

ALAN PATON'S 'AH, BUT YOUR LAND IS BEAUTIFUL'

Reviewed by Peter Brown

Alan Paton doesn't just write biographies and fiction, he also writes history. The Hofmeyr and Clayton books are not just biographies, they are also the story of the times in which those two lived.

So is this new novel. The book covers the period from the Defiance Campaign to the coming to power of Verwoerd. It is a period during which many of the laws which are the real essence of apartheid, and which wrack and tear apart our society to this day, really began to bite.

Among them were the Group Areas Act, some of whose most recent manifestations have been the destruction of District 6 and Pageview and the sickening comments by a Johannesburg magistrate on the physical features of the accused before him when called upon to decide whether the person concerned was of the right racial category to lawfully live in Hillbrow.

Another is the Bantu Education Act, resistance to which is even stronger now than when it was passed.

Its cost is to be counted not only in the number of people who have been killed and injured in protests against it since 1976, and the number who have fled the country to escape it convinced that the only way left to fight it is violence, but also in its stunting effect on those left behind. This is something testified to almost daily by the desperation of white employers who cannot find black people with the necessary basic education to take over jobs which are crying out to be filled by them.

These were the years when the mass removals began, the most spectacular of which was the razing of Sophiatown and the other black, freehold suburbs of Johannesburg. St. Wendolin's and many others are today's Natal counterparts of that tragedy.

Those, too, were the days of the first of a new breed of security laws, the Public Safety and Criminal Laws Amendment Acts of 1953, the progenitors of that terrible brood with which we now live and which are a blot on the face of our country.

It is an indication of the divided nature of our society that these terrible laws mean nothing in the lives of most white South Africans and they mean everything in the lives of black South Africans.

With them and the events to which they give rise as background, Alan Paton tells the story of a group of people who came together to fight the apartheid steamroller with very few resources, but with the over-riding conviction firstly

that if you were fighting a policy of racial division, the only logical way to fight it was for all races to do it together; secondly that each one of us would only be fully free when every single other person was.

Spread across the full canvas of the South African scene — from the loyal Nationalist bureaucrat whose certainties are slowly threatened by the things he sees his policies doing, to the people to whom those things are being done — Paton has created characters with whom most readers, black and white, will easily feel they can identify.

Thus will white South Africans begin to understand what it is like to be black in our country, and black South Africans to feel what it is like to be white. This can only be good for both.

To me the book brings back sharply the memories of those days in which one tried so hard to check the grim advance of Nationalist policies and, as one did so, felt the hard and unsmiling menace of apartheid and its laws closing in. Sometimes the spirit of that fight was extra-grim; as often as not, for no reason I have ever been able to understand it was also extraordinarily gay.

Alan Paton's book tells it all. It is fiction, but it is a true story. It shows what actually happened in those years — that there was born then, in spite of all the laws and the conventions and the smears and the threats, an organisation drawn from every racial and economic segment of our country which could, without embarrassment, condescension or any consciousness of superficial differences, really work: And, in a small way, show what South Africa might one day be.

The Improper Interference Act of 1968 put an end to that for a while, but certainly not for good. Whether this book and the two to follow it will move people as *Cry the Beloved Country* did only time will tell. I hope they will. Black/white conflict in South Africa is neither pre-destined, nor inevitable. This book proves that. If it were merely fiction, one could doubt it. If one knows, as I do, that it is also history, one cannot. □

(from the Sunday Tribune)

(Another review of *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful* — by Colin Gardner - will appear in the next issue of *Reality*).