

ALAN PATON

AT 80

– THE U.C.T.

CELEBRATION

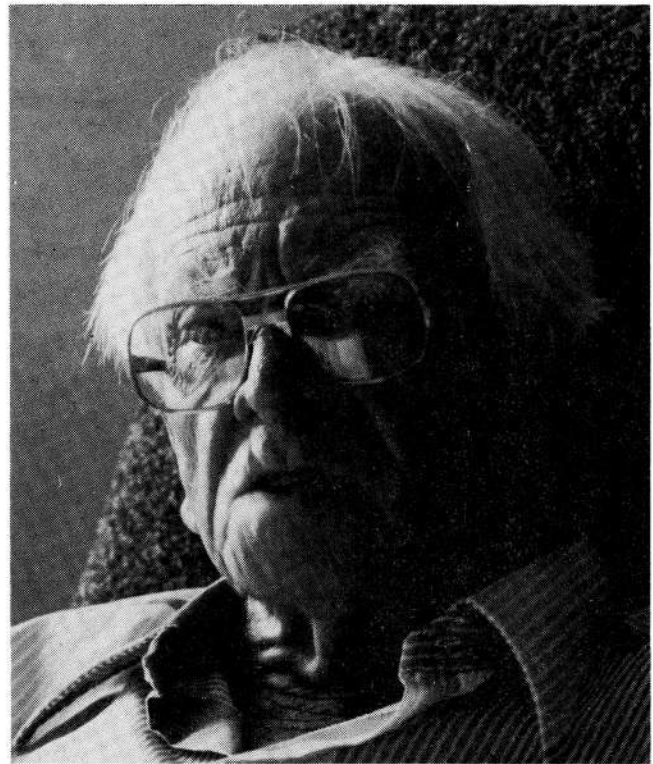
by Tony Morphet

Alan Paton is 80 this year. There have already been several celebrations of the event and there will be more. U.C.T Summer School planned a set of five lectures "to consider and salute" his achievement. The impressions which follow are a record, from the inside, so to speak, of the occasion and I offer them to carry the celebration beyond the five days at U.C.T.

The programme had many points of origin. At a literary luncheon given by David Philip for the launching of "Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful" on 6 November 1981 I realized for the first time that 1983 would make Alan Paton 80. I checked it out with him as he sat beneath the arc lamps and the T.V. cameras and committed him to coming to Cape Town in January 1983. That was the most immediate origin. The roots lie further back. I first heard of Alan Paton in a car driving back with my father from Pietermaritzburg to Kokstad. I must have been 9 or 10. It was late evening and we were moving along the rough stony road towards Umzimkulu. I can recall him quoting as we came over a rise, "Below you is the valley of the Umzimkulu, on its journey from the Drakensberg to the sea; and beyond and behind the river, great hill after hill; and beyond and behind them, the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand."

It was a strange moment. My father was no reader. He was an East Griqualand farmer; an English immigrant with no education beyond a tiny farm school in the Yorkshire Dales, but his pleasure in quoting the words was unforgettable. It was pleasure in looking across to his own land but it was, much more, pleasure in having that land dignified, taken out of its ordinary heteronomous reality and given new shape and meaning.

This recollection came back to me when I was thinking about the lecture programme, particularly when I asked the question "What precisely were we celebrating?" The broad answer came – "the giving of meaning" – and that still seems to me to be a good answer. The 80 years show an undeviating



(Photo: Joe Alferts)

commitment to the creation of meanings. And so in thinking about four people to speak of the particular meanings I began to look for four different voices which could register, give shape to, and record the special impact which the Paton life has had. The speakers would have to be representative – they were to speak for all of us – they would have to be authoritative in their own fields and they would have to have had direct experience of the Paton life.

STRUCTURE AND SPEAKERS

To find the basic structure and the people to speak was not difficult. Denis Hurley, Colin Gardner, Richard Rive and René de Villiers. Religion, Literature and Politics. They were free to choose their approaches within the three fields. Paton would be present to hear all four and would himself speak on the fifth day.

Between the early planning and the event there came a steadily increasing flow of letters and telephone calls from Mr. P. On occasions the letters would crackle with irony and the aggressive teasing wit, but behind that surface there was visible no small anxiety. He referred to his illness, "I have been through deep waters since I last saw you" and he spoke of not feeling the old will to write. We debated the title of his lecture, "Politics and Literature?", "Writing and Politics?", "The Artist in South Africa?" – always the old contradiction and conflict but platitudinously put. In November the proposals suddenly change, "The two loves of my life . the land and the word". I balked at the nakedness of it – it seemed too strong, too confessional, too self-regarding – but the core of the conception was absolutely right. I realized then that he was in a deeply reflective mood and concentrating his attention on retrospective judgement. We toned the original title down to its final form "Two Loves . the land and the word" and under that heading he began to write, phoning from time to time to say how it was going. Invariably the report was "well".

During this intervening period I also received from Douglas

Livingstone a poem which he thought I might like to read at the opening of the final lecture. I persuaded him to send the poem to Mr P. on 11 January. It is a fine poem. The salute is full and unstinted, the verbal rhyming and teasing is one writer recognizing the other in a game.

“There is a lovely road that runs . . .” Each word
Is pulsed, soars from the first : prismatical,
Socratical, muscled, ecstatical
— Cut out as from a restive midday herd,
Transmuted, each : a legendary bird
Winged from a skull that’s emblematical,
Emphatical, yet democratical —
The man within the artist undeterred.

A ten thousand year-old Muse — just turned eighty
Years young — sustains your pen, and far from weighty
Bids us salute you : Dr. Alan Paton.
Your art rebukes, inspiring as to straighten
Spines for the morrow. It is in your voice
The beloved country can yet rejoice.

I kept it in my file and decided I would read it, if I could, as an introduction.

On the Sunday evening before Denis Hurley’s opening Monday lecture I received a phone call from Anne. She sounded tired, harassed and in a mood of retreat. The drive had been long, hot and tiring. I was apprehensive, fearing, as always, the strain being placed upon him. I learned later from Jannie O’Malley that on this first evening in Cape Town he had seemed nervous and anxious about what was to come. On the Monday morning he showed nothing of this anxiety.



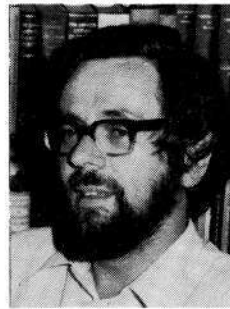
DENIS HURLEY

Denis Hurley had made all of his own arrangements having sent me a letter early on to say that ‘in matters of accommodation we Catholics practice a convenient kind of communism’. Even as I mention the genial humour of this I have a twinge. Who knows what use could be made of such a charming way of saying he would be staying with members of his Order? He was already in the lecture room when we arrived, relaxed, easy and comfortable, as he invariably is, and he spoke of the great pleasure he had had in re-reading “all of Alan’s writing”. He wears his scholarship lightly but its thoroughness is never in doubt. The structure of his lecture he had found in a footnote in “Towards the Mountain” which gives six stages to the life. His theme, pursued throughout the lecture, was of a life of service to an ideal. It was a salute given, in the manner of the Church, sub specie aeternitatis, a recording of the meeting between the sacred and the secular in the life of an individual; of talents and graces given and used; of the universal and timeless inter-acting with the personal and the immediate. The Church is ancient and wise — it sees things with a broad and steady gaze — the Archbishop was unhurried, calm and sure, his poise telling the audience perhaps more even than his words.

He spoke of pilgrimage; of the journey toward the mountain of Isaiah; of the influences on Paton of the prophets, the New Testament and the life of Jesus. His conclusion joined both blessing and the giving of thanks.

“I thank him for his long and courageous service to truth, and love, and peace, and people. I thank him for the leadership he has given us by those six sturdy steps towards the mountain.”

I cannot imagine the precise emotion that must come to a person hearing his own life discussed in such a way and by such a figure. I do know that Alan Paton found it deeply moving.



COLIN GARDNER

Colin Gardner who had been present to hear Denis Hurley on the Monday could be forgiven for feeling a little daunted as he began on the Tuesday. He spoke to his own title “Alan Paton Writer and Fighter” and his focus was on the literature and the role it has played, and continues to play in South African life. His was an argument which began with “concrete instances” and broadened throughout the lecture into a commentary on the way “the Paton project” has acted out its values in the South African drama. He spoke of a deep “yearning toward harmony” present in the prose and poetry — a deep desire for unity and community — but added that such a longing had never blinded Paton to the battle surrounding the values of love, peace and community. He read and discussed the poem **I have approached** which talks so powerfully of words, sent to “awaken consciences”, “recall absenting obligations”, “assault the fortresses and bastions of our fears”.

Cry the Beloved Country he argued was controversial in the late 1940s, had remained that, and was increasingly so in 1983. It was not a book of political propositions or strategies; rather it spoke to a gradually growing human awareness and a steadily clarifying emotion concerned with the human need for the spirit of mutuality and community. For these reasons it drew the criticism of social radicals who were in search of political answers to social questions but who failed to see that social organization was not identical with the deeper sources of human trust and mutuality. The values of love and reconciliation which challenged the racism of the 1940s created a different kind of challenge for the radicalism of the 80s.

Colin Gardner’s lecture was marked by the lucid and sensitive articulacy in which he captured the movements of his own dialogue with the works. He spoke as someone who knows and feels the works from the inside, but also as someone who cannot forget that both inside and out of them is the South African reality. Perhaps more than anything else the life of the lecture was captured in the quality of his reading. Alan Paton said afterwards that he had always thought he was the best reader of his own work, until that morning.



RICHARD RIVE

Dr Richard Rive came into the programme from a different direction. He had not, as the other speakers, worked closely with Paton. "There's a distance between me and the old man" he said when we discussed his participating, "but yes, I'll do it". That distance he made plain in his early remarks. He spoke of his early discovery of **Cry the Beloved Country**. "I was young and bitter and badly hurt. I was mauled by the South African situation. . ." "I did not like Stephen Kumalo – but I'd met him. I did not like the words of Msimangu – but I'd heard them before. I didn't like Jarvis's boys' club – but I belonged to one myself."

It was a brusque, strong and straight opening – Paton from the outside, or the "other" side. In the background of Rive's lecture one could glimpse his development from the young angry man trapped in ghetto education, crammed full of "colonial" English literature and hating it, towards the fully established literary professional committed to the creation of an authentic common non-racial culture in the South Africa of the future. From this dominating vantage point he looked back over the landscape of South African literature towards the great figure of Olive Schreiner, whom he has studied so thoroughly and so fruitfully. And as he mapped the terrain, placing writers with brief pithy judgements, he gradually established Paton's position in the total scene.

He identified two traditions – the "liberal" and the "protest" – as the basic co-ordinates of his map and he argued that the late 1940s had been the point of transition between the two. Peter Abrahams' "Path of Thunder" was published in the same year as "Cry the Beloved Country". In one the protest tradition was taking shape; in the other the liberal tradition was nearing its end. He explored the different assumptions underpinning both traditions showing how they sprang from different needs and perceptions but how they both sought change. And, he argued, the protest tradition of the 50s and 60s had gained a good deal of its impetus from its arguments with the liberal tradition in place before it.

It was at this point that the scale of his tribute to Paton finally became clear. He quoted Paton's sharp question directed at the radicals of the 70s "Who were your mentors?" One mentor of the protest movement he showed as Paton himself. The tribute was to Paton the innovator and initiator whose writing had spurred into life a new tradition in South African writing. The accuracy and justice of the view was, as it were, guaranteed, by the even-handed scholarly detachment with which he had controlled his own young anger and through which he had established the professional authority and dominance with which he spoke.



RENE DE VILLIERS

René de Villiers has been in public life for three or four decades and the wealth of his experience shows in every phrase he uses but it has done nothing to cure him of speaker's nerves. He was present at every lecture and after each he would bewail his position as fourth man. However, once at the lectern all his assurance was with him and he warmed expansively to his theme "the political evolution of a great South African."

The lecture followed a structure similar to Denis Hurley's – looking for key experiences and defining vital stages of development in the biography. He touched some of the same areas as Hurley – the funeral of Edith Rheinalt-Jones; the appointment to the Bishops' Commission, but there were fresh reaches of experience opened up through the focus on political life. The style of the lecture, too, was different. De Villiers again and again found ways of leaving his grand theme to bring in the anecdotes and scenes that he has known from his 40-year friendship with Paton. His salute never lost its two sides – the one of profound respect for a great man who has struggled to free himself from everything narrow and confining, "the man who has done more than anyone in the last 20 years to keep the liberal spirit alive through his writing" – and the other of a close and old friend with a host of shared private recollections, jokes, anecdotes and stories. The skill of the lecture was that these two levels could live together so comfortably in an hour's talk.

Under de Villiers' attention Paton emerged as an archetypal figure. A man who put behind him the narrow provincialism of colonial Natal, who overcame his racist inheritance as a white, who struggled against the exclusive nationalisms of both English and Afrikaner in order to take on the character and dimensions of an authentic South African. From a friend and fellow citizen of a torn and divided country one could expect no fuller salute.

FINAL DAY

On the final day as we came up to the lecture theatre there was a great jostling crowd at the door. Deans were to be seen queueing behind schoolboys. We had to delay the start to get everyone in which was finally managed by asking the young and supple to take to the stairs. I found myself faced with the task of introducing Alan Paton – a prospect which seemed absurd after the previous four lectures. There was no way I would have managed to read Douglas Livingstone's poem. The situation was saved by remembering a biographical note in an S.A. Outlook issue to which Paton had contributed in the 70s. It said simply "Alan Paton is still Alan Paton." I adapted it slightly, with acknowledge-

ments, "Alan Paton at 80 is still Alan Paton — only more so". Surely the shortest possible introduction.

As he moved to the lectern I was sharply conscious of his age. He seemed for a moment frail, to show the signs of his illness, and his conversation just before the lecture flashed back. "It won't happen again my dear chap." And I recalled him being exceptionally careful on the stairs and his words "I don't want to fall and break my leg — it's like when I was finishing **Cry the Beloved Country** — I didn't want to become ill. It must be a fear of not finishing something."

All of these impressions vanished as he began speaking. The voice was as ever. The same simple, austere syntax, the same guttural, clipped diction — words under intense discipline. And the style retained all its vigour and power as the disciplines of the language contained the emotional pressure beneath the words.

The lecture had the simplest structure. Two halves — one to the love of the land, the other to the love of the word. In the love of the land he spoke, as a steadfast and stern lover, of a turbulent and testing relationship — of "a love and pride so sorely buffeted for sixty years" which "yet remains constant". In his rhetorical way he asked "What is a South African proud of?"

"Of the beauty of the physical land? — Yes
Of the beauty of its diverse peoples? — Yes.
Of its moral and social achievements? — No."

The drama of the relationship lies both in the questions and the fierce monosyllabic answers. More powerful still, a gesture possible only to someone supremely sure, not only of his own character and position but of his feelings as well, he went on,

"I do not expect to be able to lay my hand on my heart and to say before I die, I am proud to be a South African"

and then the relenting pause

"but I hope some of you will be able to do so"

his face turned towards the schoolchildren.

This sombre reflective phase of the lecture was caught in a sentence acknowledging René de Villiers' argument of the day before. "I am a servant of a nationalism which does not yet exist."

Somewhere near the middle of the hour the lecture changed course. It was done deliberately and skilfully, to go behind the severity and sombreness and into laughter and mockery. Paton recounted how he and René de Villiers have exchanged Christmas cards for 30 years and have carried on a long private joke. He told it all in Afrikaans and the joke turned on one of them having a sore chest and getting drops from the doctor. The drops are political — the Oom Hendrik variety followed, when they don't work, by the Oom John, the Oom Piet and the P.W. As the patient takes them he is seized by the visions and fantasies of Verwoerd, Vorster, Koornhof and Botha, and in the grip of the dreams he cries out in the night — to the rage and misery of his wife. It was excellent political satire and turned the love of the land inside out, to the huge pleasure of the audience.

The love of the word dealt with Paton's love of literature, or rather poetry, since there were, oddly perhaps, no references to novels. The lover in this world has little of the stern moralist who loves the land. He is still enraptured, revelling in imaginative form and compressed expression. Tennyson, Yeats, Blake, Fitzgerald, Hopkins, Campbell.

All famous poems but all collected as part of a personal anthology — an anthology of emotional experience as much as of individual poems.

EMOTIONAL CURRENT

As the lecture proceeded I had become aware, sitting at the front, of a strong emotional current in the audience. I doubt that anyone could have articulated the feeling or experience but I was aware of strange low sounds and of people surreptitiously wiping an eye. This current became more palpable during Mr Paton's closing reading of his poem **A Psalm of the Forest** which, he said, expressed his world view although he did not write it for that purpose.

I have seen my Lord in the forest, He walks from tree to tree laying his hands upon them;
The yellowwoods stand upright and proud that He comes amongst them, the chestnuts throw down blooms at his feet.
The thorns withdraw their branches before Him, they will not again be used shamefully against Him.
The wild fig makes a shade for Him, and no more denies Him.

The monkeys chatter and skip about in the branches, they peer at Him behind their fingers,
They shower Him with berries and fruits, they shake the owls and the nightjars from their hiding places,
They say to each other unceasingly, it is the Lord.

The mothers cuff their children, and elder brothers the younger,
But they jump from tree to tree before Him, they bring down the leaves like rain,
Nothing can bring them to order, they are excited to see the Lord.

And the winds move in the upper branches, they dash them like cymbals together.

They gather from all the four corners, and the waterfalls shout and thunder.

The whole forest is filled with roaring, with an acknowledgement, an exaltation.

No discussion of love of the word could say more than the poem itself.

As he sat the audience rose to applaud — finding a way of expressing the strong feeling which had gathered in the hour.

Even while within the immediate pressure of the feeling I was aware that it was not a wholly new or unknown experience. It was something I had felt before, though by no means often. What made us applaud; what was it that we were hailing? A great figure certainly — one that we had heard described and discussed on the previous four days — a figure who had all the measure of his occasion and who understood himself and his situation to its full limits. But also much more than that. We were applauding a life lived to a measure far beyond our own capacities. The dimensions and commitments had been shown in the first four lectures, but in the fifth they were communicated immediately and directly into our experience.

The five lectures brought alive both the pattern and the passion of Alan Paton's life and, through that, experience was given shape, meaning and dignity. Paton has been, and still is, a giver of meanings. It was that that we were celebrating. It was the same thing that I had felt hearing my father quoting Paton on the road out of Ixopo. □