

*Make a Skyf Man!* By Harold Strachan (Jacana)

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A nation that locks up some of its finest minds is at least assured of an impressive body of prison literature. To this body *Make a Skyf, Man*, Harold Strachan's second book, makes a distinguished contribution, worthy of a place with Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug*, Hugh Lewin's *Bandiet* and Breyten Beytenbach's *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*.

*Make a Skyf* is described by its publisher as a sequel to Strachan's first book, *Way Up, Way Out*. This is true in so far as that book dealt with the protagonist's youth and early manhood and this one covers his later manhood and political career, including four years in prison; but this book is a somewhat more pungent thing altogether than the genial, affectionate earlier one. That certainly had its acerbities; but here they are more central, more deeply felt.

This book is also potentially more controversial than the first. Strachan was a member of the Communist party and of Umkhonto we Sizwe, but he has very little patience with the Marxist "Theorists" like Jack Hodgson who spout Theory at the drop of a Molotov Cocktail. Based in Durban, Strachan clearly resented Hodgson's role as emissary of what Strachan enjoys calling the Vatican, i.e. ANC headquarters in Johannesburg, with Joe Slovo, or Yoshke, as the Pope.

If this had purported to be an objective, dispassionate account of the struggle one would have been moved to cry foul; but Strachan does not promise objectivity and certainly does not deliver it. He grinds axes and settles scores; but there is another kind of balance, whereby he is non-partisan in his distribution of praise and blame. The Kokstad policeman who requests his seniors to remove their weapons and Strachan's leg-irons in front of his two small children is obviously, in Strachan's book, a more courageous man than Joe Slovo, whom he sees as an opportunist and poseur, "a man of posture and propaganda."

Strachan is blistering about Slovo's decision to flee the country: "Yoshke has blown too, against specific Central Committee decision, and directive, leaving the modest David Kitson ... to carry the ramshackle responsibilities of the Communist Party ..., and get busted doing it, and push twenty years while Yoshke, a right piteous victim of the system, goes off to Marxist majesty at Hampstead Heath, there to bemoan the loss of his rightful real estate at Sea Point, Cape Town ... and to flood the world with righteous revolutionary claptrap."

It is beyond the range or competence of this review to pronounce on these judgements, other than to say that they make for lively reading. One could add, too, that Strachan's suspicion of the "heroes" of the struggle is of a piece with his resistance to heroics in general, including his own. He makes his involvement in MK seem like a natural, almost instinctive response to the injustices of the time; but of course, to countless South Africans it was easier to live with the injustice than to resist it; and most white South Africans did not even notice the injustice.

If there is more anger in this book than in the first, there is nevertheless no lack of humour. Strachan seems incapable of keeping a straight face, even in the direst

circumstances, as when he speculates with horrified amusement on the fate of the comrade who had his penis nailed to a table by the Security Police: “only picture this victim going for a pee with his fingers in the holes like he’s playing Bach on the Blockflöte, otherwise he’s going to piss in his eyes and shoes ...” This is appalling, we say; but Strachan, unlike us, has earned the right to his amusement: it is a survival tactic in the face of horror.

On occasion, though, the humour breaks down and Strachan explodes into furious invective: speaking of a Security Branch operative who is trying to get him to turn State Witness against Govan Mbeki, he says: “The pig and his swine friends in their loony porcine fatherland don’t even know what a Boer is. ... All they’ve ever done is persecute anybody of decency within the community, including decent Boere... I would really rather die than do what he wants, and that’s no act of heroism, it’s from *hardegat otherwaais vok jou, man.*”

But the “*hardegat vok jou*” attitude is an extremely dangerous one to sustain in a prison. Heroism or not, Strachan was putting his own life on the line here, having just been informed that sabotage had been classified as a capital crime. (“We want the rope for Govan Mbeki and Denis Goldberg ... If you don’t give State’s evidence you will get the rope instead.”)

The threat is given a certain force by the fact that at this stage Strachan is accommodated within earshot of Death Row. His description of the physical and mental realities of a hanging should be compulsory reading for anybody nostalgic for capital punishment. He himself is quite explicit about his feelings: “I don’t actually want some people to kill other people on my behalf in this way. ... whether I’m a bandiet or not I’m still a citizen of this shitbegotten country and they’re doing it on my behalf.”

As this extract shows, Strachan does not hesitate to express his opinion. Fortunately he does so with so much verve and energy that it never degenerates into mere kvetching. The writing, indeed, is spectacular. As in his previous novel, Strachan shows himself to be a master of South African vernacular, a multi-lingual pot-pourri of slang, obscenity and invective, interspersed with passages of pure lyricism. For all its rambunctious, foul-mouthed fulminations, this wonderful book is a passionate account of a troubled but deeply felt love affair with “this shitbegotten country.”