

Book Review

Kansvatter: Die rustelose lewe van Ben Viljoen

Carel van der Merwe

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To write a biography is a daunting task but if done correctly and fairly, it can be a magnificent piece of historical literature. A biography, and especially an autobiography, is a literary genre that can assist any historian to see past events directly through the eyes of the person about whose life is being written. Some historical figures can boast a long list of biographies due to their popularity during their lifetime or shortly after it. Others are either merely mentioned briefly in other publications or their biographies are limited due to a variety of external factors. When it comes to Benjamin Johannes (or is it Barend Johannes?) Viljoen, his life story is finally explained thoroughly for the first time by the Stellenbosch historian, Dr Carel van der Merwe.

Carel van der Merwe (henceforth Van der Merwe) is a qualified chartered accountant with an impressive curriculum vitae when it comes to his experiences in the financial sector. His interest however is not limited to financial issues. He is also an award-winning novelist, with a master's degree in Creative Writing from the University of Middlesex, and he proved his expertise in historical research when his book about Eugene N Marais's time in London, *Donker stroom*, was published. He then enrolled for a PhD in History at Stellenbosch University, completing his thesis about the life of General Ben Viljoen. He graduated in 2018 and soon after he reworked his PhD thesis into the book *Kansvatter: die rustelose lewe van Ben Viljoen* (henceforth *Kansvatter*). He was awarded the kykNET-Rapport prize for the best non-fiction publication in 2020, and the book has received good reviews from different historians and book reviewers.⁵⁷⁴ This reviewer shares their enthusiasm about the book.

Kansvatter is presently only available in Afrikaans and it is this reviewer's fondest wish that this book be translated into English. The reason for this wish is described below. Firstly, the striking title should receive some attention. The reviewer is of the opinion that the best English translation for the Afrikaans word *Kansvatter* is 'opportunist'. The word 'opportunist' can be used in a negative or a positive sense depending on the motive of the person who calls someone an opportunist. Keep this idea in mind as you read the book. Undoubtedly Viljoen was an opportunist. Coming from humble beginnings in the Eastern Cape, working daily with his family on their farm to be able to survive the tumultuous nineteenth-century Tembuland, his desire for greater things came with his interest in the life and times of the French emperor, Napoleon I. Despite his limited schooling, Viljoen was – like Bonaparte – a strategist and a tactician, and there are many examples in this book to endorse these claims.

As he approached adolescence, the restlessness of his life did not stop. Trying like so many other Afrikaners of the time to find their fortunes on the Witwatersrand in search of gold or profiting from the miners, Viljoen would soon realise the true harshness and unfairness of life when, in his early twenties, he was financially ruined. His auctioneering business was a miserable failure but he did not allow his overzealousness as an unsuccessful auctioneer to throw him into the dark pit of depression. With wisdom acquired from his failures and like a true opportunist seeking a new venture, he soon started to build a career as a bilingual policeman in the ZAR who could influence and calm down any public confrontation in Krugersdorp, itself a rough town during the 1880s and 1890s.⁵⁷⁵ The life of a policeman, who earned very little, was soon a boring enterprise for the energetic and intellectual Viljoen. He tried his hand at publishing a newspaper and, despite making enemies among his peers, he soon realised that politics was actually the sphere in which he wanted to operate.

He would never leave the realm of politics. After being voted in as member of the Second Volksraad (national council) of the ZAR, he was soon seen as an opportunist by his peers. He initially criticised the decisions made by the Kruger faction in the ZAR but when he was rubbing shoulders with his fellow *Volksraadslede* (Members of the Volksraad) he decided to change his opinion and publish his commentary on British designs against the ZAR. Van der Merwe eloquently states in his book that Alfred Milner took notice of Viljoen's writings and never forgot it. Like his hero, Napoleon, Viljoen was considered *persona non grata* by the British Empire, the largest Western Empire of the time.

Van der Merwe delivers a meticulously planned and carefully categorised account of Viljoen's life. Each chapter gives the impression of an episode in a mini-series, and each one ends with a climax, which compels the reader to turn the page and start with the next chapter. What astounded the reviewer was how much effort Van der Merwe put in to acquire the information for this book. His *modus operandi* should certainly be seen as a 'gold standard' for biographical research. From travelling to the cave where Viljoen was born and even travelling to the United States of America to meet the direct descendants of Viljoen proved that a biography cannot only be written from the comfort of an armchair while surfing the web or reading photographed archival material. The answers are out there and they must be searched for – not only within the files of archives but also among the memories of family and friends. Even historical artefacts and natural formations, lying exposed on the historical landscape, might contain answers that will enrich biographical research.

Van der Merwe, of course, had additional resources at his disposal for specific periods of Viljoen's life. During the South African War of 1899–1902, Viljoen served as a Boer general who led his Commando in different battles and skirmishes across the eastern parts of the former Transvaal. When he was captured, his time as a prisoner of war (PoW) was short-lived. Yet, due to the popularity of the South African War among military historians and history enthusiasts alike, Viljoen's time as a commanding officer delivered a variety of sources for Van der Merwe. This period in his life is so aptly written that the reader's imagination is easily transported to the time when the British

were uncertain whether they could ever truly conquer the Boer forces in the Eastern Transvaal.

For the reviewer, who unashamedly is more interested in twentieth-century history, Viljoen's last 16 years as an immigrant to the United States are of great interest. This part of Viljoen's life has been briefly explained in previous publications by other researchers, such as Brian M du Toit and CJ Scheepers Strydom.⁵⁷⁶ Even though their publications also cover Viljoen's time in the southern states of the United States, Van der Merwe's account of Viljoen as the circus performer in St. Louis, Missouri, and then as the settler and soldier in Mexico and eventually in New Mexico is much more spellbinding due to the array of sources used. It is precisely for this reason that the reviewer is of the opinion that an English translation of *Kansvatter* is a necessity. The historians from the United States and Mexico would surely benefit to know the role played by Ben Viljoen in the histories of their two respective countries. Especially the State of New Mexico should consider and debate the role of a former Boer general in the establishment of their state more than a century ago. Could it also be argued that Viljoen was at the head of the first community of Afrikaner Americans and even Afrikaner Mexicans, a minority group equally interesting as the Afrikaner communities, which were established in Argentina, Tanganyika and Kenya?

Viljoen died in 1917 in New Mexico (NM) and is buried in the Masonic cemetery in La Mesa, NM. His life was one of adventure and ambition, which only required an opportunity to hoist Ben Viljoen into a better life with more opportunities. Yet, he also experienced times of sadness, and Van der Merwe does not ignore the personal pains Viljoen had to endure – nor the list of lovers the flirtatious Viljoen had! Writing about the life of Ben Viljoen was undoubtedly a daunting yet rewarding experience. Van der Merwe wrote a biography, which is, in the opinion of this reviewer, a well-researched, well-written and well-edited book, which is truly enjoyable to read and useful for future research.

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ENDNOTES

⁵⁷⁴ There is a Wikipedia page dedicated to Van der Merwe and also a LinkedIn profile.

⁵⁷⁵ ZAR stood for the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. It is also known as Transvaal.

⁵⁷⁶ See BM du Toit. *Boer settlers in the Southwest*. El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1995; CJ Scheepers Strydom, D.W. Krüger & G.P.J. Trümpelmann, *Afrikaners in die vreemde*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1976.
