

Alan Paton Biographical Paper
By Patricia Moore
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Alan Paton, throughout his life and writings, has given an eloquent voice to the racial struggles in his native South Africa. He was born in the province of Natal, S Africa, the setting of his novel *Cry The Beloved Country*.

His father, a Scottish immigrant, was a court stenographer and an aspiring Poet. His mother's people were third generation British settlers in Natal. His earliest memories were of the beauty of the world around him-in the brightness of flowers and the sounds of birds. He delighted to in words and in the stories-including Bible stories- read to him by his parents, who adhered to a strict Christian evangelical sect , the Christadelphians. Thus imbued with this religious upbringing, this background helps his portrayal of the Umfundisi Reverend Kumalo ring more true.

He started school at an early age and moved rapidly through the grades, always smaller and younger than his classmates. A student leader at Natal University, he majored in Physics and Mathematics and also wrote verse and drama for the students magazine. He taught high school at Ixopo the setting for *Cry*. There he met his wife Dottie Frances. They were married in 1928 and remained together until her death from [emphysema](#) in 1967.^[4] Their life together is documented in Paton's book *Kontakion for You Departed*, published in 1969. In his note to the to the 1987 edition of *Cry*, Paton expands upon his description of the novel as as a yearning for ideal justice: "It is informed with a longing for the land where they shall not hurt or destroy in all that holy mountain." This refers to the ineffable vision of peace by Isaiah: "Where the wolf lies down with the lamb and they do not hurt or destroy in all that holy mountain." (They had two sons, Jonathan and David. In 1969, Paton married Anne Hopkins. This marriage lasted until Paton's death.

The spirit of Lincoln is palpable in the study of the murdered man. Paton himself had many volumes on Lincoln, whom he greatly admired. Paton references Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his second Inaugural address. Being familiar with the content of these works we can see how they inspired Mr Jarvis' future actions to honor his son.

To continue his life's work of service,

He then served as the principal of Diepkloof Reformatory for young (native African) offenders from 1935 to 1949, where he introduced controversial "progressive" [reforms](#), including policies on open dormitories, work permits, and home visitation. This was the model for the Reformatory in *Cry The Beloved Country*.

He changed the prison into a school, giving more freedom to the boys who earned it. Of the 10,000 freed boys only ~1% failed to return.

One boy murdered a white woman who surprised him robbing her home in a similar scenario to Abdolom Kumalo's story.

Later career

Paton volunteered for service during [World War II](#), but was refused. After the war he took a trip, at his own expense, to tour correctional facilities across the world. He toured Scandinavia, England, continental Europe, Canada, and the United States. During his time in Norway, he began work on his seminal novel [Cry, The Beloved Country](#), which he completed over the course of his journey, finishing it on Christmas Eve in San Francisco in 1946. There, he met Aubrey and Marigold Burns, who read his manuscript and went to extraordinary

lengths to find him a publisher. The editor [Maxwell Perkins](#), noted for editing novels of [Ernest Hemingway](#) and [Thomas Wolfe](#), guided Paton's first novel through publication with Scribner's. With the financial success of *Cry The Beloved Country*, Paton devoted himself entirely to writing.

Opposition to apartheid TIMELINE:

Segregationist POLICIES DATED BACK TO THE INCEPTION OF THE UNION OF S A IN 1910.

N 1948, JUST 4 MONTHS AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF *CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY*, WITH THE ELECTION OF THE NATIONAL PARTY, APARTHEID INSTITUTIONALIZED AND LEGALIZED HARSH, SYSTEMATIC RACISM.

THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION AND THE US CHOSE NOT TO PROTEST THE ANTI-COMMUNIST SA GOVT'S SYSTEM OF APARTHEID. SUBSEQUENT ADMINISTRATIONS CONTINUED TO SUPPORT THE APARTHEID REGIME AS A STALWART ALLY AGAINST THE SPREAD OF COMMUNISM.

PATON COFOUNDED THE LIBERAL PARTY OF SA TO FIGHT AGAINST THE APARTHEID LAWS. HE WAS PROSECUTED AS A COMMUNIST.

THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS ALSO PROTESTED APARTHEID AND ITS LEADER NELSON MANDELA WAS IMPRISONED.

CIVIL UNREST & REVOLTS OF THE BLACK MAJORITY AND INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS, EVENTUALLY IN 1990, RESULTED IN PRIME MINISTER DEKLERK ALLOWING FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, RESTORATION OF THE BLACK LIBERATION PARTIES, & RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS, INCLUDING NELSON MANDELA.

WITH THE REPEAL OF APARTHEID, NELSON MANDELA WAS ELECTED THE FIRST BLACK PRESIDENT OF SA.

Other works

Cry, The Beloved Country has been filmed twice (in 1951 and 1995) and was the basis for the Broadway musical *Lost in the Stars* (adaptation by Maxwell Anderson, music by Kurt Weill). Paton's second and third novels, *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) and *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful* (1981), and his short stories, *Tales From a Troubled Land* (1961), all deal with the same racial themes that concerned the author in his first novel. This theme also occurs in his subsequent novels, essays, and poetry. His own autobiography and other biographies documented the lives of champions for racial equality.

When he was recognized with The Freedom Award in 1960,
The poet Archibald Mac Leish stated:

"To live at the center of the contemporary maelstrom; to see it for what it is and to challenge the passions of those who struggle in it beside him with the voice of reason with, if he will forgive me, the enduring reasons of love; to offer the quiet sanity of the heart in a city yammering with the crazy slogans of fear; to do all this at the cost of tranquility and the risk of harm, as a service to a government that does not know what it needs....is to deserve far more history than we can give our guest tonight"

Paton continued to hope that man's capacity for good will prevail. So I will give him the last word tonite.

In 1985 before the South African Institute of Race Relations, he remarked:

"In such times as these it is easy to lose hope. Nadezhda Mandelstam, whose husband died in 1938 in a Russian Gulag "transit camp", wrote a book about their life of unspeakable suffering under Stalin. This book she called "Hope Against Hope." After his death, she wrote a second book, called "Hope Abandoned". In S Africa we are still writing the first book. We trust that we will never have to write the second."

Discussion Questions

- 1. *Cry, the Beloved Country* references the Bible with the parable of the prodigal son and Absalom? Where else does the Bible inform the story?**
- 2. What are examples of paradoxes in this novel? How do you reconcile these paradoxes? How do they contribute to the richness of the story?**
- 3. How does the author develop the relationship between Reverend Kumalo and his colleague Msimangu? What are other relationships that are important to the story?**
- 4. How do some of his characters falter? Do these flaws make Paton's characters more realistic or not?**
- 5. What is Paton's vision of the world? Does he express the view that human beings are immutable or capable of transformation? Are we left with any kind of message, any vision for mankind? If so, what is it?**