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Popular Social Anthropology

"A VERY STRANGE SOCIETY"

A Journey to the Heart of South Africa

ALLEN DRURY

(Trident Press)

Allen Drury has written (this work excepted) six books. Four are described as "Fiction" and two have been described as "Non-fiction". "A Very Strange Society" might be described as a mixture of fiction and fact. The work is ostensibly a factual account of life in the Republic of South Africa: in fact, while some real live characters are used, some named and some un-named, Mr. Drury invents persons who act as vehicles for Mr. Drury's latest excursion into his favourite field, part novel, part travelogue.

On page 334, we are told of a "businessman out from England on a two-year study mission for his company". The businessman appears to have a remarkable knowledge of certain South African lobbies. Our suspicions are further strengthened by the suggestion that the English businessman's usage of Americanisms like "a while back".

Social investigation, it is felt, should not employ terms like "courage", "brave", but rather more neutral, unheroic language. Mr. Beyers Naudé, evicted from the Dutch Reformed Church on account of his lack of sympathy with apartheid, presents a case in point.

Sometimes Mr. Drury descends into sarcasm: "ladies of the Cabinet dressed in the finest taste that Afrikanerdom affords" (p. 378), and later he refers to the American couple proposing to settle in Johannesburg: "They will live in a great big house in Houghton, supported by a small brigade of barely paid blacks". (p. 424).

These and other linguistic usages, together with the selective slant of Mr. Drury's observational bias lead one to a first conclusion that, while Mr. Drury sees the Republic of South Africa with the eye of a trained journalist, the book is not to

be regarded as the authentic picture of South Africa. Mr. Drury triumphs in the end and appears to rise above it all as he flits and floats in and out of the big cities.

Mr. Drury offers us many courses, but it is a meal full of bitty morsels, eventually resulting in a jaded palate. It is indeed, difficult to keep up sustained reading of this very strange book. Padding, unfortunately, abounds, on p. 373 we are told of the number of microphones (37 in all) which hang down from the ceiling of the House of Assembly and glossy magazine type description of the Kruger National Park (p. 442).

There are some interesting freudian slips: we hear, on p. 39, of a ferocious institution (which might attract the attention of the International Commission of Jurists), called the South Africa Pain Research Institute at the University of Natal, Durban—which turns out to be no more than a mis-print for "paint". His Grace, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Durban, Denis Hurley, becomes Hurly [sic], no great error in substance perhaps, but there is no one more involved in the hurly-burly of South African religio-politics than the Archbishop. Of course, it had to be Tsafendas, the assassin, who (nearly) bumped into the author as he spent a day sight-seeing in the South African Parliament at Cape Town.

One will find the usual South African groups listed here: the Broederbond, the S.A.B.C., the Universities of both shades (though the story about Harry Lamont is perhaps too glib an explanation as to why the University of Pretoria threw in its lot with Afrikanerdom).

Mr. Drury mentions the bedrock of the Republic's prosperity, gold (p. 114) and diamonds (p. 121),

but one gets the feeling that he doesn't know quite what to do with the facts. In truth he is more at home with the economic facts. He is, therefore, much better on the S.A.B.C. (p. 133) than he is on other South African institutions.

The best parts of the book are those which describe his interviews with Verwoerd, Vorster, Sir de Villiers Graaff, Afrikaner leaders of church and state and, of course, his unabashed admiration for Mrs. Helen Suzman.

One is impressed in the interview with Verwoerd by the fact that Verwoerd was all in matters of race philosophy. (Verwoerd's cunning pun on Paki-stan—Bantu-stan springs to mind.) One is further impressed by the lack of new thinking on race problems in South Africa since the assassination of Verwoerd. Verwoerd's policy might be reduced to two words perhaps, "Never Compare". South Africa did not concern itself with the mores of other states and peoples, and these should return the compliment. Vorster, described in best journalese as "intelligent, blunt, pragmatic, tough, direct and no-nonsense", emerges as a kindlier person than legend and newspapers would have us believe. Surely between Balthazar J. Vorster and Helen Suzman, there is evidence of a mutual, albeit hostile, respect for talents in utterly opposed directions.

Mr. Drury is less kind to Sir de Villiers Graaff of the United Party. Accepting the hospitality of the Leader of the Opposition, he approaches

Sir de Villiers with something close to condescension, whether at Paarl or in Parliament.

The value of Mr. Drury's book is that it proceeds by means of a number of professional insights to a picture of a society which is perhaps not so much "strange" as "illogical". There co-exist side by side, as Mr. Drury suggests, "grand" and "petty" apartheid, what he sees as a petty-minded application of laws on the part of certain officials. If the Bantustan policy is meaningful, why is it not pushed ahead with more confidence?—a question asked by the late Chief Luthuli in conversation with Mr. Drury. Insights there are in good measure—the story of the Athlone Advice Bureau with its practical unravelling of the laws applying to Africans and their helpful advice—the Cape Bantu girl forced to the Transkei, a veritable foreign land for her, because her husband, a Transkeian, could not or would not support her and the baby. Then is the singular and instructive tribute paid to the British Empire by the Afrikaner who had cause to hate it (p. 333) and the subtlety of the portraits of persons and characters.

As one interviewed by Mr. Drury in Durban, and knowing the techniques which he used, the author of this review feels that in the field of popular social observation, Mr. Drury has few equals, but knowing Mr. Drury's prowess in getting people to talk while remaining silent himself, one suspects that Mr. Drury has given the book a dimension missing in his rough notes.