

A NOBLE PIECE OF AFRIKAANS WRITING

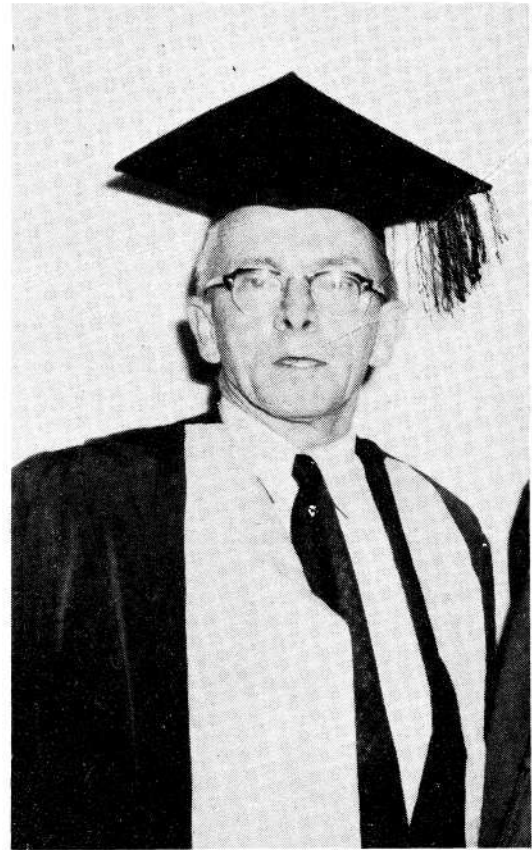
A review of "Na Die Geliefde Land" by Karel Schoeman

(with acknowledgement to "Sunday Tribune")

by Alan Paton

I suspect that this novel is a masterpiece. I cannot make the claim outright, because my judgement is largely subjective, the reason being that the theme of the novel is one that is always present in my mind. The theme is nothing less than the death of Afrikanerdom, though the publishers say it is something else. They actually call it, among other things, a description of farm life. In that case it is the story of a kind of farm life as yet unknown to us, telling not of fields and fruits and flowers, but of grief and desolation, and of longing for the days that will not come again. The reluctance of the publishers to say what the book is about is understandable. How many Afrikaners would want to read a novel about the death of Afrikanerdom?

I should make it clear that the novel is not about the actual cataclysm, the "troubles" which destroyed the Afrikaner countryside and which drove so many Afrikaners overseas. It is about the South Africa of twenty, thirty years later. At no point does the writer tell us what happened, nor does he tell us who destroyed the Afrikaner, but we can guess. Nor does he tell us how it comes about that there are still Afrikaners living on farms like Moedersgift and Eensgevonden and Kommandodrift, without labour, without hope. Nor does he tell us why the destroyer of the Afrikaner, the destroyer who surely must have had a fierce land-hunger of his own, still allows Afrikaners to occupy what one supposes to be large tracts of land. Yet it does not matter. Indeed, if we had been told too much, we would have lost the sense of the brooding presence of this desolation. One thing we know for certain: the Afrikaner has fallen from "on high."



Dr. Paton

(Natal Witness)

It is one of these Afrikaners whose parents went overseas, George, son of Anna Neethling, who now returns to visit the country of his birth, and to see the farm Rietvlei which he has inherited from his mother. The confrontation is shattering. Rietvlei is deserted, the homestead and the farm buildings have been destroyed, and the road to it is disused and overgrown. He finds a room with the Hattingshs, and from them — by inference and indirection — learns of the poverty, the lack of hope, the hidden grief, of the remnants of Afrikanerdom. From the first page one is aware that a past and present tragedy is unfolding.

Karl Kraus said that there were two kinds of writers, those who are and those who aren't. With the first, content and form belong together like soul and body. With the second, they match each other like body and clothes.

This seems to suggest that a good writer must not be too cerebrally and clinically conscious of what he is doing, and how he is making his book. That Mr Schoeman is such a writer I have no doubt. Or perhaps I should say, in this particular novel he shows himself to be such a writer. I do not know whether his other works have this characteristic of a situation that is in itself so entire, so full of many meanings, that the writer does not have to use any devices — or does not appear to have to use them — because everything, every grief, every irony, every longing for that which cannot be again, is there already in the situation that he has chosen, so that even conversations themselves seem to have some mark of inevitability. I do not know whether Mr Schoeman is always so fortunate but I hope to find out.

There are some terrible ironies in the book, and I shall record two of them. The first is that on these desolate farms, there are still pictures of the past heroes, the ministers and the senators and the members of parliament, of all those in fact whose kragdadigheid and patriotism led Afrikanerdom to its doom, but the owners of the pictures do not understand this, and talk with pride of these illustrious forerunners who, though they called themselves Afrikaners, could never come to terms with Africa.

The second example of irony is more cruel. The farmers give George a party at Kommandodrift, an occasion which is superbly described. It goes on till the early hours of the morning, when suddenly the dogs that have been shut up in some farm building, break out into demented barking. It is the police, with their uniforms, holsters, and guns. The schoolmaster is struck in the face, and falls bleeding to the floor. The police laugh at the spectacle. What colour the police are, we are not told, but we know. They shout at the young men, who endure it in silence. Then three of them are taken off. Whether they will ever be seen again, no one knows.

The scene is starkly reminiscent of what we already know. The 90 days, the 180 days, the death in the cell, the fall from the window, the laughing at the blood. How well one learns: Hattingh says

"I feel that we must apologise to you for what happened there, George. Or in any case, for the fact that you were dragged in. We wanted to make you welcome here, we wanted you to feel at home with us . . ."

George in his innocence asks how the young men can be held if they have done no wrong. Hattingh says

"They can hold us or let us go, they can kill us or let us live, they do not have to answer for anything."

George says "such a thing is not possible" and Hattingh says "That's how we live."

It is time for George to go back to Switzerland. Young Paul Hattingh clings to him and begs to be taken away.

"It's the only chance I have, the only chance I'll ever get; you must help me. Help me, help me, I tell you I'm afraid."

But George will not take him. How would the passportless boy leave the country? He gives Paul the only thing he has to give — money. The daughter Carla is tougher. He tries to tell her that he is sorry for all the hardness of their lives, but she interrupts him. "You do not need to say anything, rather go." He learns from her that Rietvlei was destroyed because young Afrikaners plotted a rising there. He offers to marry her, but she will not. She will not go with him to a land of ease and self-reproach. Nor will she stay on the farm, and be trapped in memories. "Ek wil iets uitrig; ek wil lewe . . ."

But what that means one does not know. Father and Mother, Carla and Paul, they wave him goodbye. The aeroplane goes that night. Tomorrow morning he will be home.

So ends a remarkable book. But like all true works of art, whether on screen or stage or canvas or the printed page, it lives on in the mind. And it leaves two questions with me.

It is generally conceded that most writers have two supreme aims. The one is to write, the other is to be read. If a writer believes he has written a masterpiece, his joy of achievement is enhanced when others believe it too. The more people read him, the more joyful he will be.

A writer in Afrikaans cannot expect a great circle of readers. Quite apart from that, the theme of Mr Schoeman's novel, so poignant, so compelling, cannot be expected to arouse the same response in other breasts. In all those countries where there is a burning hatred of Apartheid, and therefore of Afrikaner Nationalism, the grief of this book might well be greeted with indifference or gloating or glee. So a true work of literature might well be rejected for non-literary reasons. A South African publisher could offer a small reparation to Mr Schoeman. He could publish the book in English. Quite apart from its claim to be literature, it is a book of prophecy, and as such should be read by as many white South Africans as possible.

That brings us to the second question. What is the prophecy? Will there be a cataclysm, and will only a remnant of Afrikaners be left, powerless and lost, some still in possession of their land by who knows what kind of miracle, some bowing their heads to God or Fate, the only relics of their past being the hallowed names, Moedersgift and Rietvlei and Kommandodrift? And if there is a cataclysm, will it be because it was inevitable, or could it have been avoided by Afrikaner deeds of love and generosity and courage and wisdom? Or is it beyond reason to expect rulers to do such deeds?

Did Mr Schoeman intend to ask us these questions, or was he simply extracting the last drop of blood out of the drama of Afrikanerdom? A writer may have two purposes. The first of course is to tell a story, the second may be to teach a lesson. But the second must never overwhelm the first. In fact the second must never be seen at all. One must never in the reading or hearing of the story suspect that one is being taught a lesson. NA DIE GELIEFDE LAND meets these inexorable demands.

Will we turn in time? Will the Afrikaner turn in time? Is it really only power and privilege that he loves, or is it true that he loves South Africa? Hattingh makes it clear to George that there were two kinds who stayed, those who couldn't get away, and those who decided not to get away. But the ministers and the senators and the members of parliament were not conspicuous amongst them.

And what of the three young men who were taken away by the police from the party at Kommandodrift? Are they not the kith and kin of the Mandelas and Sobukwes, the Hugh Lewins and the Eddie Daniels, the students of NUSAS and SASO? Or were they the kith and kin the ministers and senators who ran away?

Let us leave these questions. There are too many of them. And the biggest question of all we do not know the answer to. Let us return to literature, and record our thanks to Mr Schoeman for this noble work in the Afrikaans

language. And may we be preserved from the day when it is no more spoken, except in places of grief and desolation. But that of course is not a literary question.□

MIGRATORY LABOUR

From a pamphlet published by the Justice and Reconciliation Committee of the Western Province Council of Churches.

Shame on us who separate a man from his wife, a wife from her children. This is the command of the Lord: A man shall leave his father and mother and be made one with his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. What God has joined together man must not separate. (Matthew 19: 5–6)
(The Covenant Liturgy)

On 16th December, 1972 a group of Pilgrims started walking from Grahamstown to Cape Town to publicise the facts and increase awareness of all South Africans about the evils of the system of Migrant Labour. They said,

We believe we are in the midst of a most serious social and moral crisis. This society for which we are responsible is tearing husband and wife apart through the system of migratory labour.
(A Pilgrimage of Confession for the Healing of Family Life in South Africa)

The Pilgrims said that something must be done. Some effective, sacrificial action was called for. They invited white South Africans to make a personal and spiritual journey in risking giving up those privileges and practices which do harm to others. They did this in the name of Christ, 'that in Him we need have no fear of change'. They reminded us that in 1837 a Voortrekker leader set out from Grahamstown with a Bible given him by Thomas Philipps symbolic of the claim that South Africa is a nation which has resolved to apply the Biblical message about God and man to our personal, political and economic affairs.

The Pilgrims chose to set forth on 16th December, the Day of the Covenant, renewing their own covenant with God, and pledging themselves to pray and work that His will be done on earth. They walked to Cape Town, the seat of government, praying that Parliament would make it legal for every South African husband and wife to live together with their children in a family home.

In their *Charter for Family Life* they recognised two important principals:

1. We will always need large numbers of Africans to work in the urban area.
2. We must not separate those whom God has joined together.

Therefore they dedicated themselves to work with their fellow South Africans for a society in which *Family Life* is secured as a legal right in the place where people are employed and contribute to society.

The facts about Migratory Labour

Migratory Labour is a system in which workers have to oscillate between their rural 'homes' and their place of work. In the 1920's the South African Government stated that Africans would be allowed into 'white' areas only as long as they were required to 'minister to the needs of the white man'. Since then the system has been extended in spite of widespread condemnation, from most Churches, including the Dutch Reformed Church, from sociologists and from leaders such as Chief Buthelezi who has stated, "The migratory labour system is destroying my people".

Migratory labour occurs in other parts of the world, e.g. in Western Europe, but the workers can take their families with them if they wish, and they enjoy social benefits and trade union rights, and in time can acquire the citizenship of the host country. (*SPROCAS Paper No. 3*)

All Africans leaving their 'homelands' can only work in 'white' areas on contract as migrant workers. Such a worker can never earn the right to bring his wife and children to live with him where he works.

There are probably some one and a half million migrant workers in South and South West Africa, and the system probably affects about six million people. Migrants usually have to live in barrack-like single-sex hostels or compounds.

In greater Cape Town some 55 000 African migrants live as bachelors, many in dormitories holding fifty men.

In Langa, there are *eleven* men to *one* woman.

Migratory labour encourages bigamy, prostitution, illegitimacy, homosexuality and excessive drinking with resultant violence.

Because migrant workers come and go, they cannot learn skills, get promotion or better wages. Employers are hampered in trying to build a skilled work force. Wages are artificially depressed.