My early education was remarkable for many reasons. Woodmead School near Johannesburg, the senior school I attended from the year of its founding in 1970, was both progressive and experimental in ways that would have made it an anomaly anywhere at that time. It was so not least because, during that year, the pupils made decisions in debate with each other and with the staff that turned out to be fundamental to the school’s character. The fact that the very terms on which the school operated were negotiated with the pupils made the Woodmead experiment distinctive from other well-known experimental schools, for example, A S Neill’s Summerhill School, and Bertrand and Dora Russell’s Beacon Hill School, both in England. That the school was founded in apartheid South Africa during a period when state repression was at its height made it even more anomalous, so anomalous that it is hard to believe that it really existed.  
  
The South African state had installed two systems of education: ‘Christian National Education’ for the privileged white minority, and ‘Bantu Education’ for the oppressed Black majority. The former was explicitly designed to mould children into Christians who believed that God had chosen white Afrikaners to establish racial supremacy in South Africa. Just as explicit was the mission of Bantu education. As Hendrik Verwoerd, then minister of ‘Native Affairs’, said in 1954, it was to teach ‘the Bantu’ that:  
  
There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour … Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and partially misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society, in which he was not allowed to graze.  
There were differences, to be sure, within the system of Christian National Education. Government schools, which had been segregated well before the National Party came to power in 1948, were rigidly divided into Afrikaans-language schools and English-language schools, and the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism was somewhat diluted for the latter. Several of them, long established in urban centres, had a more benign understanding of the ‘white man’s burden’ in a former British colony, one more in tune with the segregationist and colonialist policies of the United Party that the virulently racist National Party had bested in 1948. While these schools attempted to maintain their identity in the face of increasing exertions of government control, their ideologies were not distinct enough from apartheid to form a real basis for resistance. There was much to Verwoerd’s jibe that they amounted to showing Black South Africans ‘the green pastures of European society’, but not allowing them ‘to graze’ there.  
  
The same was true of the many privately funded and hence fee-paying schools, usually tied to a particular religion. Most prominent among these were the English Protestant, Methodist and Catholic schools, which followed different models within the British private school system. There was (and is) even a school called ‘Roedean’, a private school for girls named and modelled after its renowned counterpart in the South of England, and founded by the younger sister of the women who founded the original. These schools were single sex, restricted to whites and, like some of the government schools, more inclined to a colonialist and segregationist ideology than to apartheid. But they were generally conservative, disciplinarian and increasingly subject to government control, in part because the final school exams, the ‘matric’, were set and marked by a national board.  
  
For example, the prescribed book for matric history in English schools was A N Boyce’s Europe and South Africa: A History for South African Schools (1971). The book gave an account of colonialism, segregation and apartheid itself, which suggested that these systems of domination served the interests of the Black majority population as well as those of the white minority. It gave the Great Trek of the 1830s and ’40s – in which Dutch settlers left the Cape for the interior to escape the abolition of slavery – the same quasi-religious status this event held in Afrikaner nationalist ideology. And in its account of the Second World War, it glossed over the horrors of Nazism, perhaps because of the inconvenient fact that prominent members of the first National Party government had been interned during the war as Nazi sympathisers. In addition, Afrikaans was a compulsory subject in English schools, and a significant part of the curriculum involved learning long lists of offensive ‘Englishisations’, which a language police was determined to eradicate and replace with sometimes comical Afrikaans equivalents. For example, English proverbs could not be translated literally, so ‘the fat is in the fire’ had to become ‘now the dolls are going to dance’, and ‘he let the cat out of the bag’ became ‘he let the monkey out of the sleeve’.  
  
As minister of Native Affairs until 1958, Verwoerd was responsible for a slew of statutes that enforced segregation of the ‘races’ in all walks of life: economic, social and political, including the educational sector. Because his ministry was the engine room of government policy, he earned the title ‘architect of apartheid’ and, as prime minister of South Africa from 1958, he presided over the crushing of any resistance to his policies. The main liberation organisations, notably the African National Congress, were banned and their leaders were executed, assassinated or, like Nelson Mandela, sentenced to life imprisonment. Repression on this scale was enabled by expanding and modernising the police, and a vast security apparatus was given unlimited powers to detain without charge or trial opponents of apartheid.