

Alan Paton: African Prophet of Racial Justice

Address by David A. Holgate for *Space in the City*, Prophets for Our Time Series, United Church, Jewry Street, Winchester, 21 October 2009

“Well, is this what you want to talk about?” Alan Paton looked at me directly and sharply. We had been discussing the differences between the two Christian organisations at the University of Cape Town. It was a sunny summer morning in January 1976, five months before the Soweto uprisings were to harden battle lines in the anti-apartheid struggle. He was 73, I was just 22. I was visiting him to check the transcript of a public lecture he had given six months earlier at the university on the topic, “The Christian Hope in Our Land”.

As a Christian and student of English literature, I was in awe of him as a Christian writer and truth-teller. Once we had checked my transcript of his talk, we spoke about the difficulty of telling the truth in a context where saying too much can lead to house arrest, imprisonment or “disappearance”. Faced with these dangers, people develop the habit of censoring not just what they say, but also what they read and even what they think. The two volumes of Paton’s autobiography, published years after this interview, record many examples of this. During the Apartheid era in SA, the cost of truth telling and truth acting was very high.

But Paton reminded me that telling the truth is not a simple matter. When his first wife Dorrie was dying of emphysema, he had obeyed the doctor’s advice to conceal this truth from her. “But,” he added, “I would not do so now. Doctors don’t necessarily have a monopoly of the truth.” He gave other examples of when telling to truth to a rogue might lead him to despair or suicide. He advised me that there is more involved in *dealing with the truth* than just telling it.

It is the truth-*dealing* man that I wish to talk about today. About how he faced the truths about SA’s racial policies in a way that changed his behaviour, and about what he did, particularly in the period between 1934 and 1968, rather than just what he said or wrote for the rest of his life. There were a number of hinge points in Paton’s life, which I will identify in a moment, but perhaps the most important was the moment after the worldwide success of *Cry the Beloved Country*, when he attempted to live the idyllic “independent and unconventional life of a writer,” only to find that he could not do it. He himself had to *live out* the implications of the complex truths which he had explored poetically and dramatically in his novel.

Hinge: The publication of *Cry the Beloved Country* in 1948

For four years, from 1948 when Afrikaner Nationalists gained political control of SA, Paton tried to enjoy what he called the “glorious freedom of the writer’s life”, living in a cottage on the beautiful Natal South Coast. This was my home in the 1960s and 70s. Golden sands, big creamy surf, sub-tropical fruits, the warm Indian ocean, friendly Zulus, cheerful Indians, complacent colonials, country clubs. Add to this the postwar economic boom of the 50s and it is easy to imagine him and Dorrie relishing this life after 13 years running a reformatory for young Black urban delinquents on the outskirts of the raw, rough, violent city of Johannesburg.

Here was a chance for this Christian poet to put into words the truth of the tragedy that was befalling South Africa. To compose heart-wrenching laments of the way the colonial racial injustices of the past were being codified and compounded by the determined ideologues who now controlled SA. He tried. He tried hard. *Cry the Beloved Country* became a New York musical, *Lost in the Stars* in 1950. Then a film, directed by Zoltan Korda. He was wined, dined and feted by the artistic establishments of America and Britain. He even retreated to a cabin at Lanes Flat, in the depths of a Californian redwood forest to think and write. But once there, he wrote little. Just a poem to mark his son Jonathan's confirmation and a psalm in which the trees and animals of an African forest praise the Lord.

He returned to SA and persisted with his writing. He made another retreat to the UK to complete a second novel *Too Late the Phalarope* (about an Afrikaner policeman who falls foul of the Immorality Act prohibiting sex between people of different races) in 1953 and then began work on his major biography of his spiritual, intellectual and political hero J. H. Hofmeyr. But this monumental biography was only completed in 1964. After the Afrikaner National party strengthened its position in the in the 1953 elections he realised he would have to take an active part in the coming political struggle. He realised, that "doom was approaching me and the end of the glorious freedom of the writer's life." (*Journey Continued*, p. 56)

Hinge: the formation of the Liberal Party in May 1953

In May 1953 the Liberal Association formed itself into the Liberal Party of SA. Its aim was to offer (white) South African voters the chance to vote for an evolutionary transition to a non-racial South Africa. Though it shared a passionate commitment to non-racialism with the congress movement, it rejected that movement's association with what were then thought to be "communist values", in particular the sense that a good end should be pursued by any means, even violent ones. This view was, and of course is, a controversial position. During the Apartheid era, the National Party regularly used the fear of communism as a tactic to scare its political opponents. But we should also remember that in the early 50s, the Stalinist era was still less than 20 years away.

In fact, the formation of this non-racial Liberal Party pleased nobody in SA except its members. The Afrikaner National Party were naturally displeased. The United Party, till then the sole white opposition party, was furious. And the powerful congress movement--made up of the South African Indian Congress, the African National Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the white Congress of Democrats--accused the Liberal Party of weakening the only true opposition. So, the formation of the Liberal Party was another hinge moment. In the second volume of his autobiography, Paton explains that the Liberals felt they could not join the congress movement because of some fundamentally incompatible beliefs about: economic control, party control and the potential use of violence to attain a political goal (*Journey Continued*, p. 68).

Paton attributes this decision to temperament as well as belief, and I think here his Christian beliefs informed his political views. He maintained these consistently to the end of his life, vehemently opposing economic sanctions in the 1970s and 80s for instance. He was always completely opposed to the use of violence to achieve

political ends. For example, he expressed deep revulsion at the actions of some members of the Liberal party who finally despaired and engaged in some half-hearted acts of sabotage. In 1964, John Harris, a former member of the party, planted a bomb on Johannesburg station that killed an elderly woman and injured 22 others. Looking back on Harris's conviction for murder and execution, Paton expresses little sympathy for him and describes his actions as "wicked and totally futile". It was left to a young 16 year old, one Peter Hain, to draw up a sympathetic secular funeral service for the dead man. Prophets don't always get it right and young people sometimes show the way.

But, remember this is Paton writing in at the end of his life in the dark days of 1987-88, hoping against hope that the remaining civic order in SA would not implode in violence.

Hinge: the Soweto student uprising of June 1976

Looking at my collection of books and papers by or about Paton, I see that I have only one press cutting published after 1976, the year that the Soweto townships erupted and violent confrontation between blacks and whites became a real possible outcome for SA. In the Epilogue to the second volume of his autobiography, Paton mentions 16 June 1976 as the end of an era, the end of the time when white SA could imagine that white domination could continue indefinitely. It began the era of unstable equilibrium maintained the repeated declaration of states of emergency. It is striking that even in 1988 he was convinced that SA would not erupt in revolutionary violence but would go through an evolutionary process of change marked by endemic violence. But, he writes little about what possible contribution a Liberal Party could make to such a covert transition of power from one ideological nationalism to another.

There may be more information about this in his biography by Peter Alexander (1994) and the recently published collection of his letters (*Alan Paton: Selected Letters*, 2009, ed. P. Alexander). In that sense, this paper is a memoir, not an update on Paton scholarship. It is worth noting that there is a centre devoted to Paton research, The Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives, at his alma mater, the University of Kwazulu Natal.

Mention of the archiving of his personal and literary remains might be a good moment to pause and take stock....

The University website indicates that the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives "holds not only Alan Paton's literary works and related documents and manuscripts, but also papers pertaining to the Liberal Party and other institutions and organisations who contributed to the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa." The existence of such a university Centre is evidence that his country regards him as *a significant figure in the apartheid struggle*. Yet, he always regarded himself primarily as a *writer*. And I am arguing that he was one of the African *prophets* of racial justice.

Hinge: Bishop Geoffrey Clayton's Commission 1941-2

If he was a prophet, when did he receive his prophetic call? What jolted him onto the public stage? Was it *Cry the Beloved Country*, or was that novel his first prophetic

oracle? If so, this book was the first fruit of his prophetic call. From this viewpoint, there is no struggle between the writer, the prophet and the political leader. They are all expressions of a common call to discern God's perspective. Paton himself locates his call to work for racial justice in his membership of the Bishop of Johannesburg's 1941 *Commission to determine the mind of Christ for South Africa*. Yet, why was he chosen to sit on that commission? Was God's call perhaps already upon him?

To answer this, we need to step back a bit and look at his formation: his childhood in the colonial town of Pietermaritzburg, his university education and the Christian influences he met there, his work as a schoolmaster, teaching not English literature, but mathematics, and his extraordinary years as a principal pioneering penal reform for young offenders.

Pietermaritzburg in the early 20th c. exemplified British colonial rule. For the first 11 years of his life, the regiment from the local garrison marched down from Fort Napier to the Polo ground, past his house every year to mark the king's birthday. The only African people he knew were domestic servants. Later, in 1924, at the end of his university career, Paton was elected by his peers to represent them at the Imperial Conference of Students in London. Like many colonials of his era, this was his first encounter with country which has exported the culture in which he was raised and formed. Reading his biography in the 1980s, as one also born into the Empire, I was amazed to read, that

In those days the Union of South Africa was one of the most honoured nations of the Empire ... [because] the defeated Boer generals ... had forgiven the hurts of the Anglo-Boer War and had brought SA into the First World War on the side of her one time conqueror. (*Towards the Mountain*, p. 81)

He was a bright schoolboy, and in 1914, at the age of 11, he won a scholarship to the prestigious local high school, Maritzburg College. Five years later, he entered Natal University College, with a state teacher's bursary to study mathematics, one of only 115 students. There he met another brand of Christianity than the strict Christadelphianism of his parents.

Hinge: meeting Railton Dent in 1919

First he met the son of Methodist missionaries, Railton Dent. Six years older than Paton, he somehow taught him that: life must be used in the service of a cause greater than oneself. (*Mountain*, p. 59). He summed up this lesson as: Once you get the idea that life is not altogether your own property and once you realise that life is not much use without justice, you are likely to keep travelling. (*Mountain*, p. 63) Dent later repudiated Paton's friendship; nevertheless, Paton was changed by knowing him.

Hinge: meeting Dorrie in Ixopo

After a short teaching stint in a white state school in northern Natal—note that schools were already segregated in the 1920s—Paton was transferred (against his will!) to rural Natal to a high school in Ixopo. This region is the rural setting for *Cry the Beloved Country*. And it was here that he met the older, married woman, Dorrie Lusted, whom he fell in love with, and who after being soon widowed, became his wife. Life is stranger than fiction. The story of Paton's life with Dorrie is the subject

of *Kontakion for You Departed* (1969). It is an honest celebration of the 42 years they shared, publicly and privately, and in my view is his finest work.

Hinge: serious illness in 1934

Shortly after their marriage in 1928, Paton and his wife were able to return to Pietermaritzburg where Paton taught at his old school, Maritzburg College. These were happy times for him, with much scope for active community service too. During a Toc H hiking trip, in 1934 he caught typhoid/enteric fever and nearly died. After being hospitalised for 4 months, he finally recovered but faced returning to school teaching with a heavy heart. Just as term started he bumped into a nurseryman while shopping in town. The man asked what Paton would do now and he replied, 'I'm back at school, the man said, "You won't stay there. You can't stay in the same place after an illness like that."

He was right. The illness had changed him. He wrote to one of his friends from the Student Christian Association, J. H. Hofmeyr, then Minister of Education in the United Party government of Jan Smuts, to ask about a new government initiative. This was a bold innovation in the treatment of young offenders. The government had decided to transfer reformatories for juveniles from the Department of Prisons to the Education Department. There were four institutions: two for whites, one for coloureds and one for blacks. Hofmeyr advised him to apply for all four, saying it was hard to know what could be done with the latter. Paton hoped he would not get it, but did. And his wife was furious.

Turning Point: Diepkloof and the Diocese of Johannesburg 1934-1948

Yet, the next thirteen years at Diepkloof were happy and life-changing for them and all in his charge. He transformed a foul-smelling semi-prison into a place of education and hope building. The walls and fences gradually came down and a school and village complex took its place. It became famous, to those who hated these freedoms and to those who could hardly believe it.

This, and the story of Paton's church life from 1934 to 1948, constitute what I think of as the period during which God educated and called Paton the prophet. In this period he learned to speak Afrikaans, to engage with the real lives of many young black boys, and to ponder what his church, now the Anglican Church, had to say about punishment and race relations. After the Archbishop's Commission in 1941-2 had opened the door in his heart to full racial equality, he had the opportunity of attending the International Conference of Christians and Jews in 1946, where he met Reinhold Niebuhr and Leo Baeck, before embarking on a world tour of prisons. At that time, nobody thought that the National Party would come to power a few years later. Paton imagined that he was preparing himself to be a candidate for the national post of Director of Prisons in South Africa!

Instead, God was providing the time and space for his prophet to compose his first and greatest prophetic oracle. As Paton travelled around the world, in hotel bedrooms and on trains, at bus stops and on ferries, he allowed the cry of his beloved country to rise out of him. The rest of his life flowed from that action, yet the book itself flowed from the life he had already been leading for 13 years. If Paton had been appointed as

principal of one of the reformatories for young white offenders, this book could not have been written.

Evaluation

Is this enough to constitute a case for Paton being a prophet? I think so. In making this argument (and in rejecting the view that Nelson Mandela was a prophet) I am not making a case for his greatness as a religious leader, or arguing that he was a more significant political leader than Mandela. Paton would completely reject such claims and insist that his primary vocation was to be a writer.

Yet, judged solely as a writer, his output is relatively slight: three novels (only one well-known), a small collection of short stories, enough poetry and short pieces for one collection, a small illustrated devotional work, two major biographies and three works of autobiography. Fairly substantial, but not huge.

As an educationist, penal reformer and politician, he deserves a place in South African history, even though his work was undone by his successors. Diepkloof was transferred to the Department of Native Affairs and broken up into tribal constituents and the Liberal Party of which he was a founder and later President was disbanded in 1968, never to re-form.

He loved and respected Afrikaners, yet his attempt to become an honorary Afrikaner by learning Afrikaans and taking part in the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek also ended in failure. Though he made an Afrikaans man the hero of *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), an English writer friend, Antony Delius said that he had not managed to represent the Afrikaner identity accurately, while an Afrikaans friend told him he had. It is many years since I read that novel, but I would not recommend it to someone seeking to understand Afrikaners. Yet, again, he was absolutely right in commending Karel Schoeman's 1973 novel, *Na die Geliefde Land* (*ET Promised Land*) which is a novel which prophesied grief and desolation for Afrikanerdom. This commendation is all the more remarkable when one notes that Schoeman's 2002 autobiography records his view of English-speaking South Africans in the 1960s as "materialistic, superficial, partisan and complacent" [*materialisties, oppervlakkig, bevooroordeeld en selfingenome*]. English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans have often regarded one another as (bad) Samaritans. Paton consistently rejected this view.

Consistency. It is when Paton is viewed as a lay Christian leader that a strand of consistent growth and achievement emerges. His life is marked by his attempts to respond to the call of God upon it: to be good, to serve others, to seek to understand the implications of the Christian faith for his time and place and then to live it out. This is seen in his work with the Student Christian Association, with Toc H, with his church membership, with his participation in national and international faith events. Although raised as a Christadelphian, he became an Anglican at the time when his first child was due to be baptised and he remained loyal and faithful to this church all his life. He was faithful to the church when it disappointed him, e.g. in offering a lesser experience of fully non-racial fellowship than the Liberal Party, and when it withdrew the Order of St Simon of Cyrene (the highest honour the CPSA can confer on a layperson) when he married a divorcee. Some of his profoundest poetry and

writing is manifestly religious, but it is also Anglican. I can think of few 20th C poets who would take the subject of a boy's confirmation as the topic for a poem. Paton does. When I visited him he gave me an inscribed copy of his meditation on the Prayer of St Francis, *Instrument of Thy Peace* (1968).

It may be argued that just as Nelson Mandela has been a "loyal and disciplined member of the ANC", so Paton was a "loyal and disciplined member of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa" (now the Anglican Church in Southern Africa). But his allegiance was not primarily to any church, but the call of God. This call is expressed in the vision of Isaiah of Jerusalem, Isaiah 11, e.g. v. 9, which forms the epigraph to his autobiography: "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." If Paton was not himself a prophet, it is certain that he was gripped by this prophetic vision. I recall him looking at me with a combination of severity and tenderness. He seized the vision of Isaiah's holy mountain and never stopped journeying towards it.

In a lifetime where political struggle was costly and where opposition was shrill or silenced, and where hope often wavered, he kept placing the future of SA in the context of God's purposes for all humanity. For instance, his last major paper, a similar text to the one I transcribed but never published, was entitled, "The Nature and Ground of Christian Hope Today." (*Knocking on the Door*, pp. 286-93) He sought God's purposes for SA and gave the prime of his life to putting some of those purposes into practice as best he could.

Many anti-apartheid activists then and since have argued that his gentle Christian-liberal solution to SA's race struggle was wholly inadequate. The difference was that he factored *God's activity* into the process, and believed that we could not reach the holy mountain by hurting or destroying others. As it happened, it turned out that way.

In a long out-of-print children's book, called *South Africa and Her People* (1957), he predicted a *possible* evolutionary future for SA in which the idea of *domination* would lose its lodgement in the white mind:

In 1960 the massive wall may show a crack.

In 1970 the crack will have become a breach.

In 1980 the waters will be pouring through.

In 2000 the river may be flowing quietly to the sea, with only a few ruins left of its former impediment, to be preserved as historical monuments of the folly of mankind.

This *could* happen. There is very little sign of it now.

When Paton died in 1988 the waters were just about to pour through in a torrent. He did not live to see the exultant release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the joy of the first democratic elections in 1994. But he wasn't far from the holy mountain when he died, praying "God bless Africa, guard her children, guide her leaders and give her peace. Amen."