

Overwhelmed by wasted lives

THESE THREE books are very different yet they touch at many points on the key issues that have shaped the South Africa of today.

Sol Plaatje was a remarkable man, a mission-educated African from near Kimberley who developed an intense passion for the Tswana language, Shakespeare, journalism and the rights of his people. He was a founder member of the African Native Congress which became the ANC.

I was brought up in South Africa and knew nothing of him. This is the equivalent of being brought up in the United States and never having heard of Booker T. Washington. Thanks to John Comaroff who discovered Plaatje's diary, and Brian Willan who wrote a detailed biography of Plaatje, the gaps in my knowledge have been plugged.

This revised version of the diary covers the period when Plaatje was a court interpreter during the siege of Mafeking. The Boers called mission-educated Africans "black Englishmen". Plaatje certainly had a high regard for the English, for the English language and for the notion of English justice. His diary is full of amusing and telling asides about the conduct of the siege, but implicit is an optimistic assumption about the rise of the black people in an enlightened empire.

Alas for Plaatje and South Africa, the Natives Land Act of 1913 put paid to any such notions. From 1913 onwards the liberal, evolutionary approach to advancement of

Justin Cartwright questions 'inroads' on apartheid

Mafeking Diary: a Black Man's View of a White Man's War by Sol T. Plaatje; ed by John Comaroff with Brian Willan and Andrew Reed. Merdor Books/James Curry, £19.95/£7.95

The Mind of South Africa: the Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid

by Allister Sparks. Heinemann, £16.95

How Can Man Die Better: Sobukwe and Apartheid

by Benjamin Pogrund. Peter Halban, £14.95

Africans in South Africa was doomed although sentence was not officially carried out until 1948. So there is a certain tragedy underlying this amusing, literate and often irreverent diary, knowing what the future was to hold for "black Englishmen" like Plaatje and the generations of mission- (and Fort Hare-) educated Africans who were to follow.

Mafeking Diary is an invaluable piece of work and great credit is due to the editors and publishers for reissuing it at this time. One day soon Sol Plaatje will have a statue raised in his name. He was a heroic figure.

The history of South Africa since union in 1910 can be read as a story of lost opportunities, blind prejudice and officially sanctioned violence. There is also a subplot of heroism, generosity and idealism. Allister Sparks is a distinguished journalist who has been under fire in the liberal English-language press in Johannesburg.

The Mind of South Africa is his comprehensive, impressive and moving account of apartheid, starting from the day the Dutch settlers planted a bitter almond hedge to keep out the

Khoikhoi, right up to the inauguration of F. W. de Klerk. It is a measure of how fast things have moved that Sparks doubts that de Klerk would have the courage to make serious inroads on apartheid.

None the less Sparks's book does not suffer from ending before the release of Mandela. In his account of apartheid we see all the themes that the life of Plaatje embodied: the wilful crushing of black aspirations; the gross ignorance of African life and customs; the fearful greed for land; and the unhesitating use of violence. It also details the extraordinary idealism, sacrifice and moral ambivalence of the whole dreadful era.

Sparks is particularly interesting on the origins of the theory of apartheid, the *Rassenkunde* imported from Germany by the likes of Geoff Cronje and turned into "separate development". He also pays tribute to the liberal traditions which have survived, muted and often reviled, and to the Afrikaners, like Beyers Naude, who have suffered for their ideals. These traditions have infiltrated the ANC. The Freedom Charter has pro-

claimed unequivocally since 1955 that South Africa belongs to all its people, black and white, something that some Afrikaners are only now beginning to acknowledge.

Nelson Mandela shows every sign of being one of the despised "black Englishmen" with a high regard for law, constitutional action and an entrenched franchise. Who could blame him if he regarded any predilection for "group rights" as apartheid by another name in the light of this sorry history? He, Tambo, Sisulu, Mbeki and many others are in a direct line from Plaatje. South Africans, black and white, can only hope that this tradition will be proof against what is to come. The irony of Afrikaners now pinning their hopes on the "black Englishmen" is acute.

Sparks's book is indispensable for anyone who wants to understand how South Africa arrived at its present position.

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.

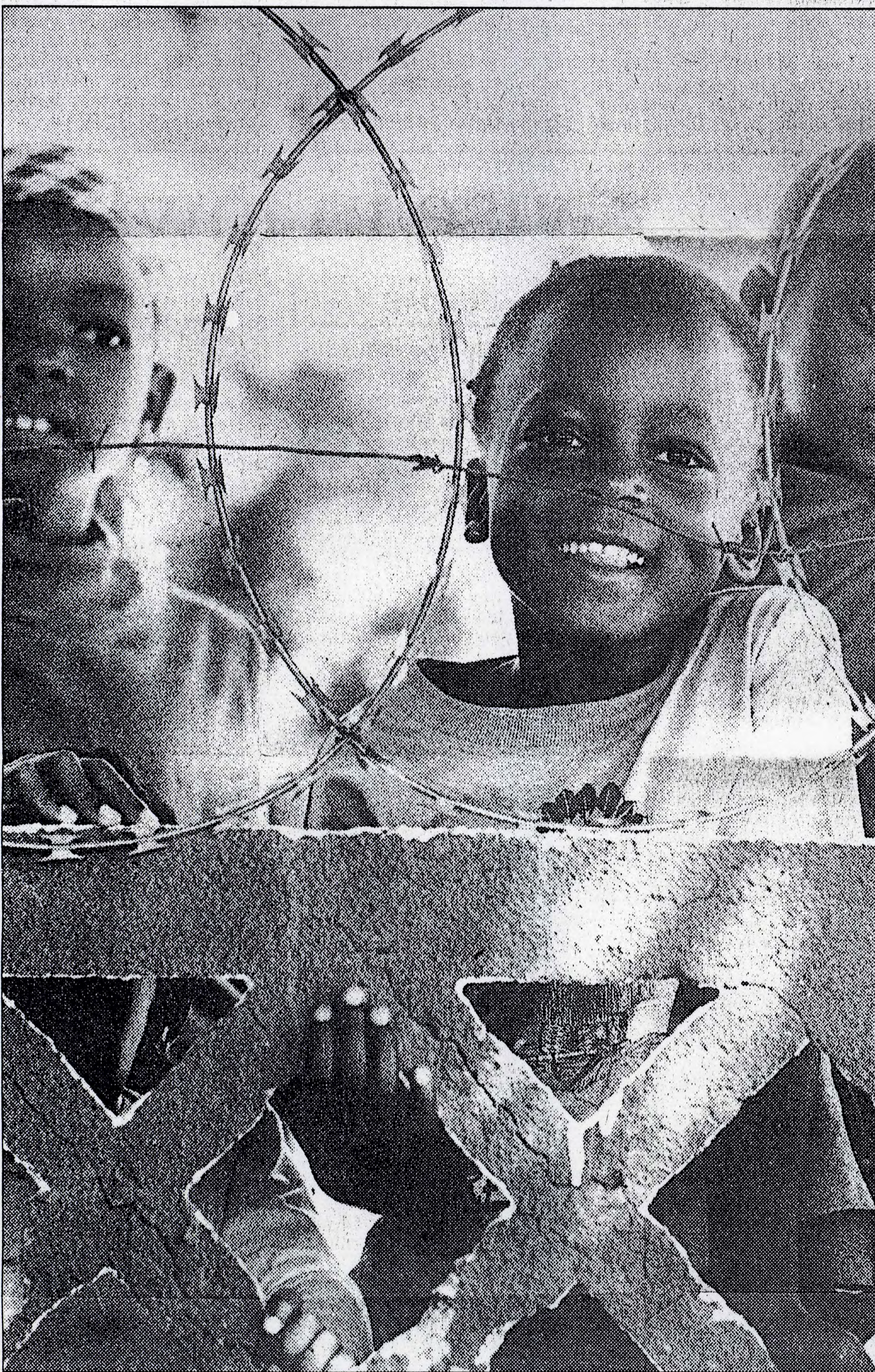
There can be no doubt, however, that Sobukwe was a man of spellbinding charm and intellect. He endured with great fortitude his long imprisonment on Robben Island, where he was kept year after year by successive parliaments in defiance of justice. The reverence in which he was held by other prisoners 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.

Reading these three books together produces an overwhelming sense of the waste of lives and opportunities which has been the history of South Africa, particularly in the last 40 years. There have been 18 million pass-law arrests and 3.5 million forced removals in that time in the name of a policy that is now being junked.

The futility and the cruelty of it all is mitigated only by the stories of individual fortitude, perseverance and principle which, such is the nature of human striving, run through it. Even as most of the white leaders of South Africa had forgotten it, most of South Africa's black leaders kept faith with human worth. They were the real standard bearers of "Western values" through the dark years.



Wall game: a hero-worshiper outside Nelson Mandela's house hopes for a glimpse of the ANC leader — from *Mandela: Echoes of an Era* (Penguin, £9.99)

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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