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His latest book, co-authored with Emeritus Professor David Welsh (University of Cape Town) is *Ending Apartheid*, published by Pearson-Longman in August 2010.

REVIEW ARTICLE

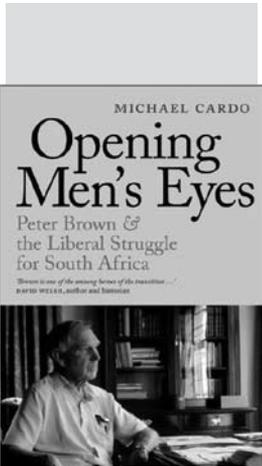
A Review of Opening Men's Eyes by Michael Cardo **Peter Brown: A Personal Memoir**

Let me declare an interest: Peter Brown was a friend and mentor to me over a forty year period and I owe him much. His benign influence on me (and I know I speak for many others) was such that whenever I had a difficult professional or personal decision to make I would ask myself, "What would Brown have done?" His moral authority was absolute – blended with courage and a consuming belief in liberal principle. Thus, "the quiet influence ... that he had exerted over a large number of people".¹

The Maritzburg Scene

Those of us who lived in Pietermaritzburg at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s had the inestimable advantage of working closely with Peter in his role as chairman of the Liberal Party. There was a happy blend of young and old in the party's membership, reinforced by an exciting intellectual atmosphere at the local centre of the University of Natal. Those of us who were fortunate to be colleagues or students sat at the feet of some of the country's most distinguished academics: Edgar Brookes, Arthur Keppel Jones (both liberals to their fingertips); Mark Prestwich (a wise Burkean conservative and a witty and penetrating leader writer for the Natal Witness); Geoffrey Durrant (a brilliant Shakespeare scholar and a superb teacher) and his able young colleague Colin Gardner; I should also mention Hans Meidner, a botanist of distinction and Gerry Doyle, a fine psychologist. There were, too, some very clever undergraduates (Robin Lee, Bill Ainslie, Douglas Irvine, Rowland Smith, Catherine Shallis, Michael Gardiner, Lettie Volschenk, Caroline White, John Chettle, et al) many of whom went on to distinguished careers in academe both at home and abroad. This heady mix of talent was a natural recruiting ground for the Liberal Party, with Peter presiding benignly over a host of social and political gatherings. Equally important was the collegiality of the senior common room: colleagues met for tea and coffee, ate lunch together arguing over the day's events, often followed by a visit to the local pub.

Halcyon days indeed! When "to be young" if not "very heaven" was to be part of an enterprise of singular liberal idiosyncrasy in a society bedevilled by institutional racism and the mindless hostility to those who opposed apartheid's gross abuse of human rights. For many, the party offered the opportunity to meet black activists on an equal footing, to gain some understanding – however limited – of the way the great majority of their fellow countrymen lived, enduring lives so profoundly different from their own.



OPENING MEN'S EYES:
Peter Brown & the Liberal
Struggle for South Africa, by
Michael Cardo
ISBN: 9781868423927
Published by: Jonathan Ball
Publishers

Personality and Principal

What Michael Cardo offers in this well written and closely argued biography is a splendid version of Brown's life: all the more necessary because his enormous contribution to the role and impact of liberal ideas on South African society never really earned the respect and reputation it so richly deserved. As the author rightly argues, "the reasons for Brown's relative obscurity are partly personal, partly ideological and partly political."² To begin with he was a highly civilised man, one who believed in the primacy of reason for the regulation of human affairs; he was diffident, reserved and never intemperate in terms of his personal dealings with friends and opponents. He eschewed ideology; "he was a doer"³ and could be impatient with those who sought explanations of society's ills in terms of some grand theory.

Brown was certainly not solemn nor moralistic. Indeed, his conversation was informed by a "teasing dry wit; [he] was entirely indifferent to matters of reputation and veneration."⁴ He preferred to base his judgements on close observation of men and events, albeit one informed by a profound belief in "justice; [it is] rightly represented as blindfold ... [and] does not allow the use of two measures, one for ourselves and our own people, and another for those who differ from us in nationality, race, or their colour of skins."⁵ This quotation from J S Marais, the doyen of South Africa's liberal historians, had personal resonance for the writer. Reading Marais' *Cape Coloured People* at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1951 exposed me to the central tenet of liberalism, reinforcing the teaching of young men at a Pretoria school who had come back from the experience of the Second World War alive to the injustice of South Africa's societies. They would gently but firmly undermine the natural conservatism of their schoolboy charges ("Why is 'house spirit' important Spence?" – a question to which there appeared to be no rational answer, encouraging a healthy dose of intellectual confusion!).

Formative Influences

This anecdote illustrates an important theme in Cardo's account of Brown's life. The truth of H A L Fisher's dictum – "always acknowledge the play of the contingent and unforeseen in human destiny" was certainly demonstrated in Brown's conversion to the liberal creed and in particular its relevance to South Africa. Cardo stresses two critical experiences: the first during his schooldays at Michaelhouse when he visited Adams College, the intellectual nursery of several of South Africa's prominent future black leaders and from 1934 under the principalship of Edgar Brookes. The latter had a powerful influence on Brown's thinking.

The second defining moment was listening to the exile, Peter Abrahams, a major South African novelist speak at Cambridge. This was Brown's road to Damascus⁶ "It shattered the accumulated stereotypes about black people with which I had grown up"⁷.

No doubt many party members could evoke such defining moments in their conversion to liberal ideals, though they came to liberalism in different ways. Some came via the exposure to liberal values at university through membership of Student Representative Councils; I, for one, was influenced in the 1950s by the late Harold Wolpe, a charismatic left wing radical on the Wits Council. Others came through the experience of fighting alongside Indian and black soldiers in World War II. Others again came through their professional activities as lawyers and doctors working at the sharp end of South African society – a compound of poverty, state

persecution and massive inequalities. “What is interesting, in Brown’s case, is that he did so in a province [Natal] which, unlike the Cape, had no discernible political tradition of liberalism, nor one of non-racialism”⁸.

What was striking about Brown was his commitment to non-racialism, in part the result of his work in Edendale (a multi-racial community near Pietermaritzburg). As the local YMCA organiser in the early 1950s, he made lasting friendships with black activists such as Selby Msimang, Archie Gumede and Sam Chetty. It was this formative experience that convinced him that racial origin was irrelevant in determining “rights, responsibility and opportunities in life”⁹. Thus, as Cardo comments, “Brown’s liberalism was nurtured by close personal friendships and interactions that transcended racial and ideological divide”¹⁰.

The Brown–Paton Nexus

It is appropriate at this stage to stress Brown’s close and wonderfully productive friendship with Alan Paton. Again, Cardo writes intelligently and sensitively about these two profoundly influential Liberal Party leaders. Cardo quotes from an interesting letter from Paton to Brown:

Must I go on writing? Must I get a job? Or must I join people like you and try to serve the country? These are my problems that I should like to have discussed with you.¹¹

And these discussions (and much light hearted banter) continued until Paton’s death in 1988.

Their relationship was based on an extraordinary combination of personality and principle, again an example to a younger generation, some of whom were regular attendees at Paton’s Sunday afternoon soirees in his Kloof home. We were all rather in awe of Paton: he could be magisterial, occasionally arrogant and forthright in opinion. And why not? He was, after all, the author of two of South Africa’s most famous novels, one of which, *Cry the Beloved Country*, had a profound impact on many readers whose views were transformed by the sheer force of the narrative. (In passing, it could be argued that Paton should have had a Nobel prize. One can only speculate in this context that his liberalism was not radical enough for the high minded Swedish judges who made such decisions. He was, after all, hostile to economic sanctions against South Africa and, therefore, well out of favour with the conventional wisdom on this issue in Europe and elsewhere.)

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Ernie Wentzel’s description of the role that Brown and Paton played in the party is instructive:

“Although Wentzel thought Brown was a ‘dreary public speaker’ and ‘not a forceful chairman’ ... he perceived in him ‘a keen intelligence, great courage and common sense and considerable diligence’. To Wentzel, Brown ‘was the party in the real sense’; for he was a man of action, and he had ‘a compassionate nature and keen sense of humour which made him respected by all sections of the Party’. Paton, by contrast, was neither a political activist nor a strategist; according to Wentzel, ‘in essence this was Paton’s limitation as a leader – he spoke magnificently but it signified nothing in the sense of action’.¹²

But despite Wentzel's qualifications, Cardo gets the relationship right in terms of its overall impact on the fortunes of the Liberal Party and a wider South African constituency: "it was through their joint leadership that liberalism came to be embodied politically, within a party, for the first time in twentieth-century South Africa. And it was through their doggedness that the liberal tradition, or a strand of it any rate, came to broaden its scope and constituency by practising (rather than just preaching) non-racialism, and by appealing to blacks not as charges but as equal partners in a project for political change."¹³

As Brown told Stanford, "it was becoming impractical to think and talk in terms of a qualified franchise in Africa in 1959. Africa won't listen".

Let Cardo have the last word: "Paton and Brown complemented one another, and their friendship was at once personal and political. Together, they were the public face of a particular strand of South African liberalism in the 1950s and 1960s, one which Albert Luthuli, in his autobiography, said took its stand on 'principles and not on expediency – a new thing indeed in white politics'. And the way that strand was woven had as much to do with their personal chemistry as it did their political like-mindedness."¹⁴ John Mitchell, a schoolmaster friend of Brown's, argued perceptively that he and Paton had "rather a sort of father/son relationship ... although, in a sense, Brown was the dominant character in the relationship."¹⁵

Brown's capacity for friendship across the colour line made him all the more determined to give practical expression to his profound belief in non-racialism by ensuring that membership of the party included all sections of South African society. And this commitment was reinforced by his work among the rural African population of Northern Natal. Hence his considerable efforts to publicise and protest against so-called 'black spot' removals. I can recall – at Peter's suggestion – travelling with Colin Gardner to black settlements in Northern Natal to explain to our audiences (which always included at least two or three bemused Special Branch police officers) the evolution of democratic parliamentary government and the gradual spread of the franchise in nineteenth century Britain. Subversive stuff indeed!

The Franchise Issue

For South African liberals the franchise issue provoked intense debate between those in the Cape, led by Oscar Wollheim and Walter Stanford, who favoured a qualified franchise and those in the Transvaal and Natal who supported the principle of universal suffrage. Cardo handles this issue with skill and perception of what was at stake for the protagonists. In effect Wollheim and his colleagues were representative of the Cape liberal tradition. By contrast, Brown and his supporters exemplified a more contemporary view, based on what was happening elsewhere in Africa where nationalist movements pressed for independence from colonial rule and for whom universal franchise was demonstrably both symbolic and a practical expression of the principle of equality.

As Brown told Stanford, "it was becoming impractical to think and talk in terms of a qualified franchise in Africa in 1959. Africa won't listen".¹⁶ His concern and the reasons he advanced illustrated clearly his capacity for down to earth reasoning, his ability to draw pragmatically on experience rather than high political theory as the basis for his change of attitude. Thus in a letter to Jack Couston, a Cape conservative, he argued,

“I started off as a strong advocate of a franchise on a high basis of qualification. The last few years have persuaded me that it is impossible to lay down a franchise qualification which will guarantee a responsible electorate. White South Africa enjoys compulsory, free education up to a high standard, its income level is high, its members own property on a substantial scale, yet politically it is quite irresponsible. I have canvassed many voters who knew virtually nothing about what was happening in South Africa and who voted almost entirely out of habit. On the other hand, I have attended Liberal Party meetings where nobody could speak a word of English but where the degree of responsibility shown in discussion has been remarkable”.¹⁷

The issue was finally resolved in 1960 in favour of a universal suffrage, but the debate proved to be a testing and difficult moment for the Liberal Party.

Brown’s Liberalism

The great strength of Michael Cardo’s biography is that it successfully combines detailed accurate insights into Brown’s personality with the evolution of his political beliefs and – above all – the sheer decency of the man. (Readers who know their George Orwell will recall his emphasis on decency as the most civilised of all the political and private virtues). As the chapter dealing with the 1960 State of Emergency and Brown’s ten year ban (1964-1974) demonstrated, he retained a remarkable resilience and an unshakeable faith in the liberal cause and its particular South African commitment to non-racialism as the very basis for social and political progress. The work also deserves praise for the author’s capacity to meld together a portrait of Brown – both the private man and the public persona – with an immensely valuable account of the origins, development and influence of the Liberal Party which he did so much to hold together in difficult times.

Nor did his commitment to the land diminish once the party dissolved itself in 1968, if anything it increased witness his chairmanship of the Association for Rural Advancement in the 1970s and 80s.

True, others such as Janet Robertson, David Welsh and Douglas Irvine have written knowledgeably and perceptively about South African liberalism and Cardo makes a fine contribution to that literature. In other words, it is the best kind of biography: illuminating about a person and the context in which he has to operate, balancing between the personal and the public domain.

The Land Issue

Of particular interest to future historians will be the account of Brown’s involvement with the land issue. As Cardo argues “there was a heightened sense of community awareness, shaped by an appreciation for the rhythms of rural life and an allegiance to the soil. Land and community were Brown’s two great concerns”.¹⁸

These were the ‘golden threads’ that connect his liberal actions in the 1950s and 60s when he opposed the state’s programme of ‘black spot’ removals. Nor did his commitment to the land diminish once the party dissolved itself in 1968. If anything it increased – witness his chairmanship of the Association for Rural Advancement in the 1970s and 80s. We note, too, Cardo’s description of Brown’s relations with Neil Adcock, kindred spirits in so far as both cared passionately about the conditions of rural Natal, but often engaged in fierce debate about what should be done to alleviate those conditions. These chapters of the book will be invaluable to future

historians researching a critically important aspect of South African society. In the 1980s, Brown resisted pressure from, for example, Neil Adcock to revive the Liberal Party. Instead he concentrated on the production of *Reality*, a journal which made a significant contribution to the debate over South Africa's future, together with involvement in the Five Freedoms Forum. But as Cardo emphasises:

“Perhaps, after 1974, Brown's greatest contribution was in the field of rural advancement and land rights. In some ways a natural progression from his work with the Northern Natal African Landowners Association against black spot removals in the 1950s, his involvement with AFRA helped empower farm workers and labour tenants. Brown also drew attention to the need for land redistribution and restitution before the transition to democracy, which was not something that many of his liberal contemporaries did.”¹⁹

These ideas, the stuff of liberal democracy – universal franchise, the rule of law, the legal protection of basic civil liberties and social justice were articulated in and out of season by the South African Liberal Party.

These political activities were supplemented by a willingness as always to do good by stealth, visiting, for example, Winnie Mandela exiled to Brandfort and contriving to make her days more “bearable on occasion it was as if I had a new lease of life and I was able to face each lonely day ahead courageously” “you will probably never guess just how much your visits meant to me.”²⁰

And throughout all these activities, Phoebe (his wife) was by his side. She continued to handle with calmness and composure the many larger than life characters who had frequented Shinglewood during Peter's years of active politics. Throughout their marriage, Phoebe provided the bedrock of domestic stability and emotional support that sustained her husband and allowed him to exert a positive influence in so many spheres”.²¹

The End Game

Finally, we have to ask how far the Liberal Party under Brown's leadership contributed to the constitutional settlement and the formation of a Government of National Unity in 1994. It is difficult to measure the precise impact of liberal ideas on the wider body politic of South Africa. Fifteen years is a short life span for a political party, but the years between 1953 and 1968 were crowded with activity and passionate commitment despite the fact that the party was outside the main stream of white South African politics. Superficially, Brown and his colleagues might have seemed irrelevant to the hard nosed realists in South Africa's major political parties, no more than voices crying in the wilderness and prophets without honour in their own country.

But this is to ignore the role of ideas – even those of a minority – in influencing, and indeed ultimately shaping outcomes. These ideas, the stuff of liberal democracy – universal franchise, the rule of law, the legal protection of basic civil liberties and social justice – were articulated in and out of season by the South African Liberal Party. They infiltrated the country's noisy, boisterous civil society which had become so dramatic a feature of South Africa's political scene, especially after the Soweto protests of 1976 and the growing opposition to apartheid in the 1980s. ‘We are all liberals now’ might well have been the mantra of those who over a dramatic four year period negotiated the grand constitutional settlement of the 1990s.

Peter Brown, through personal example and his capacity for friendship and collaboration in a host of activities across the colour line, embodied these values, though he would have been embarrassed to be told so. What he did was to make “an important and lasting contribution to the liberal tradition in South Africa. He helped, in his own way, to guide us into the non-racial democratic society we inhabit today. For that he deserves recognition and respect”.²²

Just before he died, in an interview with Norman Bromberger he predicted that: “There may come a time when the ANC starts to disintegrate or to produce factions ... and ... perhaps as the economy improves and so on ... there will be an opportunity to form a fully non-racial Liberal Party again. Something which will absorb the DP [now the Democratic Alliance] and elements from other political organisations ...”²³ “From the vantage point of 2010, Brown’s views seem prescient. Time will tell if he is proved right”.²⁴

Several generations of South Africans owe much to his fine example as friend, mentor and good companion in good times and bad. Thus, there is a moving tribute to Brown from Elliot Mngadi, his close friend and party official. After Mngadi was banned, he wrote heart-rendingly to Brown:

‘To separate me from the Party and its work is just like separating a mother from her child ... My whole life was completely intertwined with its work ... Peter I am happy because you are still fine, and I know that you will keep up the good work of nursing our baby ...’²⁵

And for this reader at least, Michael Cardo’s biography has been a moving trip down memory lane, a fine tribute to an exemplary man. He deserves our congratulations for reminding us how much so many of us owe to Peter Brown – a debt acknowledged personally even by Nelson Mandela on the heady occasion of his own release from prison in 1990: the “struggle had been won by participants of every language and colour, every stripe and hue”.²⁶ Brown was among that number.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Cardo, *Opening Men’s Eyes – Peter Brown and the Liberal Struggle for South Africa*, Johannesburg and Capetown, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2010, p14.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p15.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p47.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p15.
- 5 J S Marais, *The Cape Coloured People 1652-1937*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1939, pX
- 6 Cardo, *Op Cit.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, p33.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p70.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p18.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p18.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p80.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p172.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p73.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p113.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p84.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p130-1.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p15.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p15.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p324.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p323.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p324.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p324.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p224.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p324.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p182.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p13.