

Book Review

The opportunist: The political life of Oswald Pirow, 1915-1959

Alex Mouton

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Finding a mainstream South African publisher for an academic work on South African history is a daunting prospect for an author. Doing so when it involves a niche topic on an obscure personality in a forgotten period of South African history can be even more disheartening. Praise for Protea Book House, who backing Mouton, have provided a mainstream publishing vehicle to bring a fascinating period of our history back into the public domain. Works such as *The opportunist: The political Life of Oswald Pirow, 1915–1959* might otherwise have remained inaccessible to the general public, either residing in the rarefied atmosphere of academia or gathering dust on a shelf in a university library as an academic print. The hard truth is that well-researched, peer-reviewed and skilfully written works of history do not necessarily translate into bestsellers, and in most cases, the opposite is true. Publishers with a keen eye on their bottom-line have a set of criteria designed to maximise profit, which often clashes with the lofty standards demanded by academia. For that reason, it is always welcome when a work such as this book by Mouton manages to bridge the academic–popularist divide.

Alex Mouton is a professor of history at Unisa. He has practised his craft by publishing extensively on leading South African political and historical figures in the twentieth century, such as FS Malan and FA van Jaarsveld, as well as leaders of the official parliamentary opposition in South Africa, such as Sir Leander Starr Jameson, Sir Thomas Smartt, JGN Strauss, Sir De Villiers Graaff, Radclyffe Cadman, Colin Eglin, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, and Dr AP Treurnicht. A publishing pedigree such as this more than qualifies Mouton to tackle the biography of one of the more elusive and enigmatic figures on the South African political spectrum, Oswald Pirow. It is admirable that Mouton has chosen Pirow, the least understood and least known of our politicians, to present to – what he laments as – “an ahistorical youth who have turned their backs on history”.⁴⁴⁰

Pirow, born in 1890, the son of German immigrants, was educated in Potchefstroom, and received tertiary education in Germany and England. He was keen sportsman and successfully practised law in Pretoria. He became a National Party member

under JBM Hertzog and entered parliament in 1924, becoming Minister of Justice in 1929. He advocated and was a leading cabinet member of the Fusion Government between Hertzog and Smuts. His affinity for aviation, a long-time hobby, informed his responsibility for railways and harbours, which led to his founding of South African Airways. Pirow, a staunch nationalist and republican, was in many ways a visionary and a formidable debater. However, popular history paints a dark picture of Pirow as a vehement anti-communist, an open admirer of fascist totalitarian leaders, such as Hitler and Mussolini, and especially of António de Oliveira Salazar and Francisco Franco. His Germanophilia extended to speaking German exclusively at home, with his daughter declaring in 1939 – to the consternation of the British press – ‘s consternation in 1939, that her father felt more German than South African. Giving impetus to his legacy of as a Nazi sympathiser and eventually and out-and-out Nazi was his stiff opposition to South Africa declaring war on Germany in 1939. His political path of neutrality was an act that drove him and Hertzog to the opposition benches. Eventually, in 1940— – some believed inevitably— – he formed a new Nazi Nazi-styled party, the New Order. His flirtation with Naziism was ruinous to his once sparkling political career, and few lamented his passing in 1959, with even fewer remembering him in a modern-day Democratic democratic South Africa.

Historians, such as Mouton introduce, nuanced aspects and insights into the historiography, which popularist historians are ill-equipped to deliver. Academics spend long hours of research, often in dusty, dusky archives, digging out primary documents that they apply to a rigorous process using the historical method. The resulting work runs the torture chamber of peer review, ensuring that they bring something new, profound and factually correct to the table, thereby filling the lacunas in our knowledge. Historians will spend hours presenting and testing portions of their work before the scrutiny and criticism of colleagues. Popularist historians rely on secondary sources exclusively, resulting in their final product often reflecting a mere rehash of limited, outdated and sometimes dubious source material. Journalistic type claims that their role is the reintroduction of long-forgotten history have some validity. However, an excellent academic historian can lay claim to raising awareness and reinterpreting history based on interrogating the indispensable foundations of primary documentation. A glance at his extensive bibliography and footnotes is proof that Mouton has precisely followed this process and delivered a well-researched product.

Mouton provides an interesting and alternative insight into Pirow’s political journey. At one point, it seemed to have an inexorable upward trajectory, only to descend into humiliation and obscurity. The title of the book, *The opportunist*, adequately describes Pirow’s burning ambition, which was the driving force behind his every political move. He based his strategy on opportunism rather than on principle. Pirow arrived at his final political destination when he embraced Nazism, not out of a firm or cherished political conviction, but through steering a course of political opportunism throughout his career. He openly backed the Nazis at a time when many people believed Hitler’s Germany was unstoppable. Mouton presents a view that flies in the face of Pirow’s established place in South African historiography as that of a confirmed fascist. This revelation is indeed news for many interested in this relatively obscure inter-war period of South African

history. Not only is Pirow remembered as a Nazi sympathiser, but the blame for the poor state of South Africa's military preparation on the eve of the Second World War is placed firmly at his feet. Mouton sets the record straight on both accounts in his book.

The author summarises:

Pirow was an intriguing personality. He was ambitious, highly intelligent, cynical, charismatic, competent, energetic, a brilliant orator and an outstanding government minister. The political life of Pirow is the story of a gifted person who through opportunism wrecked a promising career⁴⁴¹

Mouton delivers a compelling case that Pirow's pacifism at the outbreak of war and his eventual embrace of Nazism were a function of opportunism rather than of any deep conviction. Pirow's poor performance in building and maintaining the Union Defence Force was the result of the Great Depression and the general lackadaisical approach most Western governments had towards rearmament in the inter-war years rather than of his ineptitude. The author reveals that Smuts used Pirow as a scapegoat for the poor condition of the Union Defence Force and destroyed his parliamentary career in a series of parliamentary debates, which forever labelled and ridiculed Pirow as the inventor of the infamous 'Bush Cart'. Pirow's "bush cart strategy" was juxtaposed with Germany's rearmament programme incorporating the symbol of the Blitzkrieg, modern, lethal Panzers.

If criticism is to be levelled, then it would be perhaps that, in seeking to redress the long-standing one-dimensional view of Pirow, Mouton has swung the pendulum too far in the other direction. It is difficult to believe that Pirow's embracing of Nazism was pure opportunism and did not involve his evident penchant for fascism early in his career. More believable is the contention that South Africa's poor military preparedness at the time was due to several factors rather than one man's ineptitude. Mouton has managed to place a relatively obscure figure (undeservedly so) back on the South African historiographical map. In doing so, he uses Pirow as a lens to peer into a neglected period of our history – the inter-war years. Mouton has successfully bridged the academic-journalist gap and presented a well-researched, readable book that adds much to our knowledge of Pirow and a fascinating period of South African history.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴⁴¹ FA Mouton. Hartfield Book Company, The Opportunist: The Political Life of Oswald Pirow, 1915-1959 (Paperback), <https://www.hartfieldbookco.com/book/9781485311690>> Accessed on 21 January 2021.