Between the Acts

David Papineau

WILLIAM FINNEGAN
Crossing the Line: A year in the land of apartheid
431pp. Hambledon & London. £14.95. 0 7524 05779

JOHN CARR
An Uncommon General
300pp. Hodder and Stoughton. £14.95. 0 340 399562

MARK THABANE
Kaffir Boy: Growing out of apartheid
345pp. Bodley Head/Pan. £12.95 (paperback, £3.50). 0 370 91586

Sympathetic commentators sometimes claim that the Africaner people of South Africa, living in constant fear, in motion, and fragmenting face the inescapable hostility both within and without South Africa. This cultural theory of Africanerdom harks back to the Boer War, and to international liberal sympathy for the Boers' fight against gold-carrying British imperialism. Today, nearly a century later, the helps the contemporary liberal mind to make some kind of sense of the South African regime. At least behind the horrors of apartheid there lies a recognisable human tragedy, and the wish to see this is the give by the Africaners' attitudes to the 'Cape Coloureds'. These are the three million people of mixed European, African, and mixed European and Asian parentage living in the Cape Province. Prominent includes the poet and activist Dennis Brutus, the pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, and the cricket star Basil D'Oliveira. Racially, the Coloureds are fairly heterogeneous, containing varying proportions of Europeans, South Africans, and slaves, and the language and of their white masters. Ninety per cent of the Coloureds have Afrikaans as their mother tongue, but the Church is the Dutch Reformed Church, the Church of the white Africaners.

As a cultural identity goes, the Cape Coloureds are simply brown Africans. But, from enrolling the Coloureds as cultural alien, the country and the world have ignored and rejected them. The Africaner National Party was elected to power in 1948 on a platform of racial purity for its white electorate. Among the first laws were the Population Registration Act, which defined the difference between 'Whites' and 'Coloureds' in the so-called 'Group Areas Act', which decreed that the two groups should live separately. And throughout the early 1950s the government fought a long constitutional battle to remove qualified Coloured voters from the national electoral roll.

The laws of South Africa do not mix well with the racial politics of Europe. Since many Coloureds are quite white, and many Whites have a fair share of black genes, children often turn out to be racially ambiguous. Since they are not classified as black, they are not in the grip of the most extreme discrimination. However, by the mid-1940s the government had largely eliminated any ambiguity in the classification of Coloureds, thereby allowing the government to conveniently reclassify them as coloured by the next generation. The coloureds are to be reclassified as black, and the third generation will be even more strongly classified.

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