

DRIVER'S PATRICK DUNCAN

A Review of PATRICK DUNCAN: C. J. Driver; Heinemann

by Alan Paton

It is impossible — for those of us who knew and worked with Patrick Duncan — to read this story of his life by C. J. Driver, with its many remembrances of things past, without strong feelings of affection and sadness, and recollections of bi-lateral exasperations, frustrations, and admirations.

One can say straight away that it is an authentic biography, free of any hagiographic blemishes, thoroughly researched by Tom Lodge. Driver was fortunate to be able to engage the services of so competent an assistant. Not all of us biographers have that luck.

Duncan emerges from it all as one of the most extraordinary of human creatures. When I first met him thirty years ago, he believed that he was indeed a creature, and by that I mean that he believed that he was made by a Creator. He then held the belief that he, like Francis of Assisi before him, could be used as an instrument by the Lord of the Creation. He had one of his sudden "visions", and this one was that God could use even a bent tool. In this also he was like Francis, who when mocked by Brother Masseo for his ordinariness, was filled with joy that God could elect such a poor creature to be his instrument.

Duncan refused to claim that he had seen a blinding light on some Damascene road, but said that the vision changed his life.

..... the certitude stole on me that my destiny was to give everything I could, everything I had, all my time, and all my strength, to the one cause: ending the colour bar.

He writes again:

..... Was I prepared to face everything? There were things worse perhaps than death. Everything?

In the end I decided I was ready.

Was Duncan true to his vision? Did he give all his time, all his strength, to his cause? I don't think there can be any doubt of it. He often did it in ways that exasperated those whom he worked with, but they acknowledged his devotion. Was he prepared to face everything? Again one must say that there cannot be much doubt of it, yet there is one apparent and notable exception which we shall read of later.

I have just completed a novel *AH, BUT YOUR LAND IS BEAUTIFUL*, which will be published in Cape Town in September, perhaps before this review appears. Patrick Duncan is a character in the novel and I wrote these words about him.

Out of his bluest of blue eyes shot flames that consumed any cruelty or cant within burning distance, and he had the ruddiest cheeks in the world, giving him the appearance of abounding health. He was a man of passionate beliefs, and had a veneration for Mahatma Gandhi. He believed with all his heart that *satyagraha*, the soul-force, the power of truth, was able to topple empires.

Well, that was true. It was the vision, the passion, the devotion, the vitality, that characterised him. He was intelligent but he was not an intellectual, except in a skilled amateurish way, like myself. If he wanted to convince you of the invincible logicity of some theory or proposition, he would overwhelm you with the passion and the vitality and the earnestness until you felt almost *mean* for not believing him. Driver relates that he wrote of himself (in 1938):

That is all I can say about most things, I like or I do not like. How uncritical and blind.

One must concede that he was then only eighteen years old, but he was old enough to understand something very important about himself. Yet he did not realise it fully. He did not realise that he would never be a cool, sober, rational, planning creature. The things that he was most emphatic about, most convincing, most overwhelming, were the things that he believed in most passionately. He was convinced that if the United States stopped buying South African gold, the United Party would sweep back into power, and the whole world would be better for it. He once cornered me on a vacant plot of ground in the Transvaal, next to the house where the Liberal Party was holding a conference, and urged me to drop everything and go with him to the White House. He left me feeling mean and exhausted.

In 1952 he and Manilal Gandhi, son of the Mahatma, led a party into the Germiston African Location in defiance of the regulations. It is fascinating to note that neither he nor Manilal liked the word "defiance". Defiance was not for them a true part of *satyagraha*. It was right to break a law because it was unjust, but it was not right to speak of defying the lawful authority (appointed by God, so said St. Paul). Duncan was sentenced to a hundred days or £100 and Manilal to fifty days or £50. After a fortnight in prison Duncan paid the rest of his fine. Driver records that he was "bitterly ashamed" of having done this. He gave as his reason the possibility that his small and exclusive book business might fold up, but his political opponents (the Afrikaner Nationalists) said he should have known that before he broke the law. Duncan had at least one other reason, and that was that he found the enforced company of real criminals quite unendurable. Their filthy language, their degeneracy, their total indifference to the ideals that Duncan himself cherished, revolted him. He found in fact, that he was not prepared to "face everything".

Driver records that for some people, for example Christopher Gell and Julius Lewin, Duncan's defiance in Germiston was the "finest moment of his political career". I have no doubt that this was so. One of the reasons for this was that his motives were simple and they were pure. He was asserting the rights of a man not to be trodden underfoot by authority. He was challenging the right of a Government to regulate the peaceful entry of any South African into any area where other South Africans lived. He was challenging the whole doctrine of racial separation. The act of defiance itself was

simple and pure. It could be understood, and was understood, by the simplest and humblest men and women. This simple and pure motive, which he never lost, was to be complicated by other motives neither simple nor pure, and of these the most powerful was his passionate and overwhelming hatred of Communism.

Driver makes it clear that Duncan was not an ideologue. The capitalist-socialist dichotomy never obsessed his mind. His hatred of Communism was really a hatred of collectivism, that would stamp out all individualism, and all individuality too. Duncan was a fierce individualist, and never became a loyal and unquestioning member of any organisation. When he finally joined the Liberal Party, the relations between him and the leadership were always to be difficult. Parties have programmes and policies and directives and loyalties. He disliked them all. He became the National Organiser of the Liberal Party, and he worked hard, but he could not endure it for longer than sixteen months. He just was not a party man. Driver writes:

He took everything at crisis-pace, and could not realise that most people had neither his energy, nor shared his certainties, nor were aware how close each next crisis stood.

And again Driver writes:

Everything was crucial; it was the "here-and-now" mind in operation.

After Duncan had left the post of Organiser he wrote to me:

Our difference is this; that I see that power is the necessary ingredient of our struggle and you don't I am **not** obsessed with power. In the **long term** it takes second place to decency and consent and goodness. But in politics it is **the essential** ingredient

He hammered on this theme, and on our bowed heads too, continually. The fact is that in 1958 there was no way by which the Liberal Party could win power. What one could call liberalism or progressivism received its first substantial white support in the general election of 1981, when van Zyl Slabbert's PFP won twenty-six seats (as against the National Party's one hundred and thirtyone!) And one must face it that the bulk of PFP support was affluent, urban, English-speaking, and drawn from the more highly educated sections of the white population. In 1981 the PFP (and I am not trying to be nasty) began to gain respectability. The Liberal Party of 1958 had almost no respectability. For the great bulk of Afrikanerdom it was a dangerous, subversive, communist-inclined party. For the great bulk of the English-speaking it was extreme or naive or a hundred years before its time, or "not quite the thing, old boy".

In May 1957 I wrote to Duncan (in my most schoolmasterly tones, says Driver) to remind him that we had agreed not to say in public that the Liberal Party would never be voted into power, and that he must not do it again. I wrote (rather well I thought, though Driver doesn't say so):

. . . . I accept your assurance that you forgot about our arrangement. Whatever else I may think about you, I have never thought you would depart from a contract unless through impetuosity, generosity, or bellicosity. At such times a wind sweeps through your soul and lots of things go flying out of the window, but this is what you are, and by now I accept it.

But Duncan was unstoppable. He went for the ANC for flirting with Communism, and offended Lutuli. He made

the Congress of Democrats very angry, and even the gentle Eddie Roux was very critical of him. It was not surprising that he turned more and more to the new black movement, the Pan-African Congress. He told the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, who visited South Africa in 1960, that there would be a total breakdown of "the present set-up" in ten, or at the outside, fifteen years. Getting into his stride, he told a Liberal Party meeting that in five years there would be no colour bar. Finally going at full speed he told a black lift-man (in a crowded lift apparently) that his freedom was coming, and when asked "when?" he replied "in a year". Driver is surprised that after all this, Duncan was not elected a vice-president of the Liberal Party, in spite of his fearless conduct during the emergency that was declared after the grave events in Sharpeville and Langa. Driver writes that "it seemed an espousal of a passive and naive liberalism which feared defiance as much as it feared racialism." That was not the case at all. It was the act of a party that just didn't want Duncan as vice-president. He was the most unsuitable person in the world to be a vice-president of anything. He had great and admirable gifts, but they were none of them vice-presidential.

It is with deep regret that I must move on, and I must content myself by saying that the Liberal Party distinguished itself during the drama of the emergency, and that Duncan, in the company of people like Randolph Vigne and Peter Hjul was one of the bravest actors on the Cape Town stage. Duncan also distinguished himself at this time as the fearless editor of CONTACT, the paper that Cynthia Duncan had given to the Party. The relationship between CONTACT and the Party was decidedly tricky, and more and more they distanced themselves from each other. Duncan the editor again went to jail for not revealing sources of information; he went several times, but what he had loathed in 1952 he now enjoyed. Was it because he was in a cell on his own? Driver does not tell us. ". . . it was a healthy life." "I bubbled over with energy." He was prepared "to stay in prison for twenty years if necessary."

This kind of thing could not last. On 22 March 1961 he was banned for five years. On 18 April the provisions of the ban were enlarged. On 3 May Duncan left for Basutoland, never to enter South Africa again. He was identifying himself more and more with PAC, whose militant arm POQO, was ready to kill. As far as I know Duncan never renounced **satyagraha** but he had come to the conclusion that it wouldn't work in South Africa, and if it wouldn't work, it was of no use to him. **Satyagraha** worked with the British government in India, but it would not work with the Afrikaner Nationalists. Therefore he gave it up. In March 1963 Duncan resigned from the Liberal Party, and joined the PAC. A visitor to Basutoland reported that Duncan talked of plans to goad the South African government into invading the protectorate, whereupon the British would have to intervene, and would, "he hoped" take over South Africa.

Driver asks whether Duncan ever understood what was meant by violence. When asked if he had anything to do with the murder of a white camping party at the Bashee River, he replied simply, "No, thank God, I didn't". Driver writes:

It is easier to see Duncan at the head of a column of men marching unarmed to attack a police-station . . . than it is to see him lying in the bushes at the roadside with a grenade in one hand and a panga in the other, waiting for a family on holiday to drive down the road.

The idea that Duncan would ambush anybody with the intention of killing is for me quite unthinkable. He wanted

justice, and he wanted it quickly, and if non-violence would not achieve it quickly, he would renounce non-violence. Yet by so doing he would have renounced some deep part of himself.

Again with regret I move on. Duncan wrote in THE TIMES of 6 May 1963 that white supremacy was "approaching its end". On 4 June 1963 he was dealt a bitter blow; he was declared a prohibited immigrant in all the British High Commission Territories. On 28 March 1964 he went to Algiers to represent the PAC. In June 1965 he was dealt another bitter blow; he was dismissed by the PAC. The long journey begun in the Germiston location in 1952 had come to its end. Driver writes: "He had given himself utterly to this great aim, and yet there was nothing more that this great aim wanted of him."

Duncan was in a way rescued by two things. One was that the Comité Chretien de Service en Algerie offered him a job as Director of Operations in Constantine. The other was that he began to write a book MAN AND THE EARTH. But one must read Driver to learn about these things. For us in South Africa, the links between ourselves and Duncan were being broken one by one. Yet we were deeply distressed to hear later that he was dying of a fatal anaemia, and he was not yet fifty.

He grew very humble. Those political certainties that he had once seen with such awful clarity troubled him less and less. He was facing a certainty of his own.

A fruit-seller in Basingstoke spoke unusually kindly to me, and I had to take refuge in the car to avoid public tears. Another loss of serenity was the sight of the fall of autumnal leaves . . . Vergil's line hit my mind with irresistible sadness: "As are the generations of leaves, so are the generations of man."

In April 1967 Duncan wrote to record "one of the most remarkable happenings in my life." He was ill and in pain and in a bed in a hotel at Timimoun in Algeria thinking perhaps of what he had written in MAN AND THE EARTH about religion. Christianity was the cult of Jehova, "and what a repulsive cult it is." Jehova was violent, jealous, and incited his people to commit crimes of genocide. Other religions were equally unpleasant, and Marxism, the "near-religion" was fading. In the hotel at Timimoun he found himself saying these words in silence.

P.D. — God, I need your help. But I suppose if you are Jehovah I can't expect you to do anything for me.

God — I am Jehovah. How can you expect me to do anything for you after the rude things you said about me in your book?

Another person — in any case you should not ask for selfish things in prayer. You should ask for general benefits, that God's will be done, etc.

P.D. — Maybe, but if prayer can't help in cases like this it can't be much use.

Within ten minutes the pain had gone, and he drove five hundred of the six hundred and twenty kilometres home.

He had become reconciled with me, whom he had so often tormented. "I have learnt to live as Pascal (I think it was) who said life was best lived under a sentence of death."

He kept on flying to London for transfusions. On Wednesday 31 May 1967 he had his tenth transfusion. On Friday 2 June he reacted badly, but was cheerful and was re-reading THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS. On Sunday 4 June he was dead. This is a most moving chapter.

Driver's last chapter is called "Judgements". I suppose that most biographers do this. I did it for Hofmeyr, and came quickly to the conclusion that he did what he had to do. I did it for Archbishop Clayton, and came to the same conclusion. One is tempted to ask what would have happened if one's hero had done this and not that, had chosen this and not that, had said this and not that. What would have happened if Duncan had been more rational, less impetuous, more patient, less individualistic, less passionate. The answer is simple. It wouldn't have been Patrick Duncan at all.

I don't know whether biographers should review other biographers. But I have no caustic criticisms of Driver's book, and certainly no snide ones. He has a weakness to which most biographers are prone. At times he overanalyses, and the story stops for the analysis, and the analysis has more to do with Driver than it has to do with Duncan. I am sure that I do not need to tell him that if one over-analyses the subject, it tends to disappear. I am a novelist (but so of course is Driver) and I want more of Duncan with the flashing blue eyes and the bursting ruddy cheeks, and his passionate insistence that made you want to run for cover, and his overwhelming earnestness that made you feel so mean when you knew you were not going to be convinced. But Driver shouldn't take this criticism too seriously, for one of Archbishop Clayton's devoted admirers was disappointed in my biography because there was too much Paton and not enough Clayton.

Driver's book has given me much pleasure, not just because it is good, but because it brought back remembrances of things past, and it will have a place of honour in my incomplete library of the events of those strange and tempestuous times. □

● Afrikaner Nationalists still have very bitter feelings because they can dimly remember the days when they were regarded as inferior citizens in **the land of their birth**. As one spokesman said: "Man, we even had to fight for our freedom. Those soldiers and guerillas of ours were noble people. Any person who is prepared to give or risk his life for the freedom of his country and his people is a hero."

● Van der Merwe, in a generous mood, explained how to deal with the problem of unemployment (the problem afflicts pink liberal countries overseas, but is of course unknown here): "Just declare it illegal. Then if people persist in it, have a few baton-charges or shoot a bit: you'll be surprised how quickly they'll give it up."

Vortex

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