

RICK TURNER'S CONTINUING CHALLENGE

A Review of "The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa", by Richard Turner.

Ravan Press.

by Colin Gardner

When Rick Turner's *The Eye of the Needle* appeared in 1972 it made a considerable stir in liberal and radical circles. What was striking about the book was its approach to the age-old and ever-new problem of the South African socio-politico-economic situation — the deadlock. Instead of locating itself firmly in the midst of the current dilemma, and offering a few tentative or desperate proposals, the book made a point of looking at the problem, and at what is implied by the problem, from what one might call the middle distance. It offered analyses and models of the relationship between social formations and the individual (here one was conscious of the influence of structuralist thinking), of the human capacity to re-form both the personality and society (here the principal influence was Sartre), and of a new South African participatory democracy (the thinking which lay behind this was both socialist and Christian).

The book invited its readers, then, to stop agonizing about the huge dark trees which seem to block one's path and one's vision in every direction and to begin to get an overall view of the wood itself. Turner put forward not only a new spatial perspective, however; he also proposed a different view of the time-scale. He invited his readers to see the present as history.

The Eye of the Needle was — and is — a most thought-provoking book. Every page presents ideas, perceptions, insights, hypotheses that both challenge the mind and open up the possibility of present or future action, whether psychological, intellectual or social. I am not myself convinced by every one of Turner's themes and strategies; a few aspects of the paradigm he puts forward seem to me partly to contradict others. But in one sense that is unimportant: his work stands as a gateway to fresh, lively, analytical and generous thinking about South Africa and its future.

The book appeared in 1972. (Incidentally it received two

reviews, one by the present writer, in *Reality* Vol. 4 No. 6, 1973). In February 1973 Rick Turner was banned, and his book went officially out of circulation. In January 1978, shortly before his banning order was due to expire, he was — appallingly — assassinated; and South Africa lost, in all too symbolic circumstances, one of her most talented and creative citizens.

The Eye of the Needle, reissued now by Ravan Press (the successor of Spro-cas, the original publisher), is not quite the same phenomenon as it was when it first saw the light. The text itself is almost unaltered (Turner revised it slightly for a 1978 U.S. version), but the frame is different. As we read it now, in the early 1980's we are aware that many significant events have taken place recently in Southern Africa, each adding its own flavour — sometimes corroboratory, sometimes perhaps rather less so — to Turner's text: the collapse of the Portuguese resistance to the liberation-armies in 1974, the Soweto disturbances in 1976, the continuation of the South African Government's homelands policy, Rick Turner's death in 1978, Zimbabwean independence in 1980.

The text also has a new frame in another, more tangible sense. It is preceded by a full and excellent biographical introduction by Tony Morphet. And it is followed by a Postscript by Turner himself. Written in 1973, it represents his desire to move from what I've called the middle distance and to confront some of the immediate problems of the South African situation. It is a remarkable piece of writing, which is in most respects surprisingly undated. In the course of a complex analysis of the forces at work in South Africa, Turner shows that — radical as he was in his essential thinking — he was prepared to favour and support every kind of creative and purposive move towards change.

This second edition of *The Eye of the Needle* is a book that every thoughtful South African should possess. □