by M. J. Daymond

Re-Emergency

RICHARD RIVE
EMERGENCY
David Philip. C.T. 1988

***Emergency* is Richard Rive's first novel. It was banned after its publication by Faber and Faber in 1963, presumably because its approach and its subject matter, a hard look at one man's experience of the three days leading up to the 1960 declaration of a State of Emergency, were considered too dangerous for the Nationalist government to tolerate in the immediate aftermath of the anti-Pass Laws campaign, the Sharpeville massacre and the nation-wide bannings and arrests. The decision to re-issue this novel twenty-four years later, as the fifth State of Emergency grinds on, is clearly right on the publisher's part. But its re-publication's being allowed does not necessarily mean that greater tolerance of opposition is being exercised; it may just mean that after forty years of rule, the government is simply more confident of its power to resist opposition which takes fictional form.**

Its immediate banning on first publication means that for most South African readers, *Emergency* will be a new novel. The actions cover three days, 28-30 March 1960, from Sharpeville Day to the declaration of the State of Emergency, and it traces the process by which Andrew Dreyer decides to commit himself to the cause of liberation inside the country. He is a young "coloured" schoolteacher in Cape Town who, as a marked man when the emergency is declared, is faced with a choice between exile via "Basutoland" or staying and certain arrest. He chooses to stay.

> . . . I shall remain here. . . . I shall fight with all the others whenever and wherever I can identify myself with them. If there is another march on Cape Town I shall be in it. I want to live my own life. I have reached the stage where I am prepared to ignore any legislation that denies me the right to go where I please, to love the girl I love and to think the things I think. (248)

Within its historical context, Rive's fiction sets out to construct the nature of that choice, particularly to show from the "coloured" point of view what such a statement of common cause, of identity, means.

"COLOURED" PEOPLE'S OPTIONS

The point of view on which the novel concentrates necessitates the setting out of the socio-political options for "coloured" people in Cape Town that were already functioning in 1948 and into which the Nationalist government's programme of legislation designed to establish racial separation and white domination was received. In order to map out these options, Rive presents District Six purely as a slum, as a place of miserable poverty that everyone wanted to escape. This is an emphasis which, twenty years after the demolition of the area and the destruction of its community, could strike contemporary readers as surprising. Subsequently, Rive himself has, in *"Buckingham Palace" District Six* (1986), joined in the more celebratory view of the District as a rough but warm hearted and vibrant community which was destroyed by white greed. This current view is one which has properly emerged in order to give force to the protest against wanton destruction; the earlier view of it as a mean and ugly environment is probably quite as true, but would have had no place in the case that Rive is creating in *Emergency*. The change in Rive's treatment of District Six is a clear example of a basic feature of perception: we see things selectively. It also demonstrates a truth about writing: the writer's selection is largely guided by the purpose with which he or she is writing.

Rive's starting point is that escape from poverty and degradation is the prime necessity in his protagonist's life. To turn this into narrative, he depicts the established forms of escape in the "coloured" community and then suggests that a worthwhile alternative lies in commitment to the larger cause of justice for all. Accordingly, Andrew Dreyer's family have, since their father's death, been reduced to living in a few squalid rooms in the sleaziest part of the District. From there, those of his brothers and sisters who are sufficiently fair, play white. His eldest brother drinks in white bars and picks up white prostitutes. Others become "respectable coloured" and live sedate lives of would-be invisibility in places like Walmer Estate or Grassy Park. Of course, as the laws of apartheid begin to bite, their confidence in their choice crumbles and Rive gives a brief sketch of just how viciously a bewildered man can turn his suffering into an attack on his wife because of the shade of her skin. Neither of the established forms of escape offer Dreyer much: he is too dark to play white and too perceptive to settle for respectability. Instead, he is fired by dreams of personal equality, dreams which Rive has him try to live out by giving him a white girlfriend, Ruth. What the decision to include a Ruth also suggests is Rive's knowledge that much as his characters might want to understand social conflict in terms of class (and this in the early sixties), in apartheid South Africa there is no ignoring the simplifying overlay of race.

Within this context, the novel sets up a debate about the ways in which legalised oppression should be resisted and conducts it through the somewhat pompous speechifying of Dreyer and his friends. Abe is shown as the most intellectual; a rigorous thinker but one who is often unable to see his way to actions that will satisfy his theoretical position. He is, for example, shown as fiercely critical of the PAC-organised campaign against the Pass Laws because he sees the way it is conducted as perpetuating the racial awareness against which they are protesting. Dreyer, by virtue of his slum childhood, is a less confident analyst, and is conversely more dependent on knowing himself through other people. It is he who loves a white girl and it is he who says of the march on the Caledon Square Police Station led by Philip Kgosana, that being there made him feel "part of it all . . . I was the crowd milling outside the police station. I felt for the first time in my life that I was Africa." (236)

DREYER'S CHOICE

Within these structures for debate, the novel is thoughtful and usually clear-sighted in the way that it charts the course by which Andrew Dreyer is led to opt for a sense of belonging and to rejoice, even if briefly, in the feeling that "They might gaol our bodies, but they can never break our spirits".(236) Rive backs his protagonist's choice although its immediate outcome is presented as very uncomfortable: still bathed in the glow of belonging that the march has created, Dreyer goes to Langa to distribute pamphlets urging workers to stay at home, only to find that his actions precipitate a clash between police and workers in which ordinary people are probably and needlessly killed.

Since this first novel, Rive has not undertaken another work organised on the narrative principles required for length. The rest of his output in the sixties was short stories (almost all banned at the time, but subsequently some of these stories have been included by David Philip in *Advance, Retreat*); in the seventies he wrote a play and an anecdotal autobiography, *Writing Black;* the recent longer work, *"Buckingham Palace",* is essentially a series of related short stories that are held in a unifying frame. Although some of *Emergency* is perfunctory — such as Ruth, the white girl whose inclusion is well motivated thematically, but whose treatment by protagonist and author alike reeks of irritation and afterthought — it is generally so effectively structured, that one wonders why the longer form has not attracted Rive again. It may prove to be sufficient to say that he is temperamentally suited to short fictional forms; certainly in *Emergency* itself his characteristic power of genial but biting irony is given its fullest rein in self-contained episodes such as the one in which the fair-skinned Abe tries in vain to be served by a hostile railways clerk at the ticket-office window set aside for "Non-Europeans Only". On the other hand, what may one day be clear is that Rive has not been able, since the destruction of the community from which he himself came, and since the deliberate fragmentation of life which is apartheid, to find for any individual life that he wishes to depict, the kind of rich and richly known context that he needs to draw on for its lengthy treatment. One wonders whether his first novel will ever be followed by a second.□

Picture by Mike Matthewman

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