

Nelson in camera



MANDELA: Echoes Of An Era by Alf Kumalo; text by Es'kia Mphahlele (Penguin Books, 161pp, R49,99).

Alf Kumalo is a seasoned and effective photographer — he can get to the right

place at the right time — and this book showcases pictures from the Fifties to the more recent tumult of the Release.

Kumalo is a news photographer: he is sent out on assignments with a brief, but obviously the published work is (a) newsworthy and discarded the next day; and (b) only the tip of an iceberg of material that grows vaster with the years. Like most professional photographers, I suppose, he looks back over his collection from time to time and wonders if it would make a book. A theme is always needed; here the theme is Mandela. The focus is always on or in the vicinity of the ANC leader.

Well... up to a point. Two pictures suggest the broadness of the net. On page 69 we have: "Photographer Alf Kumalo and Muhammed Ali. Himself a keen amateur boxer in his youth, Nelson Mandela had a copy of this photograph in his prison cell." And then, on page 61, we have a deranged looking mutt, Mandela's dog Kruschev, who was "known as a formidable watchdog, guarding the family home while Mandela was in prison."

On this basis, almost anything would do — "West Street, Johannesburg, where Mandela sometimes walked in order to get a takeaway curry." I made that up, but there are pictures of overcrowded classrooms and funerals taken while Mandela was in prison and definitely every picture ever taken by Kumalo was snapped while Mandela was doing something. The idea is, perhaps, that Mandela is such an overpowering and symbolic presence that, like the poet W H Auden's Freud, he is no more a man but "a climate of opinion."

It would, therefore, be up to Prof Mphahlele's text to illuminate such disparate, and sometimes distressing, material. To define the theme, in other words. The writer is perhaps the most strongly humanist observer of apartheid to have emerged before the imposition of Bantu Education — a fact which gives lyricism and strength to his style — but here he has distanced himself, letting the history speak almost too plainly and the effect is of a little too much compression. The better-known facts of Mandela's life are reiterated, but that inscrutability — the sense that one never knows quite what Mandela is thinking — is not penetrated.

In this paragraph, for example, there is little that is genuinely illuminating: "The turbulent Fifties raged on. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 confirmed all our fears and the belief that once Afrikaner ideology had pissed on education, the stink would linger with us until we replaced the system. The removal of Alexandra Township edged towards a confrontation. It never happened. Attempts by the ANC to weaken the government's resolve were blatantly impotent."

Some sweeping judgments are made on the ideological programmes of various black liberation movements and bodies, but there simply isn't the space to do much more than sketch out a rarefied dialectic, remote as the War of Jenkins' Ear: "(The Communist Party) was pretty aggressive in pushing the case of the class struggle as against nationalism or Africanism. The Indian leadership represented mostly the interests of the merchant class or intellectuals. The ultimate effect of this co-existence was that the nationalism that had originally fired Mandela and Tambo was no longer a one-way street. It had never, in any event, been as passionate, pristine and calculating as Lembede's or Mda's, which they equated with Africanism..."

The first marriage is soon disposed of: "He and his wife Eveline became estranged and, despite Kaiser Matanzima's mediation, the rift came. He made it clear to Eveline that no attempt to save the nine-year-old marriage was worth the trouble... Both parents were hurting badly because the only sensible solution was unbearable. In 1955, they separated. In the same year, Nelson met Winnie Madikizela, a social-work student."

Winnie makes frequent appearances. She is there on page 115 with her football team and some cops, looking a proper bossyboots.

Books like this are designed to catch the historical moment, the mood of joy and awakening to possibilities symbolised in a man freed after long and grinding incarceration.

In a way they demand too much of Mandela: he must supply the hidden text, the connecting matter between the family pictures and the desolation of mass funerals, the excited young faces that have become old men, the mystery of what it must be like to be the most famous man in the world.

Inevitably, such books are hastily prepared — captions and text and pictures are laid out in a self-defeating fashion, too jumbled-up to be sorted out adequately, so that emotion leads one on rather than a coherent line, whether personal or public. Perhaps the ideal text would be an interview — a commentary on the photographs as they stir memory. Mphahlele has done his best, but "reflections on an era" cannot in their nature reveal too much about personal hardship.

The reproductions lack crispness, which is not fair on Kumalo. And I would have liked it better if Kumalo himself had contributed some notes on where and how the pictures were taken. In the event, it's a coffee-table book about a man of the people, or, rather, his historical context — and perhaps there's too much of a paradox there to be altogether satisfactory.

Peter Wilhelm

Craftsman's joy

BULBOUS PLANTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA by Niel du Plessis and Graham Duncan, watercolours by Elise Bodley (Tafelberg, 192pp, R175).

Sumptuous is one of several apt words that can be used to describe this magnificent volume. It will delight not only the botanist, horticulturist or humble home gardener, but also the discriminating connoisseur of fine books.

It comes, splendidly cased, in both a Collectors' and a Standard edition and is truly a tribute to the different skills and crafts involved in a publishing venture of this nature.

The text itself is informed and — to this lay reader, at least — appears to conform to the relevant scholarly canons. It is also highly readable, even for the non-specialist; indeed, the writers' main purpose is to introduce the ordinary gardener to "the lovely and wonderfully varied ornamental geophytic plants of southern Africa." These are the corms, rhizomes and tubers that we normally lump together as "bulbs" and with which our sub-continent is so richly endowed.

The true glory of these flowering plants emerges from Elise Bodley's superb full-colour plates, which have been exhibited at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum and which are themselves enough to make this book a collector's treasure.

This is, however, essentially a practical book geared to the preservation, through cultivation and propagation, of endangered species of geophytes. At the same time, it meets another broader goal, lyrically and accurately summed up in the Foreword: "It presents so tantalising an overview of our bulbous flora that it will surely lure new generations of growers."

Peter Randall

NIEL DU PLESSIS & GRAHAM DUNCAN
BULBOUS PLANTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA
A GUIDE TO THEIR CULTIVATION AND PROPAGATION
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