secret, until Mac himself could claim them from me.

I took the parcel home, and had a look at the contents. There were three (I think) photograph albums of a pretty standard sort - black pages, family pics stuck down with those white corner pieces. Nothing else visible. I realised that the cloak-and-dagger style of the whole transaction meant that there was more than family snapshots. Invisible ink writing? Something hidden behind the pictures, or concealed beneath the pvc binding? I guessed it had to be either some top security stuff about Robben Island, or a hot political communication between the chaps in jail and the leadership in Britain or Lusaka. I kept the books for some months, until Mac arrived and called for them. I cannot remember how or where I handed them over to him, but I did. And that was that.

Last week when I read Mandela's account of the smuggling out of his ms I began to remember the whole long forgotten episode, and wondered whether he could be referring to the same event. And then, out of the blue, I received from Harold a rare - very rare (almost extinct in fact) letter, with the enclosed cutting. I thought it would interest you - as it did me. You must have had some real

psychic prompting to give me the Mandela book. And just in time for me to learn for sure, for the first time, that I had been a small link in the chain that made the Mandela autobiography possible.

Strange isn't it? And thank you. You're a clever little lad.

Love,

Dad.

The real-life mystery of the missing Mandela manuscript

WHERE is the original document, discovered on the Island but — as far as we know — never destroyed?

I SUPPOSE I'm about to give the game away and this will rob me of the chance of finding the buried treasure all on my own, but it's such an intriguing prospect that I just can't resist telling you about it. The publication of President Mandela's autobiography this week reveals that South Africa has its own (political) equivalent of undiscovered Van Goghs waiting to be unearthed.

The realisation dawned as I read a review copy of *Long Walk to Freedom* (a surprisingly enjoyable exercise, incidentally, for one who has grown to expect only dull worthiness from "approved" biographies of the great and the good). Following carefully the story-within-the-story of how Mandela wrote and then secreted the earliest draft of the autobiography on the Island in the mid-1970s, I concluded that there were big pieces missing from the puzzle. To wit: where was the large chunk of the original manuscript, written in Mandela's own hand, which was never destroyed? And

where was Mac Maharaj's encrypted, microscopic version of the same document, which he smuggled off Robben Island? These will surely, in time to come, be priceless historical documents.

So taken was I with the mystery of the missing manuscripts that, on arrival at Thursday night's glitterati launch at Douw Steyn's elephantine pied-a-terre, I collared Maharaj and pumped him for details of 20 years ago while the elevated throngs sipped champagne at Johannesburg's answer to the Queen's garden party. Alas, Mac does not know all the answers, but he filled out the riveting story.

On the Island Mandela began to write each night, playing truant from quarry work so that he could sleep during the day. Finishing up to 10 pages a session, he would pass them on to close colleagues for comment and eventual encipherment by Maharaj and Isu Chiba. "We mastered the technique of very small writing," says Maharaj, "and eventually put what took up about 600 full pages of longhand into 60 pages." For security reasons Maharaj was responsible for the safekeeping of his own miniature copies — which he was to smuggle off the Island on his removal to the mainland — and was kept ignorant of the whereabouts of Mandela's

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longhand document once he had returned it.

The Mandela manuscript was completed by July '76, and so was the encrypted version. Maharaj tells of how he hid away the latter: "I'd accumulated a mass of study material by that time, including economics texts. I made a false file, and also discovered that if you steam off the inside back page of a hardcover textbook, the fabric of the back page comes apart and you can

put documents inside and repaste it." The ruse worked, for when he was moved off the Island (via several mainland prisons and regular searches of his belongings), his "study materials" went with him.

Eventually, after his release, Maharaj sent the coded manuscript out to London "in dribs and drabs" with couriers who had no idea of what was contained in the books they were delivering to Rusty Bernstein. Maharaj recalls: "The innocent couriers were instructed to say: This comes from Mac. Do nothing. Just keep it until you get instructions.

"When I eventually got to London, in August '77, I got in touch with Rusty and asked him to bring my stuff. He met me at a cafe near Gower Street and asked me what the hell all this cloak and dagger stuff was about. When I showed him, he was surprised, to say the least." Maharaj then decoded the pages, dictating the manuscript to Sue Rabkin. By the end of the year there was a typed document, and here the whereabouts of the encoded original becomes unclear — although it is likely it went to Lusaka. The good news is that the canny Maharaj thinks he's close to finding it and the typescript, but he won't say more than that.

Which leaves the question of the handwritten Man-

dela script. It was decided the document should be buried in a garden in the prison courtyard, in three cocoa containers. A few weeks later, to Mandela's horror, the authorities began to have a new wall built and digging started in the region of the tins. The prisoners recovered two of the tins and destroyed their contents, but not the largest: it was found and confiscated. Robben Island's commanding officer duly told Mandela that the manuscript had been found — adding that he recognised the annotations in the margins as those of Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada — and suspended the prisoners' study privileges for four years.

Where is that manuscript today? As with the mystery of Bram Fischer's personal effects, no one seems to know — or at least they're not saying. Posterity must hope that apartheid's prison bureaucracy was efficient enough to file things away, and that the dusty pages lie safely somewhere.

Maharaj tells another story which will have treasure-hunters heading off with bucket and spade. While on the Island, the political prisoners ingeniously made their own set of keys to crucial prison doors. When discovery seemed likely, Chiba buried them near a quarry. They've never been found... happy hunting.

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