

Long Walk to Freedom

By Nelson Mandela

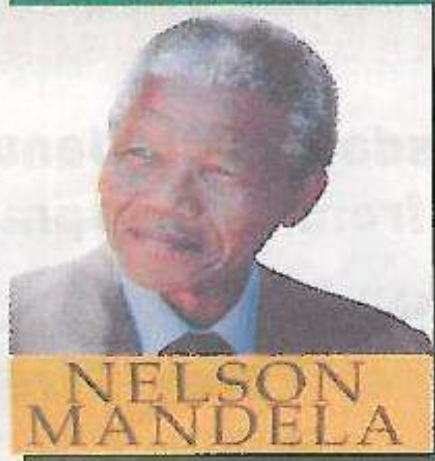
(Abacus)

A must-read for any serious revolutionary, this 800-page tome is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the struggle against apartheid you are ever likely to come across. In fact, the extreme attention to detail is possibly the only aspect of this autobiographical account of Nelson Mandela's life that could be construed as a weakness.

The opening chapters give us a fascinating insight into Mandela's childhood and the life of rural black South Africans at the beginning of the 20th century.

It is through this historical account of an as yet relatively undisturbed traditional tribal life that the reader gathers a true appreciation of just how old Nelson Mandela is and how very long that walk to freedom was.

However, about a third of the way in, the book begins to lose a little steam for anyone not extremely well-informed about the players in South African politics in the 1940s and '50s, as Mandela introduces a multitude of friends and foes, organisations and counter-organisations, many of which were deceased or defunct by the time



apartheid became the human rights issue the world could agree on. In contrast, and somewhat paradoxically, his account of the 27 years he spent in prison, which takes up the bulk of the second half of the book, is anything but tedious.

Although the attention to detail sometimes makes for a hard slog, this in-depth portrayal of the ups and downs of a struggle for the most basic of rights should perhaps make us realise how difficult and complex such an undertaking is, how many thousands of people contributed their own irreplaceable efforts, and for how long this struggle was anything but a cause célèbre.

Towards the end of the book, Mandela recalls that he was so little known in the West that some Londoners, upon seeing 'Free Mandela' posters for the first time in the 1980s, believed his first name was 'Free'.

Perhaps the best aspect of the book is Mandela's complete unwillingness to kowtow to convention and gloss over the fact that he founded the ANC's military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe, and that he was not at all averse to a violent struggle, having come to the conclusion that non-violence wasn't delivering results.

His exhilarating first-person accounts of flying around Africa to raise funds for weapons and facilitate training, as well as his later reflection that he had been surprised to win the Nobel Peace Prize because he had espoused violence, reveal Mandela as a figure imminently more complex and controversial than the smiling, grandfatherly, conciliatory image dished up by the mainstream media.

This is not to say that he does not have a commitment to reconciliation, merely that no one rises to such prominence in pursuit of such a difficult cause by being Mr Congeniality.

But read and decide for yourself. It may be more than a decade since it was first published, but Mandela's words still resonate strongly today and are well worth revisiting.

Review by Roslyn Fuller



Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller ISAK. More information about the Canadian author, her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at www.irishwriters-exchange.com