

**Author, Poet, Teacher, Christian Thinker, Activist and Penal Reformer –
A Full, but not Uncontroversial Life**

P.F. Alexander (ed), *Alan Paton Selected Letters*

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This is a most useful and well-presented volume. As Phillips points out in his “Foreword”, Paton (1903-1988) was not only the distinguished author of *Cry the Beloved Country*, but a school teacher, Christian thinker, organiser, political activist and penal reformer (p vii). This volume contains 350 letters of the 2 500 which survive. Paton was born in Pietermaritzburg and as a student at Natal University College, he began to write poetry. He also was President of the Student Representative Council. He became a teacher at Ixopo, married in 1928 and, after a serious illness in 1934, became a warden at an African reformatory in Diepkloof in what was then the Transvaal. Diepkloof had been an adult prison before being turned into a borstal for African youths. Paton worked to transform it into a school and the number of absconders fell dramatically. He felt passionately that his successes here could be applied to the country as a whole.

He strongly supported Britain during the Second World War and became Chairman of the Transvaal Association of Non-European Boys' Clubs. *Cry the Beloved Country* was written in 1947. His second novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*, did not have the same success. In 1956, he became Chairman of the Liberal Party. His passport was withdrawn in 1960. His wife Dorrie died in 1967, and in January 1969 he remarried. Alexander who edited the letters, also is Paton's biographer.

The early letters contain a good deal of poetry (some of it Paton's own) and his correspondence with Hofmeyr (who became Minister of Education in the Smuts government) contains a fascinating comparison between Smuts and Louis Botha (who became the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa in 1910). In a letter to the Secretary of Education in 1935, Paton described himself as ignorant of "native ways of thinking and asking" (p 67). He defended a village system which would make Diepkloof "one of the most advanced reformatory institutions in the world" (p 68). He told Hofmeyr that "if a frog rears his head out of the mud & imagines he will one day be a star, then he may be a fool but he is at least forgetting about the mud" (p 70). He defended Hofmeyr's liberal stance against Smuts' law to remove the African vote in the Cape, as the position of a "true democrat" and "true Christian" (p 71). Paton's strong religious views came through in his letters. His major concern had been to heal the rift between the English and the Afrikaners. He was clearly shocked by Hofmeyr's resignation in 1938.

Although I think that Winnie Mandela was wrong to describe Paton as a "white racist", his pre-war letters sometimes make for painful reading. What tempts Paton about New Zealand, he tells Hofmeyr, is "No natives, Indians, coloureds, malaria, locusts, mambas" (p 86). Hofmeyr, Paton believed, had a contribution "to make to South Africa greater than that of any English-speaking South African I know or read of" (p 93). He subsequently wrote a biography of Hofmeyr.

Paton wrote three novels at Diepkloof that have not been published. He resigned from Diepkloof in April 1948. There is no doubt that *Cry the Beloved Country* is Paton's *magnum opus* and it has had a readership and has evoked an acclaim that none of his other writings even came close to achieving. He wrote the book abroad from where he felt he could obtain perspective. He said that writing the book saved him "from going dotty" (p 146). "I feel that I am going to do something for South Africa after all", he told Hofmeyr (p 165). His book was embraced by "capitalists and leftists alike" (p 169) and received glowing reviews. The book made him much more conscious of his talent and his contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle. Gone was the pessimism that he had gifts that "my country appears neither to see, nor to want to use" (p 103).

Paton was a liberal, not a radical. The Liberal Association formed the Liberal Party in May 1953. Paton first was Vice-President and then became its leader in 1956. The party was dissolved in 1968. "I could not be true to my Christian beliefs and keep my mouth shut," Paton wrote (p 222). Many of his colleagues were banned, and in October 1960, Paton's passport was seized. If he was not a radical, he was also not a conservative, commenting that "the doctrine of national sovereignty means that one has the right to do what one wants without comment" (p 247).

He was suspicious of, but willing to work with, socialists like Helen Joseph who, he stated, was not totalitarian (p 300). Communism was another matter. The Liberal Party, he wrote, was as opposed to communism as it was to Afrikaner nationalism (p 305). “Let me tell you frankly,” he said to Mary Benson, “I have no wish to live in a Communist society. I approve of many of its economic aims but not its treatment of individuals which does not differ much from Verwoerd’s” (p 310). He said of Eddie Roux that his gentleness disqualified him from being a true communist (p 436). He was comfortable with figures like Mangosuthu Buthelezi (a good deal of his correspondence is enclosed here), and he opposed the international movement for sanctions.

Like John Harris, the former liberal who was hanged in 1965, Adrian Leftwich also gave Paton great cause for concern. Leftwich was a former liberal who joined the African Resistance Movement, a largely white radical movement which resorted to violence in challenging apartheid. Leftwich was interned in 1964, cracked up in solitary confinement and gave evidence for the state. Paton told Leftwich at Christmas 1968 that he had forgiven him (p 355).

Paton’s hostility to violent opposition to apartheid caused him to distance himself from the ANC and the international anti-apartheid movement. He referred to Albert Luthuli’s “overwhelming weakness of laziness” (p 307) and he also had very sharp words with Gandhi’s daughter, Mrs Ramgobin, after he had refused to address the squatters at the Phoenix settlement (p 377). His letters are haunted by a fear of black militancy (p 379) and a strong feeling that the contribution of liberals to the struggle against apartheid was not adequately recognized.

Winnie Mandela was wrong not only to call Paton a white racist, but a phony liberal as well (p 443). Paton was a genuine liberal. He favoured a federal republic system and considered that the UDF’s demand for a unitary state could “only be achieved by violence and revolution and with the help of outside intervention” (p 452). His tragedy, as these letters graphically show, was that he failed to support the liberation movement and sought a path which did not match up to the radical needs of the day. Nevertheless he made a contribution to the struggle against apartheid and for all his limitations, there is an integrity and vigour in his life and writings which can only be admired.