

'Is the continuation of the present a possible future?' In honour of Richard Turner, 1941-1978 by Mark Heywood.

Decades ago, Richard Turner joined up with the likes of Halton Cheadle, Alec Erwin, David Hemson, John Copelyn and other familiar names and began to try to arm the nascent trade union movement with political education and an ideology. This period of eruption eventually led to the launch of COSATU – and in many ways it birthed the rebellion that led to the collapse of Apartheid. And Turner's thought, 40 years later, gives us the most reason for introspection.

"Freedom is not something which can simply be guaranteed by a declaration of human rights." – Rick Turner

I first heard of the South African philosopher and activist Rick Turner in 1984 through his daughter Jann. At the time we were both students at Oxford University. In her flat, on the shaded banks of River Cherwell, she told me how he had died in her arms after being shot through the window of her bedroom at 32 Dalton Road, Durban.

Rick was 36. Jann was 13. By the time of his death, he had been banned by the Apartheid regime for five years.

Talking to Turner's daughter in Oxford felt poignant. It was unexpected to find such proximity to a hero of the South African liberation struggle amongst the dreaming spires. It leavened the sense of exile.

Today Rick Turner is one of the least recognised heroes of our liberation struggle. It took until 2013 to see the publication of *Choosing to be Free, The Life Story of Rick Turner*, a biography written by Billy Keniston. In its pages the life and murder of Turner is now recorded for all of humanity to be aware of... should they wish.

In *Choosing to be Free* the horror of that night of 8 January 1978 is told, again by Jann. But this time it is contained in the incident report the 13-year-old girl gave several days after his murder to one Detective A J Eysele of the SA police.

She tells of a normal family evening, her father reading to his two daughters in bed and then struggling to sleep until he "told me to think about the planets". Then how, shortly after midnight, a gunshot left her cradling her dad's shattered body in the last moments of his life.

"He did not speak a word. He was still alive. His face was white. My father was dressed in his shorty pyjamas."

Her record is a reminder of the way in which evil often strikes in the most mundane and ordinary of circumstances. Like in Gaza.

After two hundred pages of a biography, which revives Turner's intriguing and complex character, the full horror of the killing is striking. The fact that it was never 'solved' and that no one sought amnesty for it evokes new anger. The killer may still lurk somewhere in one of our suburbs, growing old with a murder on his conscience.

Apartheid and its police enforcers certainly were evil.

Choosing To Be Free is the latest episode in a series of biographies in which historians are painstakingly putting our past together again. They do so in a way that allows us not only to reflect on the past but also on our present. In this sense it is an interesting companion to *The New Radicals*, a book which recounts the self-questioning of the white student movement at Wits University in the early 1970s.

Choosing To Be Free starts its story at the other end of our country, describing the nascent student movement in Cape Town in the late 1960s and Turner's influence over it. But the main action takes place in Durban where Turner moved in 1970, a relocation which coincided with the beginnings of the revival of the worker's movement typified by the massive strike wave that took place there in 1973, shaking employers and the Apartheid state alike.

The rise of Steve Biko and the South African Students Organisation (SASO) gave the cast of the *New Radicals* cause for introspection. In Durban the 1973 Durban Strikes helped another group of students to see the worker's movement as the vehicle that would carry them and the country as a whole to its liberation. Turner joined up with the likes of Halton Cheadle, Alec Erwin, David Hemson, John Copelyn (still familiar names all) and began to try to arm the nascent trade union movement with political education and an ideology. This process, with many twists and turns, eventually led to the launch of COSATU in 1985 – and another chapter in our history!

In many ways this period of eruption birthed the rebellion that led to the collapse of Apartheid. My feeling is that through Turner's thought, we can also see how it birthed the defeat of participatory democracy as its alternative.

Because, whilst the story of the Durban ferment is interesting, it is Turner's personal and philosophical thought that 40 years later gives us the most reason for introspection.

In this regard, the book records how he grappled with envisioning a democratic South Africa. He found himself in one of the foundries of the reawakening of rebellion against the Apartheid state – and was one of its most important smithies; he spent his life experimenting with forms of political organising; but he protected his own independence.

The successful restoration of Rick that is achieved by Keniston the sculptor made me turn once more the one book Turner completed before the assassin felled his thought.

I first read to *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa*, during my own journey into the liberation struggle and found it moving and inspiring. But I had put it aside because it did not conform to the ideological certainties I had by that time succumbed to.

“Too reformist. Marxism lite.”

A mistake.

*The Eye of the Needle* was a book addressed to Christians not because Turner was a Christian but because this was a way of getting his ideas out without the book being banned. In it, Turner critiques Apartheid SA in the 1970s and the complicity of white people. He asks his readers to think of “the present as history”, condemns the “impracticality of realism” and posits the possibility of an “ideally just society” founded on a participatory democracy. In his words:

The essential problem is this: How can we design a set of institutions that will give all individuals power over their own lives without permitting them to exercise power over other people? How can we design political institutions that will give people the maximum freedom to choose what to do with their own lives?”

Forty years later, it could be argued that our Constitution and the institutions it creates should have done all that.

Why, then, does inequality abide?

‘The price of control is conformity’

In trying to answer his own question, Turner made a virtue of “utopian thinking”, asking the reader to “shatter certainties” and eschew (a pre-determined) realism. But at a time in the world when the inequalities of capitalism had their answers in the promise of socialism, Turner’s approach was heresy.

Turner eschewed ideology and certainty. He quietly defied peer pressures to join the ANC, MK or the SACP, opting instead for what he called an independent, pragmatic and “practical utopianism”.

In this context, the book restores the outlines of a conflict that developed between Turner’s approach to societal transformation and that of comrades like Alec Erwin, John Copelyn and – somewhere off-stage –

Jeremy Cronin. This is succinctly captured in an interview with Dan O'Meara, who described his embrace of Marxism:

"[It] enabled me to answer all the questions that Rick's positions couldn't really answer for me. Marxism simply said, 'Yup, this is the way it's going to happen, these are the people you have to work with, and this is the solution. And here is a role for you.' Rick's analysis didn't provide a recipe: Marxism did. Rick's answers were far too complicated."

These few words give up far more than meets the eye. They invite those of us still committed to social justice and dissatisfied with the transformation that has (not) taken place to think a little of the psychology of ideology, the certainties of the freedom fighter and the pitfalls that lie along our idealistic road.

Freedom fighters are always a minority. They are frequently an oppressed and endangered minority. Thus, in the face of hostile powers, it is unsurprising that the starting point for a freedom fighter must be certainty; certainty about good and evil, right and wrong, who is the oppressor and who is the victim. So, far so good! But for many of us, this evolved into certainty about ideology and the organisations we believed espoused that ideology.

Forty years later, one debt we have to Turner is that he resisted these pressures.

At the time of his death, Turner was looking once more into the thought of Jean Paul Sartre. Most of his comrades had moved onto Marx.

He held to his reluctance to be dragooned into the net of any ideology. He seemed aware that over time certainties (of any kind or ideology) begin to close down thought.

Wherever thought ends, the status quo endures.

Our experience shows us that when a freedom fighter is fixed on the difficult road ahead, and particularly if that road is a burdensome and hard one, certainties that morph into ideologies cause us stop looking at what is going on at the side of the road. We miss the changing landscape.

Witness Joe Slovo's slavish defence of the Soviet Union.

Witness freedom fighters now in power, who dispute a crisis of inequality.

Then, possibly as solace, because freedom is a very difficult battle to win, they begin to take pleasure in skirmishes along the way, often with other people who are nominally also freedom fighters. In defence of the faith they become involved in struggles for doctrinal purity and political correctness.

Focusing only on what is upfront and impersonal often means closing the mind to the peripheral - and ironically this dehumanises the freedom fighter.

It makes him or her a defender of unfreedoms.

The status quo beds down.

The present as history

One of Turner's acts of defiance against Apartheid was to marry Fozia Fischer, an Indian woman whom he loved. Fischer survived Turner. She lives to be his witness to a South Africa Turner would not have wanted.

Reflecting on the lives of comrades who outlived Turner, she laments the state of the new South Africa and the fact that, in respect of inequality, the past seems to have out-lived the present:

John Copelyn, for example, made a solid career as the vanguard of the unions. Then at some point he withdrew from politics. Now he runs - is it e.tv or something? He invests money in the stock exchange; he knows how to work with money and he's made money for the unions. But what changes have the workers or 'the workers' organisations' made to a democratic South Africa. I don't know.

In writing *Choosing Freedom*, Keniston has created a book that should be recommended reading for those committed to social justice. It reveals Rick Turner as a freedom fighter of a special sort. A philosopher activist.

Much greater honour and acknowledgement should be given to Turner in the tales we tell of the brave people who stood up against oppression.

The political freedom we now enjoy owes much to the sacrifices made by people like him. But sadly the present contains too much of the past. For the new generation of social justice activists it may be time to dust off *The Eye of the Needle* and enquire more closely into what the lives and thought of people like Rick Turner may tell us.

Apartheid may be dead and buried. But words written 40 years ago in dreaming of a better future live on to indict us:

*Unless we end our obsession with growth and reallocate the resources that we do have left to provide our vital material needs – food, shelter and health – we can look forward to a future of famine, growing inequality, social conflict, and universal hate and fear in the struggle for survival. DM*

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