

Z.K. MATTHEWS : A REVIEW OF FREEDOM FOR MY PEOPLE.

by Alan Paton

This book, FREEDOM FOR MY PEOPLE, the autobiography of Z. K. Matthews, edited and supplemented by Monica Wilson, is a welcome addition to the pitifully small collection of books that deal with the lives and times of our black political leaders. I knew four of them well, and they could be compared in intelligence and stature with any of our white political leaders. But their lives and fortunes were totally different.

Albert Lutuli and Z. K. Matthews were tried for treason under Prime Minister Strijdom, Lutuli was banned from public life under Prime Ministers Malan and Strijdom, and again under Prime Ministers Verwoerd and Vorster.

Robert Sobukwe after Sharpeville was sent to prison for three years, and by special Act of Parliament was detained for six years after that, this happening under Verwoerd and Vorster.

Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964 at the Rivonia Sabotage Trial. Of the four men he is the only one living and is still on Robben Island. Lutuli while still banned died in 1967, Z. K. Matthews while Botswana's Ambassador to Washington died in 1968, Sobukwe while still banned died in 1978.

The four most powerful white men of these times denied to the four most eminent black men any opportunity to play any meaningful part in the life of the country that belonged to them all. The four white men condemned the four black men to a life of unremitting opposition. To be tried for treason, to be banned and silenced, to go to prison, that was the lot of any black person who worked for the political and social emancipation of black people. In the last few decades of our history this has been the inescapable lot of any black politician. To be black, to be a politician, to become influential, these were the passports to a hard life of sacrifice. It remains only to add that not one of these four men ever turned his back on such sacrifice.

This book is the edited autobiography of one of the four, Z. K. Matthews. The story of his childhood and young manhood is fascinating. What were its characteristics? First, the possession of parents who would make any sacrifice for their son. Second, the possession by the son of a hunger for learning. Third, the possession by parents and children of a deep religion and an unswerving adherence to principle and to high standards of conduct. And lastly, the gradual awakening of the young man to the condition of his people, and a growing sense of his inescapable responsibility. Matthews says of the help given him by his father and brother: "I know only that it was an offering of the spirit that is forever beyond repayment." He felt the same deep gratitude towards his mother.

Matthews writes another fascinating chapter about Fort Hare, to which he went in 1918. He thought Alexander Kerr was a great principal, and had a great admiration for

Professor Davidson Jabavu. He thought Bishop William Smyth was a kind of saint. He fell in love with Frieda, daughter of the distinguished minister, the Rev. John Knox Bokwe, became engaged to her in 1925, and married her in 1928, even though her uncles did not at first like the idea of her marrying a foreigner. It was a long and happy marriage.

Matthews watched, without passing judgement, the slow emancipation of Edgar Brookes from his white South African chains. He never thought of Christianity as a "white" religion. His passion for the politics of emancipation was pure and steady. He was not attracted to emotionalism and demagoguery. Matthews never forgot some words written to him by Alexander Kerr when he graduated and left Fort Hare to become the headmaster of Adams College High School.

You may be tempted to cut yourself off from the rest of your people, or, on the other hand, to an unthinking advocacy of what the mob clamours for. But I am sure you will examine all things with a clarity of intellectual reason.

Had he lived long enough, Kerr would never have been disappointed, for Matthews was to become one of the most sane, most gifted, most respected figures on the entire South African stage.

Monica Wilson has rendered a great service to the political literature of our country. The book relates how Matthews went back to teach at Fort Hare, how he became a member of the Native Representative Council, how in 1955 he became Acting Principal of the University College, how he was arrested for treason on 5 December 1956, how in 1959 the charges against him were quashed. One of the noblest deeds of this noble man was to resign from Fort Hare within two years of retirement. He wrote that it was a "most bitter choice". Ten others resigned with him, among them Sibusiso Nyembezi, Selby Ngcobo and D. G. S. Mtimkulu.

It remains to record that of the four outstanding leaders mentioned earlier, Lutuli, Matthews, Sobukwe, and Mandela, two of them received some reparation for the selfless and difficult lives that they had led. These two were Lutuli and Matthews. In 1961 Lutuli was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 1966 Matthews was appointed by Seretse Khama as the Ambassador from Botswana to Washington. He thus ended his days living in a community which accorded him a deep respect, something which he had received from a mere fraction of his white fellow-South Africans.

Monica Wilson asks in her closing sentence: "what is wrong with South Africa that she continues to drive out, imprison, or destroy such sons?"

What indeed? □