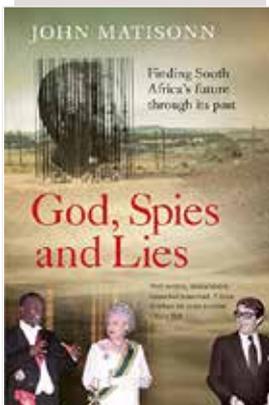


BOOK REVIEW

Graham Dominy is a former Archivist of South Africa who retired in March 2014 after winning a protracted labour dispute with Minister and Department of Arts and Culture. He has worked in and managed a variety of, archival, cultural and heritage institutions since the 1970s. He has studied extensively in South Africa and internationally: obtaining his graduate and professional qualifications in South Africa (University of Natal and Pretoria), his MA in Ireland (University College Cork) and his PhD in the United Kingdom (at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London).



**GOD, SPIES AND LIES:
FINDING SOUTH AFRICA'S
FUTURE THROUGH ITS
PAST** by John Matisonn
PUBLISHER: Vlaeberg,
Missing Ink, 2015
ISBN: PRINT EDITION
978-0-9946702-3-6
EBOOK
978-0-9946702-4-3

God, Spies And Lies: Finding South Africa's Future Through Its Past by John Matisonn

Professor Ged Martin (former Director of Canadian Studies; University of Edinburgh), writing in Past Futures: The Impossible Necessity of History (Toronto, 2004), defines history as a dialogue between present and past "in which we attempt to reassess their actions and beliefs in the light of our priorities and values." This chimes in with John Matisonn's declared intentions in this book; his story is heavy with references to the past and the meanings of history, although he stresses that it is a book about ideas.

The opening two paragraphs of *God, Spies and Lies* (quoted on the back cover of the book for good measure) hit Martin's bullseye with unerring accuracy. Matisonn begins his narrative stating that Jacob Zuma was his house guest, back in the "near perfect summer of 1990/1991." He then fast-forwards to the present day when the said house guest has morally bankrupted the ANC, and accuses Zuma of being no better than the corrupt "bunga-bunga-partying" former Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. Matisonn takes us on the roller-coaster ride that has been South Africa's history from the 1950s to the 20-teens, but all the way through the exhilaration, runs a thread of regret, a thread of bitterness.

As a memoir, I find *God, Spies and Lies* a page turner, but it is more than just a memoir, it is an account of the media under apartheid as well as in the no-longer new, but still sort of, democratic South Africa. Matisonn's personal narrative is interwoven as a seasoned journalist's account of the development and disappointments in the shaping of newspapers, radio stations and, in particular, of the public broadcaster, the SABC.

John Matisonn, Johannesburg born and bred, received his journalistic baptism of fire as a reporter on the *Rand Daily Mail* before moving on to the *Sunday Express*. He received a short jail sentence for refusing to reveal his sources for a story relating to the infamous Information (or Muldergate Scandal), the apartheid government's secret funding of *The Citizen* newspaper. He left the country to work as a correspondent in Washington, returning prepared to serve his short prison sentence – only to find that at the last moment, State President P.W. Botha had pardoned him! Perhaps a sign of gratitude from *Die Groot Krokodil* for the exposés that sank the ambitions of Connie Mulder and smoothed PW's path to power! Or perhaps a tactic to avoid bad publicity in America. In the transition years Matisonn worked to ensure the development of a competent and impartial public broadcaster and his travails in this regard make for compelling reading.

I admired the cover before plunging into the text. While Matisonn deserves great credit for this book, so does the designer of the cover, credited as "mrdesign." The cover is a collage with the dominant image being that of the "Mandela Capture" memorial

near Howick in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands: a shimmering, ethereal and elusive steel sculpture of fifty steel columns providing an image of Mandela's head, now visible, now disappearing, depending on your perspective; a real metaphor for the current state of the nation's politics! The sub-title "Finding South Africa's future through its past" is juxtaposed against this. The rest of the cover, while striking, does not work quite as well. There is an image of President Thabo Mbeki and Queen Elizabeth II, all toggled up in tiara, medals and decorations, walking into a state occasion: Mbeki wearing a British order and Elizabeth wearing a South African order – as is so often said in big South African public gatherings: "All protocol observed!" I puzzled over the meaning of this: certainly it reveals the international acceptance of a once-pariah state, but is Queen Elizabeth depicted because she is the head of the Church of England and thus, tangentially, vaguely, the reference to God in the title is given visual form? I can imagine heresy tribunals from Canterbury and Rome to Tehran and Myanmar sharpening axes and piling up the firewood! Isolated in the bottom right of the cover is a picture of a laughing Tertius Myburgh, former *Sunday Times* editor and strongly alleged by John Matisonn to have been an apartheid spy; a view which was excoriated by Stephen Mulholland in Politicsweb (*"In Defence of Tertius Myburgh"*, 1 December 2015).

The lies referred to in the book are whoppers and Matisonn traces them from the Information Scandal (and even earlier) to the parliamentary appearances of Jacob Zuma denying any knowledge of governmental failings over Marikana, or even the funding of his own home.

It was a relief to discover that the "God" part of the title arises from the view of Matisonn's old journalistic friend and mentor, Charles Bloomberg, that apartheid had a theology as well as a philosophy, and if you wanted to defeat it, you had to understand it. Bloomberg was one of the early investigators into the secretive and powerful Afrikaner Broederbond. The Broederbond started out innocuously enough as an open organisation, but soon turned into the secretive body that sought to control Afrikaner thought, ideas and institutions such as the Dutch Reformed Churches, the Afrikaans schools and universities and in government and business. Broeders and extreme Afrikaner Nationalists such as Hendrik

Verwoerd and SABC head Piet Meyer (for many years the head of the Broederbond), were convinced they were doing God's work and there was a convenient congruence between what the Broederbond thought and what the churches preached as God's word. Bloomberg's exposés began the process of weakening the Broederbond and destroying the tight unity of Afrikaner nationalism.

The "spies" stalk the pages from the notorious Craig Williamson, to Tertius Myburgh to many turned hacks reporting on what happened in newsrooms as well as on the news, in both the old and the new South Africa. According to Matisonn SABC journalists were warned as recently as 2014 that the intelligence services were watching them. The lies referred to in the book are whoppers and Matisonn traces them from the Information Scandal (and even earlier) to the parliamentary appearances of Jacob Zuma denying any knowledge of governmental failings over Marikana, or even the funding of his own home.

Espionage informs the chapter on Thabo Mbeki and foreign policy. The story of how Mbeki tried but failed to persuade Tony Blair and George Bush that Saddam Hussein's Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction has been told before. Matisonn nevertheless adds an interesting quirk; as a result of his experiences of Anglo-American duplicity over Iraq, Mbeki felt he could not trust them over Zimbabwe.

In its way the cover of the book reflects the contents: it's fascinating, but it does not hang neatly together. One of Matisonn's declared purposes is to answer the question "Was there a moment when the democratic government of Mandela's ANC started to go wrong?" (p 17). In answering this he tries to "...cut across all segments and political strands, to link people's anti-apartheid stories with their lives in the democratic era." (p. 18). These are noble aims, but over-ambitious and perhaps part of the reason for the unfortunate clumsiness in the book. It veers from intimate to macro-analytical; from a personal account of his life in a nation oppressed, to the sweeping tour of political events; from the democratic rebirth of his native land to its current economic, political, moral and leaderless morass. He tells gripping stories of editorial feuds and newsroom battles and how these reflected broader national dramas, but the mirror is slightly distorted and the narrative a little jumpy.

Post-1994 is as important as pre-1994 and here Matisonn's vantage point was more exalted as he played a major role in setting up the oversight institutions in the telecommunications and broadcasting sectors, only to see them hollowed out and turned into empty husks; a process started earlier during the Mbeki era and vigorously pursued by Jacob Zuma. Matisonn's descriptions of the power politics and internal rivalries that crippled the institutions, so proudly set up in the post-1994 years, make for depressing reading.

Despite the clunkiness and zig-zagging, this is a riveting book and is a very important contribution to our knowledge of the clash of ideas during the apartheid era, the transition years and the smothering of creative and critical thought by the tentacles of corruption and nepotism during the present administration.

John Matisonn identifies three consequences of political interference in the governance of the nation and of the parastatals:

Firstly, the degradation of institutions; secondly, "inappropriately incentivising investors", and thirdly, an ideological sleight of hand: Mbeki called the creation of a black middle class a "National Democratic Revolution" and Zuma has called his crony relationship with China and Russia "an ideological blow to imperialism."

I conclude on a more personal note: I am fascinated by Matisonn's chosen example of "inappropriately incentivising investors." He alleges that the government ignored the expert advice of Naspers/Multichoice on the building of an information economy, but adds that:

"...they could do a deal to buy the national archive when money changed hands. It is not in the public interest for a private company to have a hold over a national asset that goes back nearly a hundred years. The fine print in the deal is anti-competitive. It will hurt the public in the long run. But government was looking to the short-term so Naspers/Multichoice proposed the deal they could get away with." (p 414).

Matisonn's assertion is vague and despite my carefully reading and re-reading the text, it is not clear from the context whether he is talking about the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, or the archives of the SABC (which are referred

"...they could do a deal to buy the national archive when money changed hands. It is not in the public interest for a private company to have a hold over a national asset that goes back nearly a hundred years. The fine print in the deal is anti-competitive. It will hurt the public in the long run. But government was looking to the short-term so Naspers/Multichoice proposed the deal they could get away with." (p 414).

to a few pages earlier). There was never any suggestion of such a deal during my ten effective years as National Archivist and I would have resolutely opposed the privatisation of either the nation's documentary, or its audio-visual, heritage had this been put to me.

However, this provides a possible explanation for my illegal suspension in 2010. It could be a plausible reason as to why the then Minister of Arts and Culture and her department relentlessly persisted in a futile campaign against me based on specious disciplinary charges and dragged the case out for several years. Perhaps some deal was in the making during this time.

The only way that the national archives could be legally disposed of by the state would be by repealing or drastically amending the National Archives and Records Service Act and this has not been done. A constitutional amendment may also be needed as national and provincial responsibility for archives is set out in Schedule 5 of the Constitution. Legal queries also arise as to whether or not the public broadcaster's archives can be sold into private hands. I would argue that the SABC's archives have a similar status to that of the National Film Video and Sound Archives which are legislatively protected as part of the national patrimony.

These are intriguing questions, not only for me personally, but for the better understanding of the processes leading to the abuse of the principles of good governance and public accountability. I fervently hope that South Africa will not blight its future by selling off its past.