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Instrument of Thy Peace: Alan Paton

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Instrument of Thy Peace is an intensely personal exercise in that reflective piety which characterizes the best tradition of Christian devotional literature. While not lengthy, this little volume is highly readable and eminently useful in that Paton has managed to avoid the sentimental froth which plagues so much of the usual "spirituality" to which one is exposed. He has, in lieu of this, provided a convincing apologetic model for that interior reflection which naturally accompanies any serious attempt at travelling in the Gospel.

The book is intended, according to the Prologue...

...for sinners, and for those who with all their hearts wish to be better, purer, less selfish, more useful; for those who do not wish to be cold in love, and who know that being cold in love is perhaps the worst sin of them all; for those who wish to keep their faith bright and burning in a dark and faithless world; for those who seek not so much to lean upon God as to be the active instruments of his peace.

Howevvertthese intentions may sound to the modern ear, one should be chary of assuming them to be conventional platitudes.

Paton's reflections are not superficial excursions into the unreal or the irrelevant. Instead, they are tied to and emerge from the uneven terrain over which the sea of human experience ebbs and flows. The questions asked are the hard questions of Christian life in the world; the dilemmas of faith and doubt, of discouragement, melancholy, violence, of love offered that receives no response, of joy in sober conflict with the essentially un-joyful. It is not a matter, of course, that such issues are

now. It is, rather, that they are raised in this book with a subtlety and poignance which awakens the reader to a clear recognition that they are his own.

In addition to Paton's own provocative contributions (which include a number of personal prayers and complementary anecdotes) the materials which augment and enhance this little book are so widely drawn as to comprise an impressive catalogue in their own right; Scriptures, quotations from saints, philosophers, sages of east and west, wise men and women of every sort and condition, legends, anecdotes, news releases, and a great many more. The result is not, however, a mere juxtaposition of essentially discrete items or simply a banal regurgitation of the past. Paton has combined these materials with the artist's easy mastery to form a loose but deliberate constellation around the prayer of St. Francis from which the book takes its title. He has drawn deeply from St. Francis, and one senses that his multiform commitments as humanist and politician, as educator and author, as man and Christian man have coalesced in this book to vivify the deepest dimensions of what he understands himself to be about.

In general the material is presented in a format of short, succinct units - vignettes, as it were, through which one's attention is inescapably focused on those attitudes and responses which comprise the matrix of man's rejoinder to God and world. Of course these short, agentic units are practical for short attention spans. But more than this, they deny the reader any opportunity to miss the point at issue by hiding in some convenient verbal jungle. There are not many fig leaves here to disguise the naked truth.

Finally, it seems clear that this volume was intended to hang together as a single piece - and Paton has managed this without a doubt. It is frequently frustrating when one is searching for this or that specific item, that the material includes no index of any sort. One suspects, however, that even this may be by design. No doubt there is a psychological sense, at least, in which an index, simply by pointing up the individuality of each component part might proportionately diminish the impact of the whole. This would be especially unfortunate in the present case, in that the whole ethos of this book is of a sort calculated to take one quite beyond the superficiality to which he may be tempted by undue reliance on indices and related "efficient" accoutrement.

Instrument of Thy Peace is a serious book; and it deserves the attention of a serious readership.