Journey Into Yesterday

South African Milestones in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa’s links with Europe go back nearly 500 years to the time when European navigators, setting out from Portugal, first sailed round our coasts, where they placed their crosses of discovery. In the ensuing centuries, a new nation developed in the toe of Africa which was descended from Europe and which owed its origins to Europe’s questing genius. In the making of the South African people several countries on the mainland of Europe and the British Isles were concerned at various periods of our history, and there exist still in these countries tangible and permanent links that the visitor may see for himself and which will set in motion on European soil a whole train of South African memories. For not only was Europe concerned in the discovery, the founding and the development of South Africa, but from time to time the making of South African history actually took place in Europe.

This book is an attempt, therefore, to chronicle some, but by no means all, of those places where South Africa may be said to exist in Europe. The search for these links and memories has taken me to many parts of that continent and has brought me in touch with many devoted people, most of whom have never seen South Africa but who faithfully cherish some particular South African memory or observe some particular service for us. As I write, I recall the schoolmaster of the village of Longueval whose pupils bring flowers to Delville Wood, and the Italian peasants I met at Castiglione dei Pepoli, the Welsh octogenarian in London who did so much for the Boer generals, a Huguenot lawyer in Paris, an old lady at Clares and another at Oxford, the mayor of a Dutch town. And one has only to visit the ancient and lovely country churches of England and see their memorial plaques to realise what a price was paid by the families of 19th Century Britain in establishing and maintaining civilised order—the pax Britannica—in many parts of the world and not least in our own.

In the year 1961, as I write, it is no longer fashionable to speak of the days of European colonisation, that historical process to which we, as a nation, owe our origins and so much of our story, a process which established links between Europe and Africa and which ought not to be forgotten in an age in which new symbols and new doctrines are being increasingly articulated in Africa and Asia. This is something which applies particularly to us who live in that part of Africa where Europe made her first successful entry into this continent and where the largest number of European-descended people are to be found. With a quaint predilection for out-of-date nomenclature we still sometimes call ourselves Europeans, whereas in 1961 it is increasingly important for us to be Africans and no doubt in the near future we shall make our African nationality
increasingly emphatic. At the same time we have a proper concern for the continuation and expansion of Western European civilisation in Africa, of which our ancestors were the bearers; this is something which has nothing to do with colonialism. Christian civilisation was established in Africa with the greatest sacrifice and courage and if it is to remain and fructify in Africa we shall need to continue to draw upon, if only spiritually, the resources of Europe, the main source of our civilisation. And if, in travelling about Europe, we are able to renew those historical links and revive memories of those who were the fore-runners in our long South African story, we may also draw strength to continue it, even though in the latter half of the 20th Century it may be a different though, one hopes, as worthwhile a story.

If the contents of this book make a strange assortment and the story it tells is a rambling one, such indeed has been the nature of our history, the haphazard making of events. Standing for instance in a country parsonage in Hertfordshire, I recall that from this house a sick young man went forth to found a fortune and a new country, while not far away in a country churchyard his friend, a Jew from Germany, found his final rest. Then on the windy flats of Holland before the statue of a Boer general, I remember that in a French country town stands a statue of a French nobleman who was the comrade-in-arms of that general and that both of them are buried in the Orange Free State. So the spoor of our history leads back to many corners of Europe and my intention has been to follow it as best I could.

I hope this book will be useful to the South African traveller in Europe. I had such a traveller in mind when I divided my material, not in chronological order, but according to the country to which it belongs. My experience as a South African official in Europe has brought me many enquiries from my travelling countrymen eager to make, what we call in Afrikaans, the agteruitrek, the trek in reverse, to those places in Europe where South Africa may be said to exist. I hope this book provides an answer to some of the questions they have asked me. But, I repeat, this is not a full story, rather an introduction to South African links and memories in Europe, to the large and greatly varied traffic of men and ideas between Africa and Europe, both ways, during five centuries, and, in the final resort, a witness to the peculiarity of a people who might be properly described as being the children of two continents.
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