

MARGARET BALLINGER:

a tribute

by O. D. Wollheim

For 23 of her 86 years Margaret Ballinger sat stoically and heroically through six months of every year (plus one session in 1939 to declare war) in Parliament having to endure abuse, calumny, distortion of her words and often venomous attacks on her personality. The worst moments must surely have been those when her reasoned and well researched and documented approach to a question was completely ignored and answered by a torrent of emotional and racialistic prejudices.

Now anyone who has sat through a complete session of Parliament—or for that matter a three week session of a Provincial Council—realises that he has endured an ordeal during the major part of which he has had to listen to an incredible deluge of claptrap, petty scoring—off points, “You’re another” replies, and often sheer verbal padding to fill in time while a Minister gets ready or is out of the House, or merely to talk out time to avoid a vote on the issue. To have sat through 23 of them must surely indicate monumental patience, Herculean stamina and an utter conviction of the rightness of her case.

Through all this Mrs Ballinger never lost her cool. Nor did she ever reply to any such attack on the same level. Always she had her facts at her fingertips, her arguments lucidly and logically assembled and always her speeches were models of eloquence displaying a complete command of her subject. This is not to say that she never got angry. Few who heard her will ever forget her devastating replies to some particularly stupid argument when she often left her opponent virtually speechless and quivering with impotent rage.

Professor Hancock in his book on Smuts said that she had achieved an extraordinarily high standard of Parliamentary eloquence in the attack she consistently made upon the Government’s shortcomings in the economic and social sectors of Native (sic) policy. She herself in her book said that she was a liberal and that nothing had modified her belief that a broadbased democratic system progressively embracing politically all the elements of our complex society was the only way to peace and to fulfil our mission of carrying the torch of civilisation with its emphasis on the individual irrespective of colour to the uttermost ends of the earth.

For readers of REALITY there would be no need to embark on a full and detailed account of her life. Born in Scotland in 1896, she came to South Africa in 1904 where her father, John Hodgson, had fought as a Free State Burger against the British. She was immensely proud of her Vrystaat Burgerskap and this often was an additional weapon against her enemies and a shield against arrows aimed at her. She was educated in Port Elizabeth, graduated with an Honours degree in History at Rhodes and followed this on a Queen Victoria Scholarship to take an M. A. degree at Somerville College at Oxford. She returned to Rhodes as Head of their History Department and then became a Senior Lecturer at Witwatersrand until her marriage to William Ballinger in 1934. As Margaret Hodgson she is still remembered fondly by very many of her students both at Rhodes and Wits.

William Ballinger was a trade unionist who had been sent out by the British trade union movement to attempt to bring some sort of order into the chaos reigning supreme in Clements Kadalie’s Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU). He did not succeed because Kadalie, who was a prickly and eloquent demagogue who did his own thing and brooked no interference or advice, completely ignored all the rules and regulations introduced by Ballinger. The latter, himself no footstool, fell out with Kadalie very quickly and proceeded to other fields of labour organisation. In 1948 he was elected to the Senate to represent Africans of the Orange Free State and Transvaal and from then on until the abolition of the “Native Seats” ably supported and backed his wife.

The three “Natives’ Representatives” elected to the Assembly in 1938 made an impact on the serried ranks on both sides of the House out of all proportion to their numbers. For the first time the case and cause of the African could be put to the House without reservations. Although several Cape seats had some African (and Coloured) voters on the rolls, candidates for election could only make token gestures to them, continually having to look over their shoulders lest they alienate white voters.

Now for the first time a full blooded attack could be made on the pass laws, the migrant labour system, the absurdly small allocation of funds for the education of African children, the almost total lack of social pensions, sweated wages and pay discrimination based on skin colour. For the first time some members of the House began to realise that able-bodied men could not be divorced from their families and womenfolk for protracted periods without causing social dislocation both where they worked and at home where their families waited desperately for the money which the worker could spare from his already inadequate wage. Attention was increasingly focussed on shanty towns, the lack of proper housing, the abuse of labourers on farms and the total lack of any meaningful means of communication between those with black skins who did the work and those with white skins who wielded the instruments of power. But it must not be assumed that the three only paid attention to the affairs of Africans. They were full Members of Parliament and the record will show that they played a full and meaningful role in the general affairs of the country.

The 1936 Acts had set up a Natives’ Representative Council on which, after much soul searching, some of the best black brains were prepared to serve to try to make the new machinery work: Jabavu, Matthews, Dube, Selope Thema, Mosaka, Champion, Selby Msimang, Luthuli and others. Led by Margaret, the three who made up her team in the Assembly attended every session faithfully and as faithfully saw to it that their reports, conveniently pigeonholed without being read, did in fact see the light of day. This Council was supposed to be the means of communication between the Government and the African people and was the quid pro quo for the loss of their votes in the Cape seats. Until it prorogued sine die no Minister had taken the trouble to sit through any

of their sessions or to read their reports, some of which were quite outstanding. None of their recommendations were even debated unless the Ballingers saw to it that they were.

As a quid pro quo the Council was a hopeless failure for these reasons and it was small wonder that one of Dr Malan's first actions on assuming power in 1948 was to abolish the Council. In her book Margaret says: "It is impossible to read its record without being oppressed by the tragedy of those years. It is a record in which two things stand out conspicuously—the high level of African development in South Africa as compared with any other African community in Africa; and, in spite of already accumulated grievances and frustrations, how little it would have taken to establish a co-operative relationship with both the leaders and the mass of the African people"

The impact of the team, as I have said, was out of all proportion. By 1942 General Smuts, addressing a gathering of the South African Institute of Race Relations in the Cape Town City Hall, was to say that segregation was dead and that other ways of arranging intergroup relations had to be found. The Fagan Commission had reported and Smuts had accepted its findings that black South Africans had to be accepted as a permanent part of the urban population and that the migrant labour system was obsolete.

The 1948 elections came as one of South Africa's greatest shocks. On a substantial minority of votes, Dr D. F. Malan won a five seat majority in the Assembly. For the first time Smuts realised that the 'loaded vote' in rural areas (which he had stoutly defended since Union) was wrong and that it gave rural areas a distorted and disproportionate influence on the running of the country. In some constituencies 85 farmers had the same political power as 115 townsmen.

This must have been Margaret Ballinger's bitterest moment. For she was to watch all that she and her colleagues had so painstakingly accomplished systematically dismantled and in fact the whole country taking a giant leap back into the nineteenth century. A lesser spirit would have given up and retired from politics entirely.

But Mrs Ballinger was made of finer steel. Around her but keeping their distance a small group of more enlightened people had gathered. She could always rely on the tacit (never explicit) support of Hofmeyr, but others such as Harry Oppenheimer, Helen Suzman, Robin Stratford, Edgar Brookes and others were increasingly prepared to use their influence in caucus to support her attitudes and approach to the race question. By 1951 a small Liberal Group had emerged which rapidly grew to over 700 members all paid up and in 1953 the Liberal Party was formed with her first as Leader and later as President when her responsibilities became too onerous.

The Liberal Party encapsulated in its political manifesto all those things for which Margaret Ballinger had battled;

it gave political expression to the ethical bases of the Institute of Race Relations, the Penal Reform League and the Civil Rights League—as well as to the countless millions of voteless people and a steadily growing number of more enlightened whites. She carried on the battle in Parliament even against the enormously increased odds over those of before 1948. But now at least she had an organised group of people who could explicitly support her, provide her with material, encourage her and use what little voting pressure they could exercise.

Not that she lacked backing. Her constituents had elected her to Parliament time and again, in spite of the reluctance of some older African men to give authority to a woman. She had earned their respect and support by her fearless actions. But now she also had some support from people who could exercise a degree of political power. She continued as President of the Liberal Party until it of its own free will dissolved as a result of the Political Interference Act and she continued the battle in Parliament until 1960 when "Native Representation" was abolished.

Shortly after this she was invited to spend a year at Oxford University to write up the history of "Native Representation" and in 1969 her book *From Union to Apartheid: a Trek to Isolation* was published. But she continued to work in other fields too. She joined the Cape Western Regional Committee of the Institute of Race Relations, acted as Patron and adviser to the Civil Rights League and interviewed countless visitors from overseas who found themselves bewildered by the fact that South Africa, when the rest of the world was moving into the computer age, was moving steadily back to a feudal system.

She travelled widely in Britain, the United States, Africa and India and wherever she went she was treated as an honoured guest and fêted. Both Cape Town and Rhodes conferred on her well deserved degrees of L. LD.

Margaret Ballinger was one of the brightest stars to shine in the intellectual and political firmament of South Africa. Fearless and undaunted by the fiercest opposition, she remained rational, motivated by the highest ideals, eloquent in speech and gracious in bearing into ripe old age. I remain personally convinced that she, more than any other single person, laid the first real foundation for the slow but steady growth of more enlightened attitudes in this country. One marvels at what the students of Stellenbosch—let alone their teachers—say and do today compared with only ten years ago; at what "Woord en Daad" writes in Potchefstroom; at Danie Craven's volte face; at open beaches and restaurants; and even at P. W. Botha's shy peeping from behind the dark-room curtain of Afrikanerdom. Could this have happened—perhaps happened so soon—if it were not for the constant battle of this woman? Or would we, without her, have landed by now in an endless guerilla situation of Sharpevilles and Sowetos each following close upon the heels of the other? □