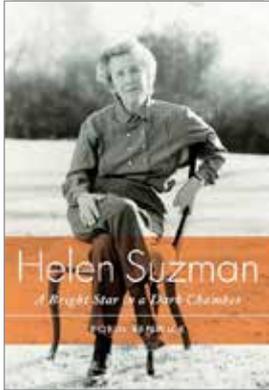


BOOK REVIEW

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**HELEN SUZMAN:
BRIGHT STAR IN A DARK
CHAMBER** by Robin
Renwick
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Helen Suzman: Bright Star in a Dark Chamber by Robin Renwick

Anyone who was active in 20th century South African politics is likely to have a story to tell about Helen Suzman. I have three – each of which illustrates both her role and character as brought home so eloquently in Robin Renwick’s short but concise volume on the veteran anti-apartheid campaigner and parliamentarian.

Suzman devoted, in Lord Renwick’s words, ‘her political career to the pursuit of high principles’, never lacking in energy, resourcefulness, intellectual rigour, and sharp-tongued humour in her decades of campaigning against apartheid and its manifestations, grand, petty and brutal, from forced removals to her support for Winnie Mandela during her banishment to Brandfort and over the inquest into the murder of Steve Biko. Her support for detainees and prisoners and opposition to the legislation that had put them in goal brought her into contact with everyone from Ruth First to Pravin Gordhan and virtually all stops in between including, inevitably, Nelson Mandela. The book is testament to the mutual admiration of these two political icons from their first meeting on Robben Island in February 1967. The reproduction of some of their personal correspondence provides a rich final flourish to this volume, their lives threads never far apart in this, Renwick’s South African political tapestry.

She did not always go easy on him – as can be gauged from my first anecdote. Mandela attended a dinner the SA Institute of International Affairs hosted as the culmination to an event examining ‘Southern Africa into the Next Millennium’ at the Rosebank Hotel in March 1998. As SAIIA’s National Director I acted as the master of ceremonies, sitting next to Helen. Mandela had endured a long day in court at the instigation of Louis Luyt, during which he had refused to sit as a protest against being called to testify by the head of the SA Rugby Football Union over his decision to set up a commission to investigate alleged racism, graft and nepotism in rugby. First she scoffed at my offer of wine, producing a hip flask in response. And then she told off Mandela. ‘Don’t feel sorry for yourself,’ she battered him. ‘I don’t know why people do,’ she said, ‘after all I am older than you!’ Mandela had to good grace to smile – or was it a wince?

The steel to her character was most notable not in her regular spats with the National Party and its leadership, but in her refusal to bow to those she disagreed with among her own political ranks. It did not matter to her, whether in the United Party (for which she had first won the Houghton seat in 1953 and again in 1958) or as the sole Progressive Party Member of Parliament from October 1961 to the General Election of April 1974 when she was joined by five others PP MPs, that she was swimming against the political tide. She had resigned from the UP along with liberal colleagues Ray Swart, Zach de Beer, Colin Eglin

and others on account of the unwillingness, Renwick documents, of the party to face up to the ‘increasingly urgent problems of our multiracial country’. The UP, which considered her to be an ‘electoral liability’ was pleased to see her go. In all she served 34 years in parliament, her career far outliving the dissolution of the UP in 1977.

But she had to endure 13 years on her own in parliament, during which time she was a lone voice of reason and source of information, asking not fewer than 2,262 questions. This required Churchillian resolve, stamina and wit, as evidenced in my second Suzman anecdote. When John Vorster told parliament that the 90-day detention-without-trial clause was to be revoked, adding that he was replacing it with a 180-day clause, Suzman’s was the lone opposing voice. ‘I can see a shiver running around these green benches,’ she reportedly said, ‘looking for a spine to go up.’

It’s you, you and the liberalists – you are responsible for this – you are inciting them – you’.

And so she became a regular target of the opprobrium of many Nats, including infamously the tirade she received from PW Botha on Dr Hendrik Verwoerd’s assassination on 6 September 1966. The Defence Minister had wagged his finger in her face in parliament saying ‘It’s you, you and the liberalists – you are responsible for this – you are inciting them – you’. When accepting the apology, later, from the future Prime Minister and President, Suzman advised, ‘You’re the man behind the guns in South Africa. You’re the Minister of Defence. It would be a sad day for all of us if you can’t control yourself’.

But she was not afraid of the left either. She never went with the arguments in favour of sanctions, for example, seeing them as symbolic, removing external influence over South African events and costing thousands of black workers their jobs. Renwick recalls her words: ‘Like everyone else, I long to be loved. But I am not prepared to make any concessions whatsoever.’

Nicky Oppenheimer celebrated Suzman after her death on 1 January 2009 aged 91, as one ‘facing down “those arch-bullies” Verwoerd, Vorster and PW Botha and the baying mob behind them “armed only with deadly wit, a deep contempt for all they stood for, and sure and certain knowledge that she was right”.’ Such fearlessness is on view, in spades, throughout the book, not least when she recounted in parliament PW Botha’s masterminding of the District Six forces removals and hostility towards SA soldiers serving on the Allied side in the Second World War, my third anecdote, one which appears in Renwick’s volume. Botha’s response: ‘The Hon. Member for Houghton, it is well known, does not like me.’ ‘Like you?’ replied Helen, ‘I cannot stand you!’

Helen Suzman was, in the words of a letter in May 1963 from Chief Albert Luthuli, also reproduced in the volume, ‘a bright star in a dark Chamber, where lights of liberty of what is left, are going out one by one’. Her decency and principles showed to black South Africans and outsiders alike that there were whites willing to fight for justice and a non-racial society. As Renwick observes, she was ‘the voice of South Africa’s conscience’. His biography of this great South African is a salutary reminder, if we need one, of the costs of the politics of identity, that our country’s struggle was (and is) less between whites and blacks than about decent people of all races joining to do the right thing.