

Review

Denis Herbstein (2004) *White Lies: Canon Collins and the secret war against apartheid*. Cape Town: HSRC Press & Oxford: James Currey

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The HSRC Press and James Currey, neither of them publishing lightweights, have thought it worthwhile to take on Denis Herbstein's history of Canon John Collins and the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF).

Any writer of whodunits with an English and ecclesiastical flavour would be proud of the title, *White Lies*, which works of reference define as 'a well-meant falsehood' or 'a conventional phrase, not strictly true'. The rest of the English setting of this book is also redolent of the crime genre. Here is the maverick Canon of St Paul's, preacher to the Royal Family, living along Ave Maria Lane in the serendipitously named Amen Court. Here his remarkable wife assists in formulating policy, dispenses sound advice with oatmeal biscuits and strong tea to a web of international conspirators and a team of intelligent and dedicated women whose work is secret and dangerous and often a matter of life and death. There are codes and keys to Zurich banks, vast sums of money are exchanged by postal order, and a worker-priest sweeps London streets while his digs provide a secret post box for receiving letters from the network. This cloak (but not dagger) activity is a profound success and contributes to changing the face of a nation. The story has pace, the characters are vivid, warts and all, and the plot is thrilling.

It is also true. The International Defence and Aid Fund had its roots in Trevor Huddleston's appeal to Canon John Collins for money to support families of Defiance Campaigners in 1952. It grew into an international organisation as a result of finance raised in the United Kingdom to pay for the legal defence of the accused in the Treason Trial. When IDAF was

banned in South Africa in 1966 in terms of the Unlawful Organisations Act, any recipient of aid identified as coming from IDAF could receive a sentence of ten years, and so clandestine ways of getting money to those who needed it were developed. The name of the organisation explains exactly what it did. Programme One funded legal defence for those charged under apartheid laws in South Africa, through connections between law firms organised by William Frankel, 'Mr X', in such a way that the firms concerned were unaware of the existence of the others. Programme Two involved hundreds of volunteers in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada and the Nordic countries who wrote letters to families in need in South Africa, who had been deprived of breadwinners through the struggle. Each letter contained postal orders bought by the sender from a lump sum provided by IDAF. Hence the *white lies* of the title. The organisation was highly professional yet based on common sense and concern for individuals: one wonders if it would have got off the ground let alone been sustained, in another age obsessed by managerialism.

Some may find a comparison between a crime novel and the subject matter of this book unsuitable. The intention is not to trivialise. The account has been brilliantly written, with the elaborate and intricate sequence of events laid out with clarity. Herbststein maintains clear control of the central narrative, but the chapters are fascinating and well organised units in themselves. There is a touching chapter on the correspondence between Stephanus Mpanza of P.O. Greenvale, Donnybrook, Natal and Eileen Wainwright, living in Hop Cottage, Hertfordshire, and of the friendship that grew between them. Another explains how the malevolent Craig Williamson was thwarted in his attempt to destroy IDAF, while yet another examines international support for the fund, topped by Collins' annual visit to the Russian Embassy where the handing over of a cheque was ceremoniously accompanied by tea from a samovar. The courage of Imam Abdullah Haron is set in the context of Islamic resistance to apartheid in South Africa: we also learn that the Imam's martyrdom was marked by a memorial service in the crypt of St Paul's, the first time the cathedral had commemorated a Muslim. The book has no footnotes, but a very detailed list of sources including many (over 200) interviews, and precise and useful endnotes, as well as roll call of some of those who wrote letters, from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

South African history has in the past been the victim of omission, bias and distortion, and could be again. The winding up of IDAF in the early

1990s was not altogether a happy process. Nelson Mandela was full of praise for what the fund had achieved, but prime movers in IDAF in 1990 also sensed a desire in the ANC for it to be replaced by an organisation with African leadership, under ANC guidance. Reluctance on the part of the Fund to underwrite legal expenses for Winnie Mandela's defence on charges of kidnapping widened the breach (Herbstein 2004:318-21). When Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* was published in 1994, neither John Collins nor IDAF was mentioned, although the organisation had provided most of the money to fund the defence in the Treason Trial and Rivonia. Luli Callinicos' recent biography of Oliver Tambo is more sympathetic about the role of the IDAF and also ensures that Collins will not be relegated to obscurity in a major account of the struggle against apartheid. Oliver Tambo and John Collins met in Johannesburg when Collins paid his only visit to South Africa in 1952, the start of a 'close, warm and lifelong friendship' (Callinicos 2004:244), as well as an effective political alliance when Oliver Tambo led the ANC in exile from 1958. Tambo's insight into the role of IDAF, where its chief usefulness lay, is most perceptive: he insisted that it 'should never become an extension of the ANC, that it should be the voice of the British people' (Herbstein 2004:497). The liberation of South Africa, though it culminated in the emergence of an African National Congress government, is not the story of one party but has many facets and Denis Herbstein's account of John Collins and the International Defence and Aid Fund is one of them.

References

- Callinicos, Luli (2004) *Olver Tambo: beyond the Engeli Mountains*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Mandela, Nelson (1994) *Long Walk to Freedom*. London: Little, Brown.