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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Conversations with Myself**

Written by Nelson Mandela

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**NELSON  
MANDELA**

**Conversations with Myself**

MACMILLAN

## FOREWORD

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*Like many people around the world, I came to know of Nelson Mandela from a distance, when he was imprisoned on Robben Island. To so many of us, he was more than just a man – he was a symbol of the struggle for justice, equality, and dignity in South Africa and around the globe. His sacrifice was so great that it called upon people everywhere to do what they could on behalf of human progress.*

*In the most modest of ways, I was one of those people who tried to answer his call. The first time that I became politically active was during my college years, when I joined a campaign on behalf of divestment, and the effort to end apartheid in South Africa. None of the personal obstacles that I faced as a young man could compare to what the victims of apartheid experienced every day, and I could only imagine the courage that had led Mandela to occupy that prison cell for so many years. But his example helped awaken me to the wider world, and the obligation that we all have to stand up for what is right. Through his choices, Mandela made it clear that we did not have to accept the world as it is – that we could do our part to seek the world as it should be.*

*Over the years, I continued to watch Nelson Mandela with a sense of admiration and humility, inspired by the sense of possibility that his own life demonstrated and awed by the sacrifices necessary to achieve his dream of justice and equality. Indeed, his life tells a story that stands in direct opposition to the cynicism and hopelessness that so often afflicts our world. A prisoner became a free man; a liberation figure became a passionate voice for reconciliation; a party leader became*

*a president who advanced democracy and development. Out of formal office, Mandela continues to work for equality, opportunity and human dignity. He has done so much to change his country, and the world, that it is hard to imagine the history of the last several decades without him.*

*A little more than two decades after I made my first foray into political life and the divestment movement as a college student in California, I stood in Mandela's former cell in Robben Island. I was a newly elected United States Senator. By then, the cell had been transformed from a prison to a monument to the sacrifice that was made by so many on behalf of South Africa's peaceful transformation. Standing there in that cell, I tried to transport myself back to those days when President Mandela was still Prisoner 466/64 – a time when the success of his struggle was by no means a certainty. I tried to imagine Mandela – the legend who had changed history – as Mandela the man who had sacrificed so much for change.*

*Conversations with Myself does the world an extraordinary service in giving us that picture of Mandela the man. By offering us his journals, letters, speeches, interviews, and other papers from across so many decades, it gives us a glimpse into the life that Mandela lived – from the mundane routines that helped to pass the time in prison, to the decisions that he made as President. Here, we see him as a scholar and politician; as a family man and friend; as a visionary and pragmatic leader. Mandela titled his autobiography Long Walk to Freedom. Now, this volume helps us recreate the different steps – as well as the detours – that he took on that journey.*

*By offering us this full portrait, Nelson Mandela reminds us that he has not been a perfect man. Like all of us, he has his flaws. But it is precisely those imperfections that should inspire each and every one of us. For if we are honest with ourselves, we know that we all face struggles that are large and small,*

*personal and political – to overcome fear and doubt; to keep working when the outcome of our struggle is not certain; to forgive others and to challenge ourselves. The story within this book – and the story told by Mandela’s life – is not one of infallible human beings and inevitable triumph. It is the story of a man who was willing to risk his own life for what he believed in, and who worked hard to lead the kind of life that would make the world a better place.*

*In the end, that is Mandela’s message to each of us. All of us face days when it can seem like change is hard – days when our opposition and our own imperfections may tempt us to take an easier path that avoids our responsibilities to one another. Mandela faced those days as well. But even when little sunlight shined into that Robben Island cell, he could see a better future – one worthy of sacrifice. Even when faced with the temptation to seek revenge, he saw the need for reconciliation, and the triumph of principle over mere power. Even when he had earned his rest, he still sought – and seeks – to inspire his fellow men and women to service.*

*Prior to my election as President of the United States, I had the great privilege of meeting Mandela, and since taking office I have spoken with him occasionally by phone. The conversations are usually brief – he is in the twilight of his years, and I am faced with the busy schedule that comes with my office. But always, in those conversations, there are moments when the kindness, and generosity, and wisdom of the man shines through. Those are the moments when I am reminded that underneath the history that has been made, there is a human being who chose hope over fear – progress over the prisons of the past. And I am reminded that even as he has become a legend, to know the man – Nelson Mandela – is to respect him even more.*

President Barack Obama



CHAPTER ONE

# Deep Time

‘I shall stick to our vow: never, never under any circumstances, to say anything unbecoming of the other . . . The trouble, of course, is that most successful men are prone to some form of vanity. There comes a stage in their lives when they consider it permissible to be egotistic and to brag to the public at large about their unique achievements. What a sweet euphemism for self-praise the English language has evolved! Autobiography . . .’

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Excerpt from a letter to Fatima Meer, dated 1 March 1971, see page 7.

1. FROM A LETTER TO FATIMA MEER, DATED 1 MARCH 1971<sup>1</sup>

I shall stick to our vow: never, never under any circumstances, to say anything unbecoming of the other . . . The trouble, of course, is that most successful men are prone to some form of vanity. There comes a stage in their lives when they consider it permissible to be egotistic and to brag to the public at large about their unique achievements. What a sweet euphemism for self-praise the English language has evolved! Autobiography, they choose to call it, where the shortcomings of others are frequently exploited to highlight the praiseworthy accomplishments of the author. I am doubtful if I will ever sit down to sketch my background. I have neither the achievements of which I could boast nor the skill to do it. If I lived on cane spirit every day of my life, I still would not have had the courage to attempt it. I sometimes believe that through me Creation intended to give the world the example of a mediocre man in the proper sense of the term. Nothing could tempt me to advertise myself. Had I been in a position to write an autobiography, its publication would have been delayed until our bones had been laid, and perhaps I might have dropped hints not compatible with my vow. The dead have no worries, and if the truth and nothing but the whole truth about them emerged, [and] the image I have helped to maintain through my perpetual silence was ruined, that would be the affair of posterity, not ours . . . I'm one of those who possess scraps of superficial information on a variety of subjects, but who lacks depth and expert knowledge on the one thing in which I ought to have specialised, namely the history of my country and people.

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1. Professor Fatima Meer, see People, Places and Events.



2. FROM A LETTER TO JOY MOSIELOA, DATED 17 FEBRUARY 1986

When a man commits himself to the type of life he has lived for 45 years, even though he may well have been aware from the outset of all the attendant hazards, the actual course of events and the precise manner in which they would influence his life could never have been clearly foreseeable in every respect. If I had been able to foresee all that has since happened, I would certainly have made the same decision, so I believe at least. But that decision would certainly have been far more daunting, and some of the tragedies which subsequently followed would have melted whatever traces of steel were inside me.

3. FROM A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD STENDEL

I was being groomed for the position of chieftaincy . . . but then ran away, you know, from a forced marriage . . .<sup>2</sup> That changed my whole career. But if I had stayed at home I would have been a respected chief today, you know? And I would have had a big stomach, you know, and a lot of cattle and sheep.

4. FROM A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD STENDEL

Most men, you know, are influenced by their background. I grew up in a country village until I was twenty-three, when I then left the village for Johannesburg. I was of course . . . going to school for the greater part of the year, come back during the June and December holidays – June was just a month and December about two months. And so all throughout the year I was at school . . . And then in [19]41 when I was twenty-three, I came to Johannesburg and learned . . . to absorb Western standards of living and so on. But . . . my opinions were already

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2. Mandela is a Thembu and a member of the royal household, and was expected to marry a bride of the regent's choice.

formed from the countryside and . . . you'll therefore appreciate my enormous respect for my own culture – indigenous culture . . . Of course Western culture is something we cannot live without, so I have got these two strands of cultural influence. But I think it would be unfair to say this is peculiar to me because many of our men are influenced by that . . . I am now more comfortable in English because of the many years I spent here and I've spent in jail and I lost contact, you know, with Xhosa literature. One of the things which I am looking forward to when I retire is to be able to read literature as I want, [including] African literature. I can read both Xhosa and Sotho literature and I like doing that,<sup>3</sup> but the political activities have interfered . . . I just can't read anything now and it's one of the things I regret very much.

5. FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MANUSCRIPT  
WRITTEN IN PRISON

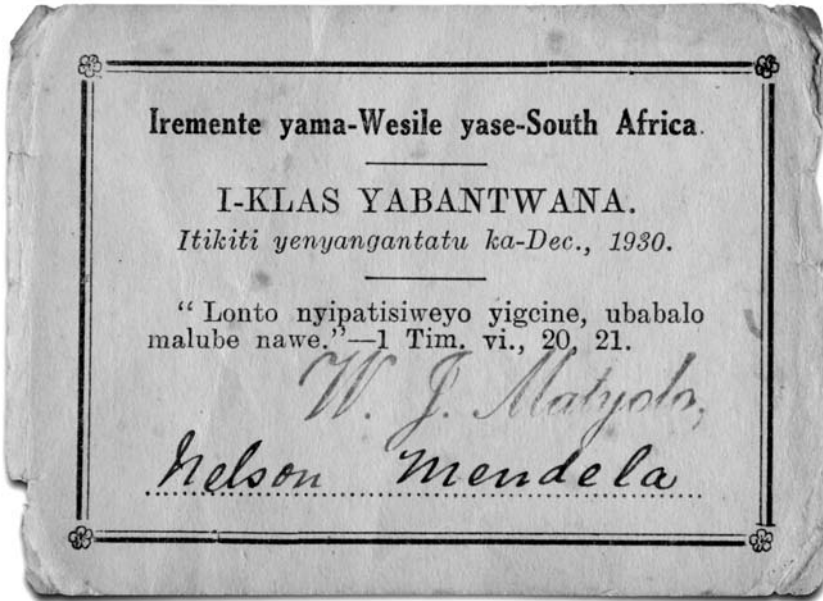
Nobody ever sat with me at regular intervals to give me a clear and connected account of the history of our country, of its geography, natural wealth and problems, of our culture, of how to count, to study weights and measures. Like all Xhosa children I acquired knowledge by asking questions to satisfy my curiosity as I grew up, learnt through experience, watched adults and tried to imitate what they did. In this process an important role is played by custom, ritual and taboo, and I came to possess a fair amount of information in this regard . . . In our home there were other dependents, boys mainly, and at an early age I drifted away from my parents and moved about, played and ate together with other boys. In fact I hardly remember any occasion when I was ever alone at home. There were always other children with whom I shared food and blankets at night. I must have been about five years old when I

3. Xhosa (isiXhosa) and Sotho (Sesotho) are two of South Africa's eleven officially recognised languages.

began going out with other boys to look after sheep and calves and when I was introduced to the exciting love of the veld. Later when I was a bit older I was able to look after cattle as well . . . [A] game I enjoyed very much was what I call Khetha (choose-the-one-you-like) . . . We would stop girls of our age group along the way and ask each one to choose the boy she loved. It was a rule that the girl's choice would be respected and, once she had selected her favourite, she was free to continue her journey escorted by the boy she had chosen. Nimble-witted girls used to combine and all choose one boy, usually the ugliest or dullest, and thereafter tease or bully him along the way . . . Finally, we used to sing and dance and fully enjoyed the perfect freedom we seemed to have far away from the old people. After supper we would listen enthralled to my mother and sometimes my aunt telling us stories, legends, myths and fables which have come down from countless generations, and all of which tended to stimulate the imagination and contained some valuable moral lesson. As I look back to those days I am inclined to believe that the type of life I led at my home, my experiences in the veld where we worked and played together in groups, introduced me at an early age to the ideas of collective effort. The little progress I made in this regard was later undermined by the type of formal education I received which tended to stress individual more than collective values. Nevertheless, in the mid 1940s when I was drawn into the political struggle, I could adjust myself to discipline without difficulty, perhaps because of my early upbringing.

6. FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MANUSCRIPT  
WRITTEN IN PRISON

The regent was not keen that I visit Qunu, lest I should fall into bad company and run away from school, so he reasoned.



Mandela's Methodist Church card, 1930.

He would allow me only a few days to go home. On other occasions he would arrange for my mother to be fetched so that she could see me at the royal residence. It was always an exciting moment for me to visit Qunu and see my mother and sisters and other members of the family. I was particularly happy in the company of my cousin, Alexander Mandela, who inspired and encouraged me on questions of education in those early days. He and my niece, Phathiwe Rhanugu (she was much older than me), were perhaps the first members of our clan to qualify as teachers. Were it not for their advice and patient persuasion I doubt if I would have succeeded in resisting the attractions offered by the easy life outside the classroom. The two influences that dominated my thoughts and actions during those days were chieftaincy and the church. After all, the only heroes I had heard of at that time had almost all been chiefs,

and the respect enjoyed by the regent from both black and white tended to exaggerate the importance of this institution in my mind. I saw chieftaincy not only as the pivot around which community life turned, but as the key to positions of influence, power and status. Equally important was the position of the church, which I associated not so much with the body and doctrine contained in the Bible but with the person of Reverend Matyolo. In this circuit he was as popular as the regent, and the fact that in spiritual matters he was the regent's superior and leader, stressed the enormous power of the church. What was even more was that all the progress my people had made – the schools that I attended, the teachers who taught me, the clerks and interpreters in government offices, the agricultural demonstrators and policemen – were all the products of missionary schools. Later the dual position of the chiefs as representatives of their people and as government servants compelled me to assess their position more realistically, and not merely from the point of view of my own family background or of the exceptional chiefs who identified themselves with the struggle of their people. As descendants of the famous heroes that led us so well during the wars of dispossession and as the traditional leaders in their own right, chiefs are entitled to be treated with respect. But as agents of an oppressive government that is regarded as the enemy of the black man, the same chiefs are the objects of criticism and hostility. The institution of chieftaincy itself has been captured by the government and must now be seen as part of the machinery of oppression. My experiences also enable me to formulate a more balanced assessment of the role of the missionaries and to realise the folly of judging the issue simply in terms of relations with individual priests. Nevertheless, I have always considered it dangerous to underestimate the influence of both institutions amongst the people, and for this reason I have repeatedly urged caution in dealing with them.

## The Native Races of South Africa: George W. Stow. P. 218.

Dr R. Rubidge who spent the greater portion of his youth in wandering about the rocks & crags of the Sneeuwberg mountains, stated that after committing some depredations, the clan was surrounded by a Commando which had pursued them and succeeded in cutting them off among the rocks of a projecting shoulder of a great precipice. Here the retreating Bushmen turned for the last time at bay. Their waiting enemies were on one side, a yawning gulf without any chance of escape on the other. A desperate struggle for life commenced. One after another they fell under the storm of bullets with which their adversaries assailed them. The dead and the dying were heaped upon the dizzy projecting ledge, many in their death struggle rolled and fell over among the crags and fissures in the depths which surrounded them. Still they resisted and still they fell, until one only remained; and yet with the bloody heap of dead around him, and the mangled bodies of his comrades on the rocks below, he seemed as undaunted as when surrounded by the entire band of his brave companions. Posting himself on the very outermost point of the projecting rocks, with sheer precipices of nearly a couple of hundred feet on either side of him, a spot where no man would have dared to follow him, he defied his pursuers, and amid the bullets which showered around him, he appeared to have a charmed life and filled his arrows ~~with~~ with unerring aim whenever his enemies incautiously exposed themselves.

Mandela transcribed portions of George W Stow's *The Native Races of South Africa: A History of the Intrusion of the Hottentots and Bantu into the Hunting Grounds of the Bushmen, the Aborigines of the Country*, see note 6, this chapter.

His last arrow was on the string. A slight feeling of compassion seemed at length to animate the hostile multitude which hemmed him in; they called to him that his life should be spared if he would surrender. He let fly his last arrow in scorn at the speaker, as he replied that "a chief knew how to die, but never to surrender to the race who had despoiled him!" Then with a loud shout of bitter defiance, he turned round, and leaping headlong into the deep abyss was dashed to pieces on the rocks beneath. Thus died with a Spartan-like intrepidity, the last of the clan, and with his death his tribe ceased to exist.