

A NUMBER OF PROPOSITIONS ABOUT ALAN PATON'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY TOWARDS THE MOUNTAIN

Publisher David Philip

By A.E. Voss

1. The product is a handsomely printed and bound book. The general tone of the dust-cover is royal blue. On the front appear (from top to bottom), 'Alan Paton' (in large gold letters), 'Towards the Mountain' (in large light-blue letters), 'AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY' (in smaller gold letters), 'BY THE AUTHOR OF *Cry the Beloved Country*' (in smallest white letters). On the back there is a photographic study of the author: his expression suggests something between guardedness and candour. There is a suggestion too that the photographer caught Alan Paton just before he smiled. The book sells at R15,00.¹

2. **Towards the Mountain** is Alan Paton's account of his own life, from his birth in Pietermaritzburg in 1903, to his emergence, after the publication of **Cry the Beloved Country** in 1948, as a writer with a world audience.² From his parent's home and education in Pietermaritzburg, he moved to the life of a schoolmaster, marriage and the beginnings of public life in youth and social work. After a severe illness, and under the influence of restlessness, ambition and the attraction of working with young offenders he moved to Johannesburg as warden (later principal) of Diepkloof Reformatory for African boys. Almost a third of the narrative concerns the Diepkloof years. It was the publication of **Cry the Beloved Country** that moved and enabled Alan Paton to resign from Diepkloof, in the very year in which the National Party victory in the South African general election ushered in what Alan Paton calls "this new era", when "For the first time in his life he had to challenge the State . . ." The book is not all narrative, nor all facts: there is much anecdote, comment and speculation; some poetry, some drama.

3. The title comes from Isaiah 11:9, which forms the epigraph:

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea.

The image of the holy mountain gives a principle of order to the narrative. Thus Alan Paton names **Cry the Beloved Country** and the South African election of 1948 as "the two decisive events of my life". The first released him from the life of a salaried public servant to "the idyllic life of Anerley" (on the Natal south coast). The second "set *him* back on the road to the holy mountain . . . towards which one travels, not always hopefully, and at which one never arrives". An important implication here is the honour-ability of politics. There is a paradox too: the novel,

began as a profoundly private action – "in the grip of powerful emotion . . . in a fever . . . written under the influence of powerful emotion, in hotel rooms in Europe and North America, contributed, after its publication, to the stature and authority (ref. 'author') which made Alan Paton the political figure he was in the 50's and 60's.

4. In one sense Alan Paton's life is like that of his hero Khumalo, who left Natal to find both disillusionment and awakening in the big city. From his birth in "Pietermaritzburg, the lovely city" ("My hometown was paradise".) and "a private world of the self" he moved after education, marriage and in mid-career to Johannesburg ("City of Gold . . . City of Crime"). It is an exemplary South African life, "as rich", as Alan Paton says of his student days, "as any life in Europe"; exemplary in that for all of us fiction and reality, riches and poverty, career and unemployment, service and suffering, Gold and Crime are mutually functional.

5. It could be argued that the Christian era of Western Europe invented only one 'literary' form, the autobiography, dependent in its nature on a particular evaluation of the individual life. The prototype is Augustine's **Confessions**, an account of an individual's relationship to God in this world. Alan Paton, writing **Cry the Beloved Country** is like John Bunyan writing **Pilgrim's Progress** in gaol: Bunyan, who "fell suddenly into an allegory". Like Augustine and Bunyan, Alan Paton tells his story as a narrative of conversion to a faith in which he finds order for his life. The autobiography becomes a dialectic between grace and will, circumstance and decision, chance and choice. Thus in 1923, as a student of education Alan Paton writes that he "suffered much religious doubt" when he encountered Behaviourism, which challenged his "notions of the self, of the possibility of its sovereignty, and therefore of the whole concept of using one's life, by conscious resolve, for the service of God and man". The resolution is, as perhaps it must always be, paradoxical: by an act of choice to believe in the validity of choice.

6. The historical interest of Alan Paton's life is considerable. Born in a Victorian colony, he has lived through two world wars, travelled widely, been active in South African public life. He acknowledges a number of guides and heroes along the way, some of whom he has written about before (Hofmeyr, Archbishop Clayton). Often crucial moments in his life seem to follow on a combination of his own political experience (the Diocesan commission of 1941)

and the personal example of others (Mrs. Edith Rheinallt Jones). But there are significant glimpses of less obvious figures too; Paton's charges and colleagues at Diepkloof, for example.

7. Alan Paton is looking back on his life over thirty years ago. It is a writer's life, a story-teller's life. Much is given; though some is withheld, the impression is one of candour. In his account of family, friends and professional relationships, Alan Paton acknowledges occasional pettiness, resentment and infidelity on his own part. Sometimes the factual persons become fictional characters, but they cannot always be controlled. At one stage, exasperated beyond endurance by an ex-Indian Army colleague on the Diepkloof staff, Alan Paton wrote ((To hell with Stewart-Dunkley" on "the immaculately whitewashed wall" of "the white staff lavatory". In his relationship with his own wife and sons, Alan Paton suggests that "The mother-

son contest does not seem to be so much of a conflict of wills as that between father and son . . ." Perhaps the saddest moment in the experience of the book comes earlier, at the end of Chapter 15. Alan Paton's father had disappeared while on a solitary walk in the Town Bush Valley, outside Pietermaritzburg, in May 1930. His body was found only seven weeks later. "So my father's life came to a tragic end. For all his jokes and jollity, his life had in some way been solitary, and he made it more so by alienating the affection of his children. Now of course I think of him with nothing but pity". The last seems to me a sad sentence. □

FOOTNOTES:

1. I received a free copy from **Reality**.
2. I first read **Cry the Beloved Country** in 1950. My copy (from the sixteenth printing) was a school prize. So I got a free copy of that too.

Ex Africa semper aliquid (non) novi . . . ?

A REVIEW OF 'CONFLICT AND COMPROMISE IN SOUTH AFRICA'

edited by Rotberg, R.I. and Barratt, J. (David Philip, Cape Town.)

By Francis Antonie.

One may well agree with Gibson Thula that 'an interesting feature of contemporary political life in South Africa is the degree of attention being given to devising alternative constitutional models.' But one may also be forgiven for believing that the creation of constitutional models appears to have become virtually an end in itself – and indeed, some strange models have recently emerged.

If the Total Strategy Constitutional Model is anything to go by, then it appears that not only has the cart been placed before the horse, but the wheels been dispensed with. Mercifully, the contributors to 'Conflict and Compromise' have managed to replace the wheels, but there still seems to be some doubt about where exactly the horse belongs!

'Conflict and Compromise in South Africa' is a collection of papers arising from a 1978 conference sponsored jointly

by the World Peace Foundation of Boston and the South African Institute of International Affairs. It is primarily concerned with possible future political arrangements for South Africa. These are (1) the further evolution of the National Party's policy of Separate Development; (2) a system based on the principle of 'one man, one vote, one value'; (3) partition of the country into two or more separate states; (4) a federal and/or consociational arrangement.

Harald Pakendorf's paper 'Can Separate Development Evolve?' while not really breaking new ground, gives a lucid account of what verligte Nationalists are thinking, confused though these thoughts appear to be to non-verligte-Nationalists. Where his observations are not confused, they are simply naive. Thus, 'the proposed new South African constitution . . . gives real political leverage to Asians and Coloureds'. Really? (As regards the old Verwoedean dream