

Jan thought you might like  
to see Randolph's country.

## TIMOTHY HOLMES

Timothy Holmes's Drakensberg boyhood - his parents owned the fishing hotel at Underberg - gave him a love and a rare understanding of the African landscape and its people which suffused his poetry and gave an inner strength to the two books on David Livingstone for which he will be best remembered. From St Charles's College in Natal he went to Trinity College, Oxford where he read English from 1954 to '57. Though an attractive and amusing personality to his friends, he was a shy man, his Catholic school had no Oxford connexion and he said that for a year he spoke to no one but his tutor. He read instead, richly stocking his wide range of interests, which made him great company as a conversationalist in years to come. His degree taught him no trade and, after a spell in Underberg at the family hotel, he enrolled to read law at the University of Cape Town in 1960. The timing changed his life. Term began in February, he made friends in the Liberal Party, which he had joined in Natal, and on 21 March the shootings at Sharpeville and the dramatic events in Cape Town that night and on the following days propelled him into full-time activism in the struggle against white racial supremacy in South Africa. In the two or three years that followed he was in the forefront of a desperate action to hold together the nonracial democratic front despite the banning of the African congresses and the crippling of the Liberal Party by government action. In the small circle round the radical Liberal leader Patrick Duncan he played a key role as assistant editor of Duncan's fortnightly *Contact*, which had ignored the clampdown on political reporting under the State of Emergency. He succeeded as editor after the banned Duncan's escape to Lesotho, and joined in the founding of the new and influential literary journal *The New African*. *Contact* had been moved to Swaziland to escape government attack during Mandela's 1961 strike campaign but on his return Holmes was held by the Special Branch in the police cells in the Transvaal *dorp* of Carolina. At that point, his sense of powerlessness decided him to leave South Africa, where the only role for a committed democrat was an underground one facing extreme penalties. *Contact* and *The New African* had both acclaimed the new 'wind of change' Africa, and Holmes showed his faith in it by moving, with his wife, to Northern Rhodesia, first to a teaching post in remote Chipata (then Fort Jameson) and later at the Sir Evelyn Hone College in Lusaka. Turbulent Northern Rhodesia had rejected the Central African Federation and was now demanding independence from Britain, which it achieved in 1964. Holmes made friends with several of the coming leadership of Zambia who were his students and was taken into the new information unit in 1967. His first marriage had ended and in 1968 in England he married Nadia Price, a Sierra Leonean of great beauty and character, who kept the home fires burning with her work as an international civil servant in the long years of Zambian economic decline. Tim went farming, outside Lusaka, but the ZAPU guerrilla army camp was their neighbour and they endured air raids from Ian Smith's war planes and security interference in their lives. Tim's research and writing went on and in 1985 his poetry collection *Double Element* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (for best first volume) bringing the Holmeses to London for happy reunions. Back in Zambia, when researching in the Livingstone Library his locally published history of Zambia for the young, he found over 100 unpublished letters, 20 of them quite unknown, by the great missionary explorer. In 1986 Trinity gave him the Richard Hillary Award to work on these in Britain, where Wolfson College, Oxford elected him to common room rights, and Portugal, where he learned Portuguese to encompass important

sources on Livingstone's travels in Angola and Mozambique. *David Livingstone Letters and Documents 1841-72* was published - in Britain, the US and Zambia - in 1990 and was followed in 1993 by *Journey to Livingstone: exploration of an imperial myth*, a masterly biography which sought to restore the stature of a great Victorian who had been much besmirched by would-be Lytton Stracheys. He shows that if Livingstone was wrong 'in believing that his ideal [for Africa] could be achieved by the single Man of Destiny, wrong in seeking to belittle and crush those he thought stood in his way, he was right in his wish to see people free'. Holmes shared that last wish, and a love of Africa, with Livingstone. Though slavery had gone, colonialism and, far worse, *apartheid*, had followed. He lived to see them gone too, and took part in the process. His last years in Zambia were filled with his many writing and research projects, and with the poetry he continued to produce. Strangely, he called his last small Internet poetry volume in 2001 *Final Selection* and it proved so. Malaria in February was followed by serious debility and advanced colon cancer was diagnosed. The end was quick and peaceful, leaving many to mourn him and much unpublished work but a solid contribution to mark his life in Africa. \*

*Timothy Holmes, writer and poet, born Johannesburg, South Africa 1 January 1936; married first 1961 Sally Morgan (two daughters one son; marriage dissolved), secondly 1968 Nadia Clarke; died Lusaka 23 May 2002.*