

## **Cry the Beloved Country** by Alan Paton

Alan (Stewart) Paton 1903-1988

### **“Sidelights”**

One of the earliest proponents of racial equality in his native South Africa, Alan Paton first came into the public eye in 1948 with his novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. A landmark publication for its time, the novel follows the fate of a young black African, Absalom Kumalo, who, having murdered a white citizen, “cannot be judged justly without taking into account the environment that has partly shaped him,” as Edmund Fuller writes in his book *Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing*. The environment in question is typified by the hostility and squalid living conditions facing most of South Africa’s nonwhites, victims of South Africa’s system of apartheid.

“Three artistic qualities of *Cry, the Beloved Country* combine to make it an original and unique work of art,” Edward Callan notes in his study *Alan Paton*. “First, the poetic elements in the language of some of the characters; second, the lyric passages spoken from outside the action, like the well-known opening chapter; and third, the dramatic choral chapters that seem to break the sequence of the story for social commentary, but which in fact widen the horizon of the particular segments of action to embrace the whole land, as well as such universal concerns as fear, hate, and justice.”

In assessing Paton’s work, Callan compares the author to American poet Robert Frost. Paton’s art, says Callan, “is related to South Africa as Robert Frost’s is to New England. Both of these writers work within the framework of an external landscape where they know all the flowers and shrubs, birds and animals, by their familiar names. As observers of the human inhabitants of these landscapes, both writers recognize the profound aspirations of human personality; and both communicate their insights in language that is fresh and simple, yet vibrant with meaning.”

Paton followed *Cry, the Beloved Country* with another socially conscious novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*. This volume centers on a white Afrikaner, Pieter, whose youthful idealism has tragic consequences. The story hinges on Pieter’s love affair with a black girl; according to Alfred Kazin in the *New York Times Book Review*, “Under the ‘Immorality Act’ of the country, sexual relations between whites and blacks are a legal offense.” As Kazin goes on to explain, “Pieter is sent to prison, his father strikes [the youth’s] name from the great family Bible and dies of shame, and the whole family withdraws from the community in horror at Pieter’s crime ‘against the race.’”

“Invariably, comparisons [of *Too Late the Phalarope*] with *The Scarlet Letter* and *Crime and Punishment* arise,” as Fuller points out in another work, *Books with Men behind Them*. “Once Pieter has committed his act, there is no possible release for him but total exposure--a dilemma he shares in part with [The *Scarlet Letter*’s] Arthur Dimmesdale and [Crime and Punishment’s] Raskolnikov. Paton gives us a long sequence of superb suspense, arising out of guilty misunderstandings of innocent natural coincidences. But just as the death wish is commonly unconscious, so Pieter suffers an agonized dread of discovery, unconscious of the fact that it is that exposure and its consequences that have motivated him from the start.”



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A handful of nonfiction works and biographies followed Paton's second novel, but the author received more critical attention for his 1981 book, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, which was his first novel in 28 years. The story opens with an act of quiet rebellion. An Indian teenager named Prem enters the Durban Library in Natal, South Africa, and sits down to read. Since she is not white, she is barred from using the facility. However, Prem defies the authorities, and her struggle ignites the embryonic anti-apartheid campaigns of the 1950s. The story goes on to trace the history of such organizations as the Liberal Party (of which Paton was president from 1958 to 1968).

As Chicago Tribune Book World reviewer Charles R. Larson sees it, the novel "fairly groans under the weight of human misery and havoc." He also states that "readers unfamiliar with the horrors of South African politics may be shocked to learn of apartheid legislation against racial mixing at every level of human contact—including funerals and religious services." "Paton's determination to expose injustice is so overwhelming that too often his characters have little life beyond their roles in his morality drama," John Rechy writes in a Los Angeles Times Book Review article. "Emphasizing their admirable hope and courage, he at times denies them the full, defining power of their rage. The unfortunate result is that the evil, too, becomes faceless; a disembodied voice of inquisition barking out injustice." But whatever artistic criticism he has for *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, Rechy concludes that he "respectfully [envies] Paton's courageous hopefulness, which has allowed him, at age 78 [at the time of publication] to continue to believe that justice may prevail in his beautiful land of entrenched evil."

Newsweek critic Peter S. Prescott sees in Paton's dispassionate style an advantage to the novel's message: the author "offers no diversions, no digressions, no scenes designed to build character, to set a time or place, except as they are shaped by his obsession with this appalling injustice. That in itself would make [*Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*] extraordinary; what makes it more so is his ability to keep such a story light and dramatic." In a similar vein, John Romano points out in a New York Times Book Review piece that in Paton's novel "individual human dilemmas are never swallowed up or diminished by the overarching political context of the story he is telling. Paton is relentless in his faith in the moral meaning of individual human experience." The author's faith, Romano adds, "is not a religious one, but a faith in the function, the usefulness of personal sympathy.... [Paton's] considerable practical contributions to political life in South Africa aside, his place in the literature of social protest has been secured by his steady devotion to the ideal of the empathetic imagination in fiction."

Originally Paton had hoped to make *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* the first part of a trilogy of novels about South African race relations. Weakened by a heart condition, however, he concentrated on his autobiography. He finished the first volume, *Towards the Mountain*, in 1980, and the second, *Journey Continued*, just before his death in 1988. The books describe Paton's early years as an educator, when he observed the social inequities that prompted *Cry, The Beloved Country*, and his later involvement with the Liberal party, which dissolved in 1968 rather than purge its nonwhite members as the government demanded. In his last years Paton was criticized by many anti-apartheid activists because he opposed their efforts to pressure the government by discouraging foreign investment in South Africa. Such sanctions, Paton argued, would unduly punish South Africa's poorest blacks, and he decried even Nobel Prize-winning clergyman Desmond Tutu for supporting such a strategy. Though controversial,

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Paton saw his actions as consistent with a lifelong belief in progress through moderation and mutual understanding. As he wrote in *Journey Continued*: "By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom."

### **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

Family: Surname rhymes with "Dayton"; born January 11, 1903, in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa; died of throat cancer, April 12, 1988, in Botha's Hill (near Durban) Natal, South Africa; son of James (a civil servant) and Eunice (James) Paton; married Doris Olive Francis, July 2, 1928 (died October 23, 1967); married Anne Hopkins, 1969; children: (first marriage) David Francis, Jonathan Stewart. Education: University of Natal, B.Sc., 1923. Religion: Anglican. Memberships: Royal Society of Literature (fellow), Free Academy of Arts (Hamburg; honorary member).

### **AWARDS**

Anisfield-Wolf Saturday Review Award, 1948, Newspaper Guild of New York Page One Award, 1949, London Sunday Times Special Award for Literature, 1949, and Oprah Winfrey's Book Club selection, 2003, all for *Cry, the Beloved Country*; Benjamin Franklin Award, 1955; Freedom House Award (U.S.), 1960; Medal for Literature, Free Academy of Arts, 1961; National Conference of Christians and Jews Brotherhood Award, 1962, for *Tales from a Troubled Land*; C.N.A. Literary Award for the year's best book in English in South Africa, 1965, for *Hofmeyr*, and 1973, for *Apartheid and the Archbishop: The Life and Times of Geoffrey Clayton, Archbishop of Cape Town*. L.H.D., Yale University, 1954, Kenyon College, 1962, La Salle University, Philadelphia, 1986; D.Litt., University of Natal, 1968, Trent University, 1971, Harvard University, 1971, Rhodes University, 1972, Williamette University, 1974, University of Michigan--Flint, 1977, University of Durban/Westville, 1986; D.D., University of Edinburgh, 1971; LL.D., Witwatersrand University, 1975.

### **CAREER**

Writer. Ixopo High School, Ixopo, Natal, South Africa, teacher of mathematics and physics, 1925-28; Maritzburg College, Pietermaritzburg, Natal, teacher of mathematics, physics, and English, 1928-35; Diepkloof Reformatory, near Johannesburg, South Africa, principal, 1935-48; Toc H Southern Africa, Botha's Hill, Natal, honorary commissioner, 1949-58; University of Natal, Durban and Pietermaritzburg, Natal, president of the Convocation, 1951-55 and 1957-59; founder and president, Liberal Party of South Africa (originally the Liberal Association of South Africa before emergence as a political party; declared an illegal organization, 1968), 1958-68. Non-European Boys' Clubs, president of Transvaal association, 1935-48.

### **WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:**

- *Meditation for a Young Boy Confirmed* (poem), S.P.C.K., 1944, Forward Movement, 1954.
- *Cry, the Beloved Country* (also see below), Scribner, 1948, recent edition, Macmillan, 1987.
- *Cry, the Beloved Country* (screenplay; based on his novel of the same title), United Artists, 1951.
- *Too Late the Phalarope* (Book-of-the-Month Club selection), Scribner, 1953, reprinted, Penguin, 1971, reprinted, Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995.

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- The Land and the People of South Africa, Lippincott, 1955 (published in England as South Africa and Her People, Lutterworth, 1957), revised edition published under original title, Lippincott, 1972.
- South Africa in Transition, Scribner, 1956.
- Hope for South Africa, Praeger, 1959.
- Tales from a Troubled Land (stories; also see below), Scribner, 1961 (published in England as Deb bie Go Home, J. Cape, 1961, new edition, Penguin, 1965).
- Hofmeyr (biography), Oxford University Press, 1964, abridged edition published as South African Tragedy: The Life and Times of Jan Hofmeyr, Scribner, 1965, new edition, Oxford University Press, 1971.
- (With Krishna Shah) Sponono (play; based on three stories from Tales from a Troubled Land; first produced on Broadway at the Cort Theatre, April 2, 1964), Scribner, 1965.
- Instrument of Thy Peace: The Prayer of St. Francis, Seabury, 1968, revised edition, 1982.
- The Long View, edited by Edward Callan, Praeger, 1968.
- For You Departed, Scribner, 1969 (published in England as Kontakion for You Departed, J. Cape, 1969).
- (With others) Creative Suffering: The Ripple of Hope, Pilgrim, 1970.
- Apartheid and the Archbishop: The Life and Times of Geoffrey Clayton, Archbishop of Cape Town, David Philip (Cape Town, South Africa), 1973, Scribner, 1974.
- Knocking on the Door: Alan Paton/Shorter Writings, edited by Colin Gardner, Scribner, 1975.
- Towards the Mountain: An Autobiography, Scribner, 1980.
- Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful (novel), Scribner, 1981.
- (Author of foreword) Elsa Joubert, Poppie Nongena, Norton, 1985.
- Journey Continued: An Autobiography, Scribner, 1988.
- Songs of Africa: Collected Poems, Gecko Books (Durban, Africa), 1995.

Paton's manuscripts are housed in the Alan Paton Centre and Archives, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

### **MEDIA ADAPTATIONS**

Lost in the Stars, a musical tragedy adapted for the stage by Maxwell Anderson from Cry, the Beloved Country, with music by Kurt Weill, was first produced on Broadway at the Music Box, October 30, 1949; a motion picture, Lost in the Stars, based on the musical, was produced by American Film Theatre in 1974; the play, Too Late the Phalarope, adapted by Robert Yale Libott from Paton's novel of the same title, was first produced on Broadway at the Belasco Theatre, October 11, 1956; the stage and screen rights to For You Departed have been sold.

### **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

#### **BOOKS**

- Alexander, Peter, Alan Paton: A Biography, Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Callan, Edward, Alan Paton, Twayne, 1968, revised edition, 1982.

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- Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale, Volume 4, 1975, Volume 10, 1979, Volume 25, 1983, Volume 55, 1989.
- Fuller, Edmund, Books with Men behind Them, Random House, 1962.
- Fuller, Edmund, Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing, Random House, 1958.
- Paton, Alan, Towards the Mountain: An Autobiography, Scribner, 1980.
- Paton, Alan, Journey Continued: An Autobiography, Scribner, 1988.

### PERIODICALS

- Chicago Tribune Book World, February 28, 1982, May 9, 1985.
- Christian Century, January 3, 1996, p. 3.
- Detroit News, March 28, 1982.
- Globe and Mail (Toronto), May 5, 1984.
- London Review of Books, December 3, 1981.
- Los Angeles Times, May 22, 1988.
- Los Angeles Times Book Review, April 25, 1982, October 30, 1988.
- New Republic, March 24, 1982.
- Newsweek, March 15, 1982.
- New York Times, July 13, 1981, April 2, 1988.
- New York Times Book Review, August 23, 1953, April 16, 1961, April 4, 1982, November 20, 1988.
- Times (London), November 12, 1981, August 26, 1989.
- Times Literary Supplement, August 11, 1961, September 23, 1988.
- Tribune Books, November 27, 1988.
- Washington Post Book World, December 11, 1988.

### OBITUARY NOTICE

Born January 11, 1903, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa; died of throat cancer, April 12, 1988, in Botha's Hill (near Durban), Natal, South Africa. Political and social activist, educator, academic administrator, and author. Paton was probably best known for his 1948 novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, in which he vividly portrayed the horrors of South Africa's racist apartheid system. Paton worked as a high-school teacher in the 1920s and 1930s and as a reformatory principal from 1935 to 1948. He began writing *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1947 while touring European and American prisons and reformatories. The novel concerns a black minister's loss of religious faith as he searches for his son, a suspected murderer, in the vast Johannesburg ghetto. Though some critics found *Cry, the Beloved Country* pretentious and occasionally awkward, the book proved enormously successful, and Paton was soon perceived as a figurehead for South Africa's antiapartheid movement.

In the early 1950s, Paton founded the Liberal party of South Africa and increased his opposition to his country's racist policies. His actions prompted retaliation from the South African Government in



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the 1960s, when it effectively banned the Liberal party and revoked Paton's passport. Paton, however, continued to oppose apartheid, though in his later years he was sometimes perceived as a conservative for his protests against foreign sanctions and disinvestment. Among his other writings are the novel *Too Late the Phalarope*, the short story collection *Tales From a Troubled Land*, and the autobiographical works *Towards the Mountain* and the posthumously published *Journey Continued* (title listed in one source as *Journey's Eng*).

### **OBITUARY AND OTHER SOURCES**

#### PERIODICALS

- Chicago Tribune, April 13, 1988.
- Los Angeles Times, April 12, 1988.
- New York Times, April 13, 1988.
- Times (London), April 13, 1988.
- Washington Post, April 13, 1988.

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