

IN MEMORIAM

MARGARET ANDERSON. Died March 10th, 1972, aged 78. Faithful member of the Liberal Party and Black Sash.

Words spoken at her funeral by Alan Paton.

We have come here today to give thanks for the life of Margaret Anderson, and to express our sympathy to her daughters Barbara and June.

I suppose that the most outstanding quality of her very strong character was her honesty, and those other qualities that go with it, such as integrity and independence of thought. It could sometimes take one aback. I remember showing her a tree in my garden of which I was particularly proud, and her response was "what a very odd place to plant a tree."

Her honesty made her very faithful to her principles. She didn't see any point in having a principle if you didn't keep to it. Therefore hypocrisy was foreign to her nature, nor was she capable, as so many white South Africans are, of self-deception.

She therefore could not deceive herself about the injustices of our society, about the terrible gap between rich and poor, about the even more terrible fact that the rich were with few exceptions white and the poor with few exceptions black. Nor could she blind herself to the terrible gap – not only economic but also of ignorance of one another – that separates black from white, or to the gross disparity between expenditure on the education of a white child and that of a black child. She concerned herself greatly about the education of her servants' children. And that of Miriam Sishi – who unfortunately cannot be here today – who took the brave step of going back to school at the age of 39 so that she could become a teacher.

Margaret sent a message from Botha's Hill – about 1955 I should think – to Peter Brown and myself, asking us to go to visit her and talk to her about the newly-formed Liberal Party, whose political aims were regarded by most white South Africans as extreme, and she joined immediately. Her politics had always been socialist, and now they became non-racialist as well.

I remember one incident well in a crowded shop in Kloof. This was at the time when the Liberal Party was under heavy fire. Many of its leading members had been banned because the Minister "deemed" them to be "furthering the aims of Communism". Some of its young ex-members and some young people who were still members were accused – and some found guilty – of acts of sabotage. At this time we all kept a stiff upper lip, but not Margaret. Her clear penetrating voice sounded through the shop, "why don't you like the Liberal Party? "

NO SERVILE FEAR

There was no trace in Margaret of that servile fear that afflicts so many of us, of the Government and the State and of authority in general. As far as I could see, and it is a word one seldom uses, she was fearless.

Early on she joined the Black Sash. Even when her physical strength was declining, she did not like to be left out of the Black Sash stands. On March 3rd, ten days ago, she went to Durban, not to sit in her chair, but to stand. There is no doubt that this hastened her end. Who are we to say that she should not have done so? It was her life, and that was the way she wanted to use it. Her will in these matters was very strong.

There were times when her will brought her into conflict with others. When she was getting older and wiser, and other people were getting older and wiser too, she would often cut short the argument, which was a sacrifice to her, because argument was very dear to her, and enabled her to employ her not inconsiderable intellectual gifts.

She was as you know a great reader. She was also a great amateur student of words. The dictionary was always nearby with the books of shrubs and flowers, and the word puzzle in the "Natal Mercury" and other puzzles as well. One could not spend an evening with her, or any other time, without her looking up some word or other. Here at least argument was pointless, the dictionary had the last word.

We give thanks today for her good, honest public-spirited, fearless life, that was so free of cant, deception, and specious argument. She was very proud of her daughters, though I suppose they know that. She was not a believer, but her moral code was essentially a Christian one. It is my own conviction that she would have liked to be able to believe. Therefore let us say, may her soul rest in peace. □