
Long Walk to Freedom, The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela

By Nelson Mandela

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REVIEW BY THOMAS DE MONCHAUX

If we were asked to compare Nelson Mandela, the man whose journey from political prisoner under Apartheid to President of South Africa has symbolized and inspired the transformations of that country perhaps more than any other, to a figure from American history, one answer might be Abraham Lincoln. Both men have been called great emancipators and fathers of their nations; Mandela, like Lincoln, is attempting to bring a democratic nation together out of a land that has been fragmented by racism, regionalism, and violence. But, as Mandela tells us in his recent autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, the first role he played was that of Lincoln's assassin: John Wilkes Booth.

The role was in a play put on by the Drama Society at the University College of Fort Hare, the only university for Black South Africans at the time, where Mandela was a student in the 1940s. "My part was the smaller one," Mandela observes, "though I was the engine of the play's moral, which was that men who take great risks often suffer great consequences."

Of course, Mandela's own experiences as an engine of the continuing transformation of South Africa from Apartheid to democracy demonstrate that moral as much as any play: the book recounts the frustration, fear, and isolation that Mandela experienced as an African National Congress leader and activist in the 1950s, as a leader of Spear of the Nation, an underground branch of the ANC, in the early 1960s, and as a political prisoner from 1962 to 1990 (from age 44 to age 71), and paints a picture of great risk and of great consequence.

But the book also paints a picture of Mandela's life before and after that period of long imprisonment, and reveals a sense of the patient, persistent, observant, distant, and wry man behind the na-

tional symbol.

With a self-deprecating humor, Mandela recounts the Dickensian reversals that shaped his childhood and early life. The son of an adviser to the chief of the Thembu tribe in the Transkei, Mandela was, "groomed, like my fathers before me, to counsel the rulers of the tribe." But when Mandela's father denied a local white magistrate's authority in a tribal dispute, he, "lost both his fortune and his title," and the family were dispatched to a simpler, harsher life in another village. However, Mandela returned to the Thembu royal household after his father's death, and became a virtual son of the Thembu king, who sent him to boarding school and college (where he was, by his own description, something of a country "yokel."). At 23, in order to escape an arranged marriage (of which Mandela notes, "she was undoubtedly no more eager to be burdened with me than I with her"), and after being dismissed from Fort Hare in the wake of his involvement with students protesting conditions at the school, Mandela arrived at Johannesburg. After more Dickensian misadventures, he found work as a law clerk, (through Walter Sisulu, then a real-estate agent). With Sisulu and others, he would in 1944 form the Youth League of the African National Congress, taking the first steps toward risk and consequence. Of this period, Mandela notes, "I cannot pinpoint a moment when I became politicized...I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, From henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise."

Of course, it was Mandela who was particularly imprisoned, not only by the Pass Laws and racist gradations of Apartheid, but by the walls of Robben Island and Pollsmoor Prison. Half of Mandela's narrative deals with this period of imprisonment, but Mandela also details the events that followed his release.

Mandela does not offer much to those who might expect details about the politicking and negotiations that took place after that release, between himself, then-prime minister F.W. de Klerk, Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mongosuthu Buthelezi, and others—negotiations that led to the April 27, 1994 elections that made Mandela president of a transitional "government of national unity." Presumably in part because detailed observations on these events would affect his continuing

work, Mandela is economical in his treatment of them. For instance, of how he and the ANC prevented national discord and violence in the wake of 1992 statements by de Klerk, "that if the ANC made the country ungovernable, the government might be forced to consider some unpleasant options," and the September 1992 shootings of twenty-nine ANC marchers in Bisho, the capital of the Ciskei homeland, Mandela observes only that, "I warned Mr. de Klerk that any anti-democratic actions would have serious repercussions [and that]...I met with [him] in order to find common ground and avoid another tragedy like Bisho...and on September 26, Mr. de Klerk and I met for an official summit." That summit laid the ground works for agreements that led to the first all-race democratic elections in South Africa.

The negotiation and cooperation with de Klerk are part of a pattern that emerges in the book of cooperation between Mandela and those who might more easily be his rivals or enemies. A wary pragmatism emerges in his description of his work with de Klerk: "I was often asked how I could accept the [1993 Nobel Peace Prize] jointly with Mr. de Klerk after I had criticized him so severely. Although I would not take back my criticisms, I could say that he had made a genuine and indisputable contribution to the peace process. I never sought to undermine Mr. de Klerk, for the practical reason that the weaker he was, the weaker the negotiations process. To make peace with an enemy one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes one's partner." A similar attitude seems to imbue Mandela's ambivalence toward communism and the alliance between the Communist Party and the ANC. In describing a 1989 encounter between himself and a government "secret negotiating committee" that preceded his release, Mandela recalls how he pointed out to them that, "the [Communist] party and the ANC were separate and distinct organizations that shared the same short-term objectives, the overthrow of racial oppression and the birth of a nonracial South Africa, but that our long-term interests were not the same." Elsewhere, Mandela recalls that while during the 1950s he "questioned the philosophical and practical underpinnings of Marxism [and] was first and foremost an African nationalist fighting for our emancipation from minority rule... I was prepared to use whatever means to speed up the erasure of human prejudice and the end of chauvinistic and violent nationalism. I did not need to become a Communist in order to work with them." Mandela notes that, "the cynics have always suggested that the Communists were using us. But who is to say that we were not using them?"

This capacity for wary alliance or agreement, and for forging unexpected trust between mutually suspicious parties, is apparent not only in Mandela's account of his national politicking, but of his life as a prisoner. Describing a pre-trial detention in 1960, Mandela notes that he and a guard, "had a kind of gentleman's code between us," when the guard accompanied Mandela on furloughs to Johannesburg from Pretoria: "I would not try to escape and thereby get him into trouble, while he permitted me a degree of freedom."

Indeed, what is striking about the narrative is how, while Mandela's period of imprisonment is for outsiders a giant blank and interruption in the story of his life, for Mandela it seems to have become a continuation and intensification of his work outside prison walls. "There was no point in having any permanent enemy among the warders," he notes, "It was ANC policy to try to educate all people, even our enemies: we believed that all men, even prison service warders, were capable of change, and we did our utmost to try to sway them."

Mandela's account of life at Robben Island (and after 1981 at the milder Pollsmoor Prison) includes protests and organization by prisoners, hunger strikes, go-slow strikes, demands for release, for books, for better treatment and food, and the observant weighing of the characters and intentions of his captors and fellow-prisoners. (To hear him dissect the question of whether a prisoner should pick up a sandwich dropped for him by a guard is to hear a marvelously acute connoisseur of the psychology of power and politics.) Of his arrival at Robben Island prison, Mandela observes, "[it] was without question the harshest most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system...its isolation made it not simply another prison, but a world of its own, far removed from the one we had come from. The high spirits with which we had left Pretoria had been snuffed out by its stern atmosphere; we were face-to-face-with the realization that our life would be unredeemably grim. [But] my dismay was quickly replaced by a sense that a new and different fight had begun."

Of his first day at Robben Island, Mandela recalls how, to the bewilderment of his guards, he would only walk, "at a stately pace," when told to run: "We had to show them that we were not everyday criminals but political prisoners being punished for our beliefs." The account of much of the period on Robben Island, particularly of what Mandela describes as a failed 1969 plot by an agent of BOSS, South Africa's secret intelligence agency, to assassinate Mandela in a phony escape attempt, is chilling. The contrast between the elegance of Mandela's language and the brutishness of much of his time there,

spent breaking rocks or gathering seaweed, is telling.

Pervading that language and the book is an understated and surprising sense of humor, a sensibility that tends toward the gently ironic. Of his arrest in 1962 (after a period of underground activism and evasion of authorities that earned him the nickname "the Black Pimpernel"), Mandela notes that, "at least on that night-August 5, 1962- I did not have to worry about whether the police would find me. They already had." After a devastating description of a period of solitary confinement, Mandela nevertheless notes that he was, "on the verge of initiating conversations with a cockroach." Of the moment in March of 1960 when Mandela was released for one minute from detention so that he could be formally re-arrested under the stricter terms of the State of Emergency that followed the Sharpeville massacre, Mandela writes, "I did not know whether to laugh or despair."

It is through such dry humor that we get a sense of the spirit of the writer who otherwise holds the reader at arm's length. Rarely are we invited to listen in on Mandela's thoughts at moments of tragedy and triumph. When his sentence to Rodden Island is pronounced, Mandela recounts how he felt about the verdicts given his co-defendants, not about his own. When Mandela describes the deaths of Walter Sisulu and other friends and allies, he dwells not on his own feelings but pays lengthy tribute to the deceased. It is through almost incidental details that we understand the great consequences Mandela seems to have experienced for the risks that he took. The effect of Mandela's separation from his family is conveyed through the recollection of his son who had "taken comfort," in wearing his, "too-often distant" father's suit jacket, which reached the boy's knees, during Mandela's long absences. The effect of Mandela's separation from society during his imprisonment (and of his reemergence into society) is conveyed in the recollection of a Pollsmoor prison guard tying Mandela's tie for him in preparation for a meeting with then-president PW Botha, when Mandela realizes that after 26 years in prison uniforms, he has forgotten how to tie a Windsor knot: "The deputy commander... stood back to admire his handiwork. 'Much better' he said."

Richard Stengel, who worked with Mandela on the autobiography, has observed that, "Mandela is often lonely, not for lack of company, but for intimacy." The role that descended upon Mandela during his trials in the 1950s and 60s as (in Mandela's words) "representative of the great ideals of freedom, fairness, and democracy in a society that

dishonored those virtues," and the task of passive resistance while a prisoner, of hiding his uncertainties, "behind a mask of boldness," has, in Stengel's interpretation, required Mandela to "build a wall around himself." Stengel recalls that, "I interviewed a number of [Mandela's] colleagues with whom he spent decades in prison, and while they loved and respected him, they confessed that they did not feel as though they really knew him." This is true of Mandela's autobiography as well: it is as much, if not more, about Mandela's work, his strategies, his plans, his observations about others, than it is about himself. It is about the continuing, enduring, walk to freedom as much as it is about the walker.

The walk continues. This autobiography is of course still incomplete: Mandela continues to write and shape the story of South Africa and of his own life. The solutions to many of their dilemmas, such as the role and relations of the ANC with other organizations, the addressing of questions of education, poverty, continuing violence and corruption in South Africa, and the direction the nation will take during and after his presidency, have yet to be discovered and written. Nevertheless, *Long Walk to Freedom*, offer much to those who seek to understand the man and his dilemmas.

During later years on Robben Island, Mandela was permitted to read books and novels (although anything with the words "red" or "war" in its title was forbidden). "I recall especially John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, in which I found many similarities between the plight of the migrant workers in that novel and our own labourers and farmworkers, [and] one book that I returned to many times was Tolstoy's great work, *War and Peace*. For a way of describing what *Long Walk to Freedom* offers those who seek to understand the New South Africa and President Mandela himself, we might consult those two authors: "A book is like a man," Steinbeck once observed, "clever and dull, brave and cowardly...." Few would call Mandela dull nor cowardly—indeed it is by the opposite qualities that he is perhaps most often described. But the book does seem to be like the man in its doggedness and straightforwardness, in the dignity and discipline of its language, in the understated treatment of the joys and pains of experience, and in its preference for the descriptive and factual over the rhetorical. The book, like the man it describes, seems to be one of action more than of drama.

In describing General Kutuzov, a character in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Mandela notes that he, "defeated Napoleon precisely because he was not swayed by the ephemeral and superficial values of the court, and made his decisions based on a visceral understanding of his men

and his people. It reminded me once again that to truly lead one's people one must also truly know them." To the extent that it confirms and strengthens our understanding of Mandela's endurance, dignity, and reserve, that it reveals Mandela's intense awareness of his own symbolic role, and that, around the edges of the mask, it reveals a persistent optimism and a gently ironic sense of humor, *Long Walk to Freedom* enables people to approach an understanding of Mandela that matches this leader's understanding of people. ●