

BOOKS

In our national slough of despondency, we sometimes forget the heroes without whom South Africa would be even worse off than it is

SHINING LIGHT ON SA'S SHINING LIGHTS

David Gorin

● A new book, *Legends: People Who Changed South Africa for the Better*, reminds us that things could have turned out worse for the country.

Matthew Blackman and Nick Dall have stuck to the formula of their previous two books, *Rogues' Gallery* (which deals with our long history of corruption) and *Spoilt Ballots* (about the despoliation of democracy).

Readers unfamiliar with the authors' approach should know that their style is conversational and accessible rather than analytical or deeply insightful. Still, it's refreshing to read history that doesn't take itself too seriously.

The introduction sets the tone, bringing a smile in the third paragraph: when they mooted the idea of writing about good people in the country's history, say the authors, they were met with responses such as, "That must be a very short book."

Indeed, only 12 people are included — though they admit to having held some legends in reserve for a possible sequel.

And there are some odd omissions. Oliver Tambo — cofounder with Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu of the ANC

Youth League, ANC leader-in-exile for 15 years and a 50-year stalwart of the organisation — gets only four fleeting mentions. Archbishop Desmond Tutu gets just two.

So the book is less a pantheon and more a truncated chronology of South Africa's "rolling landscape of history" from the late 1700s to the present.

The story starts with chief Moshoeshe, who was ahead of his time in foreseeing the inevitability of change. He was something of a philosopher. The French missionary Eugène Casalis acted as adviser and read history to him, recording Moshoeshe's observation that "men have been the same in all ages. Greeks and Romans, Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Basutoos have one common nature."

Understanding this commonality, and possibly encouraged by worldwide precedents, he adapted his political strategies as circumstances demanded: sometimes he allied with the Boers, other times with the British, and he always looked for peaceful solutions or the option to negotiate.

The authors have worked hard at keeping readers entertained. Puns and witticisms are used liberally, as are snappy subheadings. "Black peril, white guilt", for example, is a play on the title of Frantz Fanon's seminal 1952 book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. It's used to headline a section on a 1920 essay by Sol Plaatje, a journalist and founding member of the South African Native National Congress. Plaatje was in the US at the time and felt obliged to point out that there — as in South Africa — black women were at risk from white men significantly more than the other way around.

Referencing John le Carré's legendary Cold War novel, "Tinker, Schreiner, soldier, spy"

is another delightful subheading leading into a side discussion of whether author, human rights campaigner and suffragette Olive Schreiner acted as a spy for the Boers during the 1899-1902 South African War.

Readers may find the text boxes disruptive. They add value, but many could have been woven into the narrative. Pausing to read them too often requires backtracking to pick up the thread. After 100 pages, this becomes a tad tiresome.

Thankfully, there is almost no lightheartedness in the chapter on Steve Biko, aptly titled "The Consciousness of a Prophet". Biko was just 30 years old when he was tortured and murdered after being detained by security police at a roadblock — a strategy adopted by the apartheid apparatus in rounding up so-called enemies of the state.

"Christ's death was the prototype for these murders," said theologian Barney Pitso, cofounder with Biko of the Black Consciousness Movement under the banner of the South African Students' Organisation.

Mandela to Makeba

Which hero stands tallest? Mandela, of course. Was he what Tolstoy said of Abraham Lincoln, a "saint of humanity"? Mandela himself scoffed at this. "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying,"

he told his biographer Tom Lodge.

The authors concur, pointing out — albeit in their chatty style — his presidency's errors of judgment in failing to lead unambiguously on HIV/Aids or to nip in the bud the disastrous arms deal. He was also unwaveringly loyal to despots and human rights abusers such as Muammar Gaddafi.

"Mandela wasn't nearly as strict on those around him as he was on himself," the authors summarise neatly.

But Mandela is a predictable inclusion among the legends. Another is more left field, and enlightening: Sailor Malan, World War 2 fighter pilot hero and leader of the Torch Commando, an early anti-apartheid movement. Sadly, his contributions are today better recognised in the US and the UK than they are here. Embarrassingly, I recognised nothing more than his catchy nickname. For the record: his real name was Adolph Gysbert Malan.

The most uplifting? "Mama Africa" Miriam Makeba, who overcame desperate poverty and the weight of political forces opposing her to become a globally acclaimed songbird.

Legends makes for interesting, easy reading without glossing over the tragedies and idiocies of our past. The final chapter is dedicated to esteemed former public protector and FM contributor Thuli Madonsela, described as "the embodiment of a biblical David": courageous, committed, wise and humble. She would appear, from the acknowledgments, to have helped the authors with fact-checking. I read that twice to be sure it's not a quip. Highly appropriate, I thought. ✕

Legends: People Who Changed South Africa for the Better by Matthew Blackman and Nick Dall (Penguin Random House, 2023). Blackman and Dall are freelance contributors to the FM

