

A Moral Giant

Nelson Mandela
Mary Benson
Penguin pbk £2.50



To her earlier studies of the African National Congress of South Africa, for which this country owes her thanks, Mary Benson adds a timely biography of the ANC's world-famous leader Nelson Mandela. This is an impeccably clear, direct and I believe accurate account, of a remarkable and rightly admired person of rare intelligence, honesty and courage who has known how to hold fast, through years of extreme oppression, to the belief that justice and peace can be made to prevail against every kind of political violence and official crime. Without sentimentality or rhetoric on Benson's part, Mandela is revealed as a moral giant compared with the malevolence that persecutes him.

Another virtue of this usefully concise biography is that it places its subject firmly and intelligibly within the context of the anti-racist struggle to which Mandela has devoted his life. This is therefore a book for all sympathisers with that struggle who want to know more of the facts and the 'argument'; in the same way, it is a book for the curious whose interest has been stirred by South African news over the past few months, but who now feel they need reliable information on the background. For if this is a 'short life' of Mandela, it is also a dependable sketch of his 'times'. Even the well-informed are likely to benefit from reading Benson. Although I have followed the South African news for

rising 40 years, I still found this book could tell me things I did not know before.

Benson's historical sketch in these brief chapters is especially good, it seems to me, in its portrayal of the difficult and often hazardous process whereby the ANC - with its allies, not least the South African Communist party - has advanced itself to the political and moral maturity it undoubtedly commands today. That process, as she shows, has had to pass through periods of doubt, compromise or dogmatism, as well as through dilemmas of sometimes huge proportions and times of appalling persecution (the latter not yet ended). But in these latest years its maturity has been shown in many different ways, perhaps above all in the development of unity-in-struggle represented by the United Democratic Front.

Mandela's own contribution to that development, and his crucial participation in it, are well brought out in these pages, not only in discussion of his choices and decisions but also in quotation from his lapidary writings and statements from prison. One can fully understand just why it is that Mandela is the standard-bearer and epitome of the whole democratic movement in South Africa.

My own hope is that readers of this book will include those good persons here who still nourish doubts on the justification for an all-out boycott of the apartheid regime. Above all in the cultural and academic sphere, such boycotts can never be wisely applied without cast-iron justification. That kind of justification exists in this case. It exists, essentially, by reason of the fact that *effective* anti-apartheid action - outside South Africa as well as inside - can alone speed up the dismantlement and dismissal of the apartheid system. No-one doubts, I suppose, that apartheid's days are numbered: the message seems to have got through even to Botha and company. But how long must the agony continue to be dragged out? What further miseries must lie along the path of do-nothing and delay?

Without effective action - and that includes boycott, every kind of boycott - all talks of freedom in South Africa, whether personal or political or academic, remains the ploughing of water and the sowing of the wind. Will those who doubt this please read Mary Benson, and think again.

Basil Davidson