

Vale

NOTICAS

IAN DOUGLAS SMITH

1919-2007

Although always staunchly true to his beliefs, Ian Smith attracted controversy and more than his fair share of misunderstanding.

His son, Robert Smith said on Wednesday that he expected as much vitriol from the press as praise for his late father. And, rightly, he refused to say more, arguing whatever he said would be misconstrued. Nevertheless, barely had he spoken than the headlines, commentators and obituaries were dismissing his father as a bigotted, unthinking racist. This fate was shared by his predecessors as prime minister – Lord Malvern, Sir Roy Welensky, Sir Garfield Todd, Sir Edgar Whitehead and Winston Field - most of whom disliked him and some of whom despised him. All were accused at some stage as being racist.

They and Ian Smith were, of course, victims of history, caught in a straitjacket.

They had inherited a country freshly implanted into a late iron-age culture in the middle of Africa. They all sought in their varying ways to bring to Rhodesia the benefits of the Western concept of democracy, unknown to the people they were living amongst. They all intended to foster non-racial political evolution which would achieve rule by the majority in the fullness of time.

None were able to do so because the British and the West, mired in the Cold War and economic consequences of the Second World War, wanted to appease the African nationalists and rid themselves of their imperial responsibilities. The result is the current state of Africa. Need I say more?

Although I knew Ian Smith for 27 years I will not pretend to understand his essential being. He was immensely generous and helpful to me in many ways with my project but he was a private man. We discussed the issues which I was studying but, although both Carole and I worked on his book, *The Great Betrayal*. I was not a confidant, nor did I presume to be. He paid me the great compliment of giving me sole access to his official papers on which I have based my two books 'So Far and No Further!' (his words on declaring UDI) and my about-to-be published *A Matter of Weeks rather than Months* (Harold Wilson's boast when imposing sanctions), and a third book, as yet untitled and half-written. I was not, however, offered access to his private papers or his diaries on which he based *The Great Betrayal*. And I respect his decision.

Thus I would find it difficult to write a biography because I lack the crucial insight.

What I can declare is that Ian Smith was one of great men who left an indelible footprint on the march of time. His detractors only betray their ignorance and misunderstanding of the man and the world he was born into. He came from a family and a society which understood

that duty was part of your being. He was at heart a farmer and, like his father, Jock Smith, before him, a great cattleman. Indeed, he was happiest walking among his cattle.

A quiet, shy man, he had qualities which his detractors never recognised. His leadership was unspoken but led him to captain sports teams at school and university, to command his RAF flight and to become the Chairman of the Students Representative Council of Rhodes University before being asked to represent Selukwe in the Southern Rhodesian Parliament. Professor Hobart Houghton, the distinguished Professor of Economics, urged him to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship and go on to Oxford University to further his studies but Ian Smith wanted to go farming. All he ever yearned for was to be on his beloved Farm Gwenora with his cattle.

A measure of the man was that he retained life-long friendships of men such as Jack Howman, Sam Whaley, Ken Mackenzie, P.K. van der Byl and so many more. He came from what my son, Andrew, calls the 'Warrior Generation'. He faced the terrors of war and suffered grievously. A lesser man would have taken the offer to return to Rhodesia as an instructor after his Hurricane crash in 1943.

Instead he returned to 237 Squadron and fought on. His resourcefulness came to the fore when he fought with the partisans in northern Italy after being shot down in 1944. His leadership and his tough response to any challenge came when he led a party of escapees over the Maritime Alps in his bare feet in the hard winter of 1944-1945. Again he did not go home but went back to fight in Northern Germany. His war left him with pain for the rest of his life and that impassive face which misled so many of his detractors. If I cannot share with you any particular personal insights into the man, I can debunk many of the accusations laid against him. For example, he did not declare war on African nationalism. Quite the reverse.

In 1962, during the premiership of Whitehead, ZAPU chose the 'Armed Struggle' in accordance with the Marxist prescription for the acquisition of power. Arms caches and armed men began to be found and picked up. Winston Field and Ian Smith inherited this and all Governments have to act or abdicate. He was not, as depicted by his enemies, and Harold Wilson and the British press in particular, a weak, indecisive puppet of his right wing. He was his own man. He was not an appeaser like Macmillan, Butler, Sandys, Wilson, Carrington and the host of others who presided over the decline of Britain's world status.

He was also not overawed by any of these men.

The right wing did not force his hand on UDI. The British did this by refusing to negotiate with him and then, at the last minute, offering him impossible conditions including the loss of powers gained in 1923. The right wing within the Cabinet did not persuade him to turn down the Tiger deal as Harold Wilson and his ilk liked to believe. He arrived on the deck of HMS Tiger warning Wilson that he could not accept the British prescription for Rhodesia's return to legality – rule by a Governor and Whitehall for an albeit short period. He knew it would be fatal for Rhodesia and Lord Soames would prove him right in early 1980. As Cabinets work by consensus, he agreed to table the Tiger package before him, but he warned Wilson again that he could not accept the method of the return to legality.

We men are all rightly influenced by our wives but he was not a puppet of Janet whatever his critics liked to believe. Without doubt he valued her opinion but he was his own man. He was not the devious tricky liar his opponents liked to depict him as. He was obstinate and he refused to fall for the guile of the British, unlike Bishop Muzorewa. Indeed, Ian Smith's ability

to out-manoeuvre and outlast his opponents, led Sir Roy Welensky to tell me one day in 1977 in his office in Old Lonrho Building that he wished he could draw. If he could draw, he said, he would draw a cartoon of Ian Smith as the Great Chief Sitting Bull seated outside his tepee next to his totem pole on which were hung all the scalps of those who had negotiated with him and failed. They included Lord Butler, Duncan Sandys, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Arthur Bottomley, Lord Gardiner, Harold Wilson, Michael Stewart, George Thomas, George Thompson, B.J. Vorster, Hilgard Muller, Henry Kissinger, David Owen, Andrew Young and more.

Ian Smith is accused of being a racist by almost all the obituaries you will read. Yet he abhorred apartheid and the Afrikaner Nationalists. I had many discussions with him on this subject. He expressed admiration for many of the Africans we discussed including Nelson Mandela. It is true that he called Mugabe a Marxist gangster but was he wrong?

I would say that he was realist and from the outset recognised that it would be impossible and indeed suicidal to settle with Mugabe and his ilk. Ian Smith made the mistake of saying in public 'Never in a thousand years' and that mistake still reverberates. Nevertheless, he warned the British from the outset that a premature transfer to majority rule would be disastrous but they disagreed, saying he was blinded by his own bigotry. He was also not the barely literate Rhodesian Front farmer many liked to think he was. He surprised Bill Deedes by speaking Italian. He could surprise one by quoting whole passages of Shakespeare (another legacy of his time in Italy).

When Carole, Andrew and I saw him in January of this year, one of us (I fear it was me) mentioned something about being true to oneself. We were treated to the whole second half of the passage from Hamlet

'This above all: to thine own self be true.
And it must follow, as night the day,
Thou canst not then be false
to any man.'

He was to himself true.
Thank you