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978-0-521-03364-0 - Selections from the Smuts Papers - Volume I, June 1886-May 1902

Edited by W. K. Hancock and Jean van der Poel

Excerpt

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PART I

THE STUDENT YEARS

12 JUNE 1886–11 SEPTEMBER 1895

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1. STELLENBOSCH

The Smuts Collection contains only two letters, both written by Smuts, which relate to the five years (July 1886 to 1891) that he spent in Stellenbosch as a student at Victoria College. There are, however, a few other personal documents of this period that compensate, to some extent, for the paucity of letters and give an insight into the mind of their author. These are note-books, essays and verses. Some of the note-books are filled with Greek vocabularies—evidence of the thoroughness and intensiveness of Smuts's methods of study. The most ambitious verses are birthday poems for Isie Krige written under the spell of Shelley. The ablest essays are *Homo Sum*—on the subject of slavery—which was published in *Het Zuid-Afrikaansche Tijdschrift*¹ for June 1889, and *South African Customs Union*, entered for a university competition in 1891.

This subject had been prescribed. It was topical, for South African politics at that time turned largely upon the conflicting customs and railway interests and policies of the two inland Boer republics and the two maritime British colonies. Smuts clearly found it congenial. He wrote at length, no doubt at too great length, but with sincerity and force. He built his whole essay upon the conviction which was also to be the foundation of his statesmanship—'the fact that South Africa is one.' The excerpt below (4) sums up the arguments for unity and shows a mature and detailed grasp of the actual political situation in 1891. The preparation and writing of this essay had been for Smuts a highly educative exercise. It had taught him, he said, how to master intellectual material and use it and, more important still, 'I owe to it the birth of my political consciousness.' (14b).

All the surviving writings of Smuts's student years except *Homo Sum* are in English. In common with all the children and young people in the Cape Colony who spoke Afrikaans at home, heard Dutch in church and read it in their Bibles and hymn-books, Smuts had his school and university education in South Africa entirely through the medium of English. Dutch was taught as a second language and Smuts learned to write it well. But English always remained the language in which he expressed himself with the greater ease and profundity.

¹ A monthly magazine published in Cape Town 1878–93.

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1 To C. Murray

Vol. 1, no. 101

The earliest extant letter written by Smuts. The letter from C. Murray that follows provides an account of how it survived.

Klipfontein¹

12 June 1886

Mr C. Murray
Professor, Stellenbosch

Dear Sir, Allow me the honour of your reading and answering these few lines. I intend coming to Stellenbosch in July next, and, having heard that you take an exceptionally great interest in the youth, I trust you will favour me by keeping your eye upon me and helping me with your kindly advice. Moreover, as I shall be a perfect stranger there, and, as you know, such a place, where a large puerile element exists, affords fair scope for moral, and, what is more important, religious temptation which, if yielded to, will eclipse alike the expectations of my parents and the intentions of myself, a real friend will prove a lasting blessing for me. For of what use will a mind, enlarged and refined in all possible ways, be to me, if my religion be a deserted pilot and morality a wreck?

To avoid temptation and to make the proper use of my precious time, I purposely refuse entering a public boarding department, as that of Mr de Kock, but shall board privately (most likely at Mr N. Ackermann's) which will, in addition, accord with my retired and reserved nature.

I shall further be much obliged to you for information on the following important points:—

First, having passed the School Honours Examination² in April last, am I to enter the Public School or the College?³ Second, in case I am qualified for the Junior Matriculation Class, am I exempted or not from a special admission

¹ The farm in the Swartland district of the south-western Cape Province, bought by Jacobus Abraham, father of Smuts, on 30 March 1876. It lies 13 miles north-west of Riebeeck West and is now owned and farmed by Mr J. A. Smuts.

² The School Higher Examination of the University of the Cape of Good Hope.

³ Established as a high school in 1866. Named successively the Gymnasium, Stellenbosch College and, in 1887, Victoria College, it had, since 1874, prepared candidates for the certificates and degrees of the University of the Cape of Good Hope. In 1918 it became the University of Stellenbosch.

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Examination into the College having passed the aforesaid Examination in

1. Latin
2. English
3. Dutch
4. Geometry
5. Arithmetic and Algebra
6. Natural Philosophy ?

Third, the time when the College or P.S., that is, the one I am to enter, commences the next quarter.

Fourth, what are the Schoolfees to be paid ?

Fifth, how are the requisite text-books, etc. supplied, by the Committee, the students themselves, or voluntarily ?

Sincerely assuring you of my deep gratitude if I may have you for a friend, and also, if informed on these points.

I have the honour, dear Sir, of calling myself your obedient servant,

J. C. Smuts

Address:— Riebeeck West
Via Hermon Station

Mimi
Beach Road
Sea Point
21 July 1933

Dear General Smuts—No, this time it shall be Dear Smuts, An exhaustive clearing up of old drawers and boxes incidental to house moving, has brought to light the enclosed.

After the lapse of many years I can recollect distinctly that this letter stood out very clearly from the run of such communications—the writer knew what he wanted. And I suppose that was the reason of my putting it aside, to be forgotten till today.

I don't like destroying it, as I have ruthlessly during these past days burnt piles of old letters. And I don't think it should drift about. I think you will care to look at it, at any rate, if not to hand it to one of your children.

This letter tempts one to reminiscences and reflections. I resist the temptation. But I do take the opportunity of recording my hope that you may by God's good grace through yet many years do the work the Lord set you, and equipped you for, in the service of the world. Ever yours very truly,

Charles Murray

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2 To S. M. Krige

Vol. 1, no. 101A

Riebeek West
10 December 1887

Dearest Isie,¹ When you receive this, it will be the 22 December. Need I express congratulations? Need I tell you what sympathy I feel for you on this your 17th birth-day? No, you know I have more than mere words can express. Some wishes I have expressed in verse,²—some aspirations which I know accord with your own. May I add one more? It is that we may be faithful to each other, that our mutual love may be pure and unselfish, that in whatever relation and circumstances we may be, it may grow from more to more, and, if possible, never be dissolved; that we may be bound together in soul and spirit by a holy and a true love.

People generally have but few chosen friends; so you needn't be surprised when I tell you I have only two on earth, you being one of them: and you are the only one to whom I feel myself drawn by every tie of sentiment and nature. You are the only one in whose society I feel alone, by myself, as if there is no second one, as if we two are one. I do not know whether my character and my ways accord in any way with your tastes and sympathies (I may hope they do) yet this I know,—and I not only know it, but I experience it inwardly as a part of my existence—that I sympathize with you, that I *love* you as my own soul, (to use the phrase in which Jonathan's love for David is described).

Is this the issue of mere chance? Is it chance that we lived for such a long time only a few paces from each other without getting acquainted, and that we suddenly met some time ago and that we felt a mutual liking? No, this is certainly not chance. It is our Heavenly Master who has brought this about, that we may help each other onward on the path of holiness and love, and that in loving each other we may learn to love him more intensely. Whatever the whispering tongue of the world may allege, let our love never be romantic or sentimental, but the deep love of truth, which sticketh closer than a brother, and is only purified, never dissolved, by adversity.

¹ Sybella Margaretha Krige, whom Smuts married in April 1897.

² See 3.

You remember that I told you the morning after you had sent me those lines I was quite upset at reading them. Had I no reason to be upset and unseated by such a stanza as this:—

Oft I've tried to be a Christian,
But I *cannot, cannot* be,
So no hope to live in heaven
Through Eternity I see.

Now from the very first time that I began to know you I saw a Christian in you, and I still maintain that you are one; so you can understand how I felt when I read that stanza. Isie! you *are* a Christian are you not? You *are* washed in the blood of the Lamb, bought unto Life Eternal. We too *will* one day 'meet in glory yonder, (though through grace and grace alone) when we've done our work down here.' O what shall we tell our Saviour when we meet Him on that golden Shore? Everything is so extremely simple and intelligible in salvation. Don't you believe that Saviour, do you think he is a liar and deceiver when he says he died for you? I know you believe. Hear now what Jesus says: 'He that *believeth, hath* everlasting life'—John v. 24. Don't you believe Him when he says this. Does He tell a lie here? Surely not. But then you are a Christian. Does he want anything more than this? No: 'He that *believeth, hath.*'

I know where the difficulty comes in. You wish perhaps to have a *security* that you are saved. But this is just the very point. The word of Jesus: 'He that *believeth, hath*' must be security enough. You must take him just on his word. This is the new life: not to walk by sight, but by faith, to believe what he says. All who go to hell do so because they don't believe this word of the Lord, because they make Him a liar. But you surely trust Him and will never think Him guilty of a falsehood. I give myself to Him—He says He takes me—and I must believe He does so. This is salvation. You *are* a Christian.

As to the few lines of verse I have written, I can only deplore that they are not more worthy of your Birth-day. Their composition has decisively convinced me that I am no poet. I send them only to you, and would not have sent them to any other, for I know that love—or, at the very least, pity—will annihilate your critical powers in this instance. It may seem affected to

THE STUDENT YEARS

2

your taste that I should put my wishes (which are such as every mortal would express) into the mouth of Heaven and Earth; but I have done so in allusion to that evening when we talked in your garden of the voice of Nature. You wrote a poem for me on occasion of that talk, and I thought I might remember it in a few lines to you. For the same reason the somewhat long and irrelevant introductory part has been written: so that the whole represents a heap of dissimilar elements miserably mixed together. Yet whatever the verse, the thoughts in some cases, though not very poetic, are yet true, and that is a good thing. If the general tone seems to be too religious for this occasion, remember again that I have written for *you*, and was consequently at ease in expressing religious sentiments.

Don't study too much during the holidays. Your mind will be a hundred times stronger next quarter if it enjoys a thorough relaxation of four weeks. I for my part am not going to pay attention to book-work, though I will yet manage to study a little. *Prometheus Unbound* will be an agreeable companion in your quiet hours; it proved to be such to me, at least. But let me warn you of one thing: read the last Act most of all, for it is really the best poetry I have ever read; and I think you will to a great extent concur with me in this opinion. The various choruses seem to have something unearthly about them. They don't seem to be the product of a mortal, but of some spirit from another world. And the more you read them, the deeper this impression takes hold of you. People think Shelley was an atheist; but I have never read a poet who re-echoes so deeply the spirit of the Bible and who infuses such an ethereal spirit into me. His poetry is love, loveliness and thought. Take for instance his 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', pp. 523. Such a tone of unearthly melancholy breathes throughout the whole, deepened by the intensity of Shelley's feeling. What do you think of the second stanza, of the third and second last? By the feelings he stirs up in your heart you can know he wishes to say a thousand times more than he does really say.

Or take the 'Stanzas written in Dejection', pp. 515. Have you ever read a piece which breathes such a mournful tone, so filled with despair? And yet one seems to fall in love with the man's despair, though one doesn't know why. Or read the few

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STELLENBOSCH

lines 'Lament' on pp. 502—(Your 'Lines' are on pp. 503)—or the 'World's Wanderers' pp. 508 and also the exquisite 'Lines' there. All seem to be voices from another world, speaking of love, hope and purity.

Would you hear how Nature Speaks?—Read the 'Pine Forest'—pp. 496—on a quiet summer evening in your garden, just as the sun sets:—

A spirit interfused around
A *thinking silent* life.

Don't forget your promise of a Christmas piece for me. If however you find any difficulty in the way of doing so, you must not write; at least, I shall not consider it a breach of your promise. I must tell you too that I relish your poetry quite as much as Shelley's; and I suppose you will also relish mine as much or nearly as much (!).

If Minnie¹ comes to know that I have written to you, please convey my best love to her. O what pleasant moments I have spent with you and her this past term!

Wishing you happiness and joy with the coming Christmas and with New Year, I am, Very truly yours,

Jan Tot²

3 Poem [1889]

Box D

The first birthday poem to Isie Krige was written by Smuts in 1887. The second (3) is dated 22 December 1889. A third was written in September 1894, when he was in Strassburg; it is called 'Love and Life' and inscribed: 'To Mia on her 24th birthday, December 22 1894' and was published in the Stellenbosch Students' Annual for 1894–5. The MSS. of all these poems, in Smuts's handwriting, are in the Smuts Collection.

To I.M.K. on Her Nineteenth Birthday

I.

'Tis two long years since last I to thee wrote
A few short lines of love and sympathy

¹ Minnie Rust, sister of Isie Krige. Born 24 October 1872, died 1955.

² Tot or Tottie, an abbreviation of Hottentot, was the nickname of Isie's brother, P. S. Krige, because he had black hair as an infant, though later it became fair. The fair-haired Smuts seems also to have been nicknamed Tot for a while.

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3

On thy then Birthday: but how far remote
 Down Time's dim vistas seems that day to me!—
 So varied are the scenes, such the infinity
 Of those experiences through which the soul
 In its swift voyage to eternity
 Through dismal desert wild, by flowery knoll,
 Through shallows and through deeps unceasingly did roll.

2.

Now once again I wish to talk to thee,
 Now that thy old year's past, now that a new
 Is come—of thy soul-struggle to be free,
 What time the horizon dark and darker grew,
 And gloom o'erspread the heavens, and thick dew
 Fell bitter cold, and winds and storms closed round
 Of killing doubts and questionings not a few:
 Gloom and unrest within, wild storms around
 Banished the Light divine, and Music's heavenly sound.

3.

O gloomy time before thou wert quite free,—
 When in thy soul Despair was king supreme,
 In Thy sweet soul, now shrine of Liberty,
 But then a gloomy dungeon whence no gleam
 Of Heaven's light fell; no, nor did it seem
 As if there was a Heaven, whence the Light
 Of Hope and Faith-inspiring stars might stream,
 As it has ever done, since first the Night
 Of Phantasms and Chaos went bye in hideous flight.

4.

And to that Shrine a worshipper I came,—
 At first a passerby on Life's high way,
 But soon drawn near by its reported fame—
 For in it still with undiminished ray
 Pristine Divinity did shine; 'Stay,
 Lonely traveller,' said an unknown voice,
 'Here drink sweet water, pure and fresh as day
 Here worship in its silence, far from Noise
 Where sleep the unfathomed Depths of Being's divine joys.'

10

5.

I paused and reverently drew near, the day
 Was sinking in the West; 'twas calm around,
 Nature was hushed, and on her sweet face lay
 Heaven's Smile ineffable, nor stir nor sound
 Of moaning wind,—but all creation wound
 In the deep silence of Eternity,—
 No sphere to sister-sphere made rhythmic sound
 Audible midst the universal Sleep
 As silent Adoration knelt o'er the vasty Deep.

6.

My soul,—it drank that liquid peace and clear
 Till sweet intoxication stilled its thirst
 And then I kneeling worshipped;—Ah me! *here*
 An Image of the Eternal I saw first
 On this wide world, where it is immersed
 And hidden deep in sham and phantom-shell
 Formed in Life's sea, and there with darkness cursed
 And deep opacity, hiding what fell
 Of Beauty and of Truth from the Eternal well.

7.

And then I rose; Heaven's lamps were shining bright
 In the far deeps of Space; dimmed were my eyes
 By some Presence felt but hid from sight;
 Dissolved in Thought I saw before me rise
 A Shape substantial, which etherialized
 My baser presence; Truth's transparency
 Shone with mild radiance in it, realized
 By Soul-communion;—glorious 'twas to see
 That Time-apprehended Form of Eternity.

8.

Then faded slow that angel form away
 And to me sense returned; I looked again
 To see the Temple in the star-light ray;
 But it was gone; first I thought to remain
 In silent Thought and Worship, but the rain
 With grim sarcasm replied, 'Get thee hence
 Thou dreamy loiterer,' I strode off amain
 Deep and long musing on this problem, 'Whence
 Come these airy shapes to this our world of sense?'