

Govan Mbeki: Tribute or treatise?

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Written in an energetic and engaging style, Bundy's biography of Govan Mbeki offers the reader an accessible entrée to a fascinating and complex period of South African history, seen through the life story of one of South Africa's great struggle heroes.

Bundy's painstaking research provides a wealth of detail that adds an extra dimension to the historical facts and his use of quotations is both relevant and pertinent. His interest in, and admiration for, his subject is evident throughout – at times, one feels, almost at the cost of academic objectiveness.

The format and presentation of the book is clear and easy to use, with interesting chapter headings, powerful opening sentences, and good use of paragraphs. The clear footnotes, well-organised bibliography and index, and the use of shaded pages for additional information about particular events mentioned in the narrative make the book an accessible source for students of history. However, Bundy's use of emotive language in describing events and people is at times at odds with the balanced prose usually associated with an academic work and his predilection for alliteration sometimes has the effect of rendering the prose self-conscious.

Bundy's grasp of the political canvas against which he paints his subject is evident in his cogent and insightful analysis of the events of the liberation struggle. However, one is never in any doubt that this is essentially a portrait of one of the struggle heroes and, like many commissioned portraits, at times verges on the flattering. There are a number of occasions when conflicting views are swiftly submerged in the overall tide of goodwill, which rings a warning bell about the objectivity of his portrayal of Mbeki.