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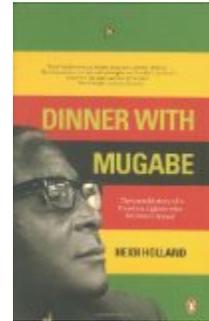
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heidi Holland. *Dinner with Mugabe: The Untold Story of a Freedom Fighter Who Became a Tyrant.* Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2008. xxi + 250 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-14-302557-3.

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Mugabe the Man, from a Journalist's View

This very interesting book is by a journalist from southern Africa who has published in a wide variety of news media for several decades. Motivated by her own history as a supporter of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle in the 1970s, Heidi Holland (who actually had “dinner with Mugabe” in the late 1970s) seeks to answer the questions that torture many disappointed liberal whites who have some connection to Zimbabwe: What happened to Robert Mugabe? Once the darling of the West, admired for his leadership of a promising African country, how and why did he become a tyrant, viciously opposed to any voices critical of his rule and seemingly set on the destruction of once-prospering Zimbabwe? The main methodology Holland uses to address these questions, and the book's major contribution, is a large number of interviews conducted with an impressive array of people who knew Mugabe personally. There is even an interview with Mugabe himself from late 2007, a nearly unbelievable achievement when it was conducted.

Academic analysis of Mugabe and the political economy of post-independent Zimbabwe is thick and rich. The dominant analysis is that Mugabe always had autocratic tendencies, and an ethnic vision of Shona rule under the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) for Zimbabwe that quickly played out in the Matabeleland massacres known as Gukuruhundi in the early 1980s that crushed the political competition of fellow freedom fighter Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). But this is a different kind of book. While aware of the academic literature, Holland's mission is to

understand Mugabe as a person, his psychology and motivations. In this effort she follows two main streams: first, she develops a “psycho-biography” that utilizes insights from psychology to interpret Mugabe's key behaviors; second, she identifies key conditions and elements of Mugabe's political context over time that help explain his turn to tyranny.

The first stream would likely cause unease in most academics (including me), for reasons I describe below. Academics will also likely be uncomfortable with the frequent interjections of opinion and an obvious bias in interpretation, part of the journalistic tone which will likely also make it more appealing to the general reader. The scholar will be more comfortable with the second stream, and Holland addresses a large number of relevant contextual issues that, while they do not absolve Mugabe of responsibility for Zimbabwe's meltdown, are important to any explanation of the contemporary situation. For example, she explores the constraints imposed at Lancaster House that hamstrung Mugabe's desires to finish the revolution through land reform. She raises the intransigence of white Zimbabweans, including politicians such as Ian Smith (who was allowed to remain in the country and the new parliament), and commercial farmers, both of whom continued to act as a racial block, hence polarizing and emphasizing race when Mugabe was actually interested in partnerships (for example, he had several whites such as Dennis Norman in his first cabinet). Holland points to the West in general for turning a blind eye to the massacres in Matabeleland and

hence contributing to Mugabe's growing sense of omnipotence and invulnerability. She also lays blame on the West, but especially the United Kingdom, for failing to promote land reform in the late 1990s, when the Blair government refused to honor a deal Mugabe had struck earlier with John Major's team. The failure of the land summit in 1998 left Mugabe no room on the issue, and events quickly descended into the well-known chaos we have today. Holland also emphasizes the continuing support from other African leaders for Mugabe, both now and in the past, that has been poorly understood and highly underestimated by the West, and which has also allowed Mugabe to act with near impunity. All these issues, and more, make interesting reading for those who have at least a general understanding of recent Zimbabwean history.

What saves the "psycho-biographical" parts of the book for this skeptical reader is the interview-based approach. Most of the sixteen chapters center around an interview with a key person with first-hand knowledge of Mugabe, often from important political and personal times. Interviewees include Mugabe's brother, Donato Mugabe, and first wife Sally's niece, Patricia Bekele. These sections paint a personal portrait of Robert Mugabe as a shy, bookish child, with no friends, who tried fiercely to live up to his mother's vision of him as destined for greatness, after being abandoned by his father in his early years. In later chapters Holland emphasizes the impact of the death of Mugabe's young son while Mugabe was in prison (he was not allowed to attend the funeral). Mugabe's personality in jail is described by Mac McGinness, one of Mugabe's guards. Holland also interviews key British political figures such as former U.K. foreign secretary Lord Carrington who brokered Lancaster House, and Lady Soames (daughter of Winston Churchill and wife of the last governor of Zimbabwe, Christopher Soames). Lady Soames was very fond of Robert Mugabe, whom she describes as potentially good and warm, but naïve about leadership. Ian Smith gets his say, and Holland suggests that his stubbornness and immaturity are

very like those of Mugabe. Clare Short, the U.K. international development secretary under Tony Blair who failed so badly on the land issue, has her chance to state her case. Dennis Norman is interviewed, offering inside views of the early political years in which he enjoyed a good relationship with Mugabe, and during which agricultural successes were scored in both the small-scale and commercial sectors under his ministry. Holland interviews Father Fidelis Mukoni, head of the Jesuits in Zimbabwe, and overseer of all official functions for Mugabe. Mukoni never criticizes Mugabe even though he was part of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace that so scathingly criticized the events of Gukuruhundi and implicated Mugabe in the massacres. Other Catholic clergy are interviewed, as Holland holds the view that the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe has been instrumental in its collusion with the state in relation to its brutality against opposition. Even Mugabe's tailor and private doctor are interviewed, as are Jonathon Moyo and Edgar Tekere. Tekere is scathing, while Moyo is circumspect, reluctant to share much of a personal opinion beyond the observation that Mugabe believes he is born to rule, and should die in office like a monarch.

The reader may find the psychological comments hard to take. For example, Holland asserts that Mugabe remains traumatized by his experiences of his domineering mother; he has never recovered from his first child's death; he has an identity crisis in being caught between being an "Englishman" and an "African"; he was so brutalized in prison that he takes it out on his enemies; his jealousy of Mandela contributed to his increasingly repressive tactics in the 1990s; et cetera. However, the content of the interviews is worth the read. Holland's analysis may not always be convincing or sufficiently nuanced to satisfy the academic reader, but she certainly succeeds in offering new material that complicates our view of Robert Mugabe, and reminds us that history is a process of both biography and larger events of politics and economy.

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