

### **The British Empire's Swan Song in South Africa**

**Graham Viney, *The Last Hurrah: South Africa and the Royal Tour of 1947***

Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2018

xiv + 386 pp

ISBN 978-1-86842-924-0

R285 (paperback)

The pageantry and imperial nostalgia of royal tours are a fascinating lens into the project of empire and the role of monarchy within colonial rule. Graham Viney's *The Last Hurrah* is a well-researched and engaging read, with literary qualities and critical insights that place it a step above more pedestrian accounts within the genre.

The author places the 1947 royal tour to South Africa of King George VI, and other members of the royal family including a young Elizabeth (and future Queen) within historical context that asks some important questions about the period. The royal tour occurred a year before the rise to power of the National Party in the 1948 election, with many in the British Empire still riding high on the heady but uncertain wave of victory and imperial patriotism that followed the end of the Second World War.

Viney brings to life many of the personalities, controversies and complexities of the 1947 royal tour to South Africa. We are introduced to both the public performance and private thoughts of King George VI and his entourage, aided greatly by archival labour most notably within the Royal Archives at Windsor, but also by research undertaken at the Eton College Archives, the National Archives in Pretoria, and using newspapers and pamphlets. There are also several photographs in the pages of the book, many previously unpublished. By looking beyond secondary sources for the narrative, the author introduces some details that might well be new to historians who are familiar with the period.

Viney is astute in his nuanced approach to the royal tour. This was not a royal visit embraced by all, and the itinerary and purpose of the tour was met with scepticism from some members of the public. The African National Congress (ANC) Youth League and South African Communist Party called, unsuccessfully, for a boycott of the visit, which cast a small cloud over the meeting between the royal family, the ANC president-general AB Xuma, his wife, and other African politicians at the *Ngoma Nkosi* held at Eshowe. As Viney notes, 'populism triumphed over politics when it came to the crunch' (p. 140). Also present at this same event was Albert Luthuli, future president of the ANC and Nobel Peace Prize winner (1961) as representative chief of the Zulu people. With a nod to the work of Hilary Sapire on the 1947 royal tour, Viney agrees that 'the tour witnessed the last genuine outpouring of black loyalism in South Africa' (p. 141). The symbolism of royal sympathy and

possible benevolent intervention against settler colonial overreach in segregation policy was on the wane, but still held some value in the eyes of African nationalists and traditionalists alike.

In contrast, on the far-right of Afrikaner nationalism, the *Ossewa Brandwag* cautioned against the seductive dangers if one were ‘to pay tribute to the Conquerors’ (p. 109). *Die Transvaler*, then edited by Hendrik Verwoerd, chose to avoid much mention of the royal visit. Yet, several of the ‘Queen’s Afrikaners’, represented most clearly in the then Prime Minister Jan Smuts and his wife Isie, embraced the royal visit. Viney weaves into the narrative the conviviality and tensions in response to the royal tour in South Africa.

With the royal itinerary only covering a day in Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa – compared to three in Bloemfontein – which Queen Mary commented privately was ‘too stupid’, behind-the-scenes appeals from residents for a longer stay won out when the royals agreed to give up a day of rest on Easter Friday. A brief royal stop-over at the black township of Alexandra was met by the cheers of around 60 000 residents, and the singing of *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrica*, yet the royal household was struck by the contrast between ‘the cheerful herdsmen they had seen in the countryside and the often-miserable looking blacks “in grey flannel trousers, shiftless and outcast”’ (p. 203). As Viney notes, this unfavourable impression by the royals would not have gone down well among the African majority, facing racial discrimination, yet eager to forward an image of modernity and equality. The discomfort of the royals to critique of empire was kept to a minimum. In contrast, and perhaps most at home among the English-speaking elite of Johannesburg, King George VI was moved – uncharacteristically, given his speech impediment – to give an impromptu speech during one luncheon. ‘There is an atmosphere here that I find very encouraging and stimulating’, he said, noting that in Johannesburg he had found ‘a progressive and friendly community’ (p. 202).

In the penultimate chapter, titled ‘The Coming of Age of the Heiress Presumptive’, Viney presents a very human portrait of the then Princess Elizabeth, who celebrated her 21st birthday in Cape Town. At her birthday dinner and dance, she danced into the early hours, despite a headache and at least one incident of trampled royal feet (the culprit, the rugby-playing lock-forward Nellis Bolus with his size-13 feet). In the hours before, against the backdrop of a parade of 8 000 military and ex-servicemen, there was well-wishing from various children, the mayor of Cape Town, and numerous other dignitaries. It all provided a particular messaging of empire as being benevolent and multi-racial. In her birthday speech, Elizabeth vowed: ‘... my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of the great imperial family to which we all belong’ (p. 275). These words ring out as being both earnest and anachronistic today, following her seventy years on the throne, and long after decolonisation and the emergence of the Commonwealth.

The book falls within what could be called academic trade: of appeal both to the general public and to an academic readership. Most often, Viney gravitates towards literary detail that is highly readable, but is less attentive to prolonged historical analysis. *The Last Hurrah* is somewhat sympathetic towards the liberal view of empire at the time, and within the book there is some sentimentality and a pang of regret for what might have been if not for the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the passage towards a republic. Despite 14 years between the 1947 royal tour and the birth of the Republic of South Africa on 31 May 1961 – upon which Viney ends the book – those events ‘belong[ed] to two South Africas ago’ (p. 328). Historians still have much to debate about the 1947 royal tour, especially around the political economy of racial segregation in ways not sufficiently covered by Viney. *The Last Hurrah* is an excellent introduction to the topic, and an enjoyable read, but it is not the final word.

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