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HARD TIMES

urban folklore into their already grotesque daily lives.

Mayhew was working within the reasonably lucrative genre that catalogued the lives of London's street poor. Picturesque and bizarre beggars and hawkers, as well as crooks and conmen, had been described and illustrated for the market since the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Select committees, statistical societies and agitators for change (from Chadwick to Engels) kept the indigent in full view throughout the 1830s and 1840s, and many novelists spliced scenes from 'low-life' into their cityscapes. There was little new about the subject matter. Mayhew's innovation was to let the poor speak for themselves at length. And where other interrogators would cut out their extemporising, Mayhew recognised that the margins of the interviewees' conversation was where the true meaning of their lives often lay.

It is Mayhew, to a greater extent even than Engels, who reveals the processes of a highly complex society where capitalism has come to maturity. Cumulatively, the interviews highlight the structures against which individual poor Londoners fashioned their lives – or failed to do so, and perished. But Mayhew's ongoing appeal also partly stems from his non-alignment with any political theory – or rather, his brief flirtations with various ethical postures, adopted and abandoned within the space of a few paragraphs. He is the man of the crowd, and his shifting moods, ranging from intense empathy to utter disgust, make his work feel more trustworthy rather than less.

He stated at the end of his preface that his aim was simply to alert the rich to the sufferings of the poor, to urge them to 'bestir themselves' to improve the conditions of the people. He did not say how this was to be accomplished, but stimulating 'self-help' seemed to be what he had in mind. Evangelical philanthropy was not the way, as it patronised and robbed the poor of the admirable spirit of endurance (their most attractive feature, as he saw it). He thought protectionism was a good thing: he believed that Free Trade might suit the capitalist, but protectionism suited the working man as a defence against the mid-century's mania for cheapness. Cheap goods always meant cheap labour; cheap labour usually meant poverty.

Today's Right and Left could both claim Mayhew for their own, if they read his investigative findings selectively. Two thousand interviews totalling 1.7 million words (in the unabridged work) speak eloquently about the devastating levels of human misery and injustice that arise when laissez-faire runs amok and charity is the only ameliorative power. However, Mayhew himself stated at the outset, 'I shall not be misled by a morbid sympathy to see them [the poor] only as suffering from the selfishness of others'; elsewhere, he despaired of 'men whom, for the most part, are allowed to remain in nearly the same primitive and brutish state as the savage – creatures with nothing but their appetites, instincts, and passions to move them'.

To order this book at £10.39, see LR bookshop on page 10

GENERAL

MICHAEL HOLMAN

MANDELA, INC

CONVERSATIONS WITH MYSELF

By Nelson Mandela
(Macmillan 454pp £25)

LET'S GET ONE thing out of the way. Nelson Mandela is a great man. His compassion, his tolerance, his capacity for forgiveness and his wisdom broke a political logjam that threatened to engulf southern Africa and enabled him to preside over South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. Others, all extraordinary in their own right, played invaluable roles: Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President F W de Klerk, Walter Sisulu, Joe Slovo, Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki. Without Mandela's magisterial, benign authority, however, South Africa would have remained at war with itself and with its neighbours.

But that is no reason to set aside doubts and misgivings about this fascinating albeit flawed volume, packed with titbits, embedded in material that should be essential to the specialist reader. The problem is that these titbits, intriguing though they are, hardly warrant the purchase of this 450-page book; meanwhile historians and biographers need to be wary, for what is promised is not always what is delivered.

In the words of Verne Harris, leader of the eight-member team responsible for the project, Mandela has 'opened his personal archive'. Twenty-seven years in prison allowed him much time to reflect, and those reflections were smuggled out of jail in the form of an extraordinary range of letters and diaries, transcripts and journals, notes and memorabilia, going back to his Methodist Church card, dated 1930. The result, says Harris, reveals 'not the icon or saint ... Here he is like you and me ... [the book] gives us his own voice – direct, clear, private.'

Admirers can trawl the pages and discover the trivial, the intimate and the poignant, finding out what Mandela had for breakfast on the day he was moved from Robben Island to the mainland (bacon and eggs), how he coped without sex ('one gets used to that ... and it's not hard to control yourself'), and his reaction to the death of his mother: 'I had never dreamt that I would never be able to bury ma,' he wrote in a letter from jail. We learn that Queen Elizabeth is 'a great lady, very sharp'; Pope John Paul II is 'humble, very humble'; Margaret Thatcher is 'warm ... charming ... I was tremendously impressed by her.'

But who is this book for? If *Conversations* were intended for the general reader, these insights, observations and homilies should have been halved in number. Even then, it would require a near obsessive interest in the minutiae of Mandela's life, for we already know much about the

man. We have his 400-page autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*; an authorised biography by Anthony Sampson and a sharp, unauthorised biography by Martin Meredith; the books by Allister Sparks and the account of the transition by Patti Waldmeir; and, if you still are not satisfied, his jailers' story.

Perhaps *Conversations* is intended for biographers and historians? It should be an invaluable source, and it would be churlish to deny that the two-year project is a remarkable achievement. But researchers cannot rely on these documents, for they have been 'winnowed', as Harris puts it – a polite way of saying they have been edited. Mandela's own role was limited. Although the book was produced with his 'blessing', writes Harris, Mandela 'indicated his wish not to be involved personally'. He has merely given the project his approval. So one must assume that Harris and his colleagues took it upon themselves to select the material that would be suitable for us to read.

This winnowing explains some important gaps and raises some questions. Does Mandela's first wife, Evelyn, whom he divorced in 1957, really warrant only two references? Should not Mandela have said something about allegations that he physically mistreated her? Why is there not a single indexed reference to the Iraq war, a subject he felt strongly about? Why is there no reference in his papers to Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe? There may well be good reason to withhold sensitive material. But the failure to register the gaps in the record not only undermines the claim that Mandela has opened his life to public scrutiny, it blunts the cutting edge of what should have been an essential researchers' tool.

So what lies behind this book? Harris says it 'has its origins in the 2004 inauguration of the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Dialogue as the core function of the Nelson Mandela Foundation'. I cannot help wondering if there is more to it than this. I suspect that the book was conceived not merely as an academic exercise but as a fundraising scheme by a foundation that has been in the forefront of a process that has been going for some time: the commercialisation of Nelson Mandela.

Whether it is his autograph or his lithographs, access or image rights or product endorsement, the touch of magic that comes from an association with the world's best known and most loved statesman is available at a price – and that price is often set by the Foundation, which is insatiable in its search for funds to continue its work and imaginative in devising means of raising more money.

No doubt *Conversations* will make the Christmas best-seller list. For some, the knowledge that the Foundation will benefit from its sales – it holds the copyright to the material in the book – is reason enough to buy it. Others may be tempted to cut out the middlemen, write out a cheque for the price, and send it directly to an African charity of their choice.

To order this book at £20, see LR bookshop on page 10