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BOOKS AND AUTHORS

BY JOHN BARKHAM

It is eight years since the South African Government removed Alan Paton's passport, and in the long interim he has busied himself with three published books--a biography of a South African statesman, a collection of political essays, and a volume of devotional thoughts. But of the haunting prose which made "Cry, the Beloved Country" and "Too Late the Phalarope" famous around the world, there has been nothing. The good news today is that Paton has once more tapped that inner vein of eloquence in a book likely to be published in the United States next year.

It required a traumatic experience to produce what is best described as a deeply personal testament. Paton's wife, Dorrie, died on October 23, 1967, at their home in Kloof, near the city of Durban, after a long illness. They had been married almost forty years, the last of which he spent watching her slowly die of emphysema. From all over the world letters of condolence poured in on the bereaved writer. More than half of them came from the United States, which Paton regards as almost a second home. One in particular, from a GI in Vietnam, touched him deeply.

As Paton recalls it, he felt impelled to place on record the story of his life with his wife and what it had meant to him as a man and a writer. At the back of his mind was a book something like John Gunther's moving tribute to his son, "Death Be Not Proud." Within a month of Dorrie's death he had begun writing, and steadily it poured out of him--the remembrance of things past, the shared memories and experiences. The narrative is in the second person throughout, as though he were addressing his wife.

The result is a manuscript of almost 40,000 words instinct with poetry, tenderness, passion and a surprising degree of humor. Though he did not intend it, the work proved to be an act of catharsis. It may, indeed, prove to be the closest thing to an autobiography we are ever likely to see from this stern, austere writer. It bears the title "Kontakion," from the Greek hymn in praise of the dead.

The work is in shortish sections, most of which were done in bursts of sustained writing. Memories sparked memories. "Events I had long forgotten came back to me by a process of association," Paton mused. "Words flowed as they have not done for me in years.

(MORE)

I was eager to get back to writing, and 'Kontakion' almost wrote itself. What I think will surprise most readers is the humor. But then Dorrie and I had great enjoyment in our lives."

Paton is in good health and spirits, and expresses no bitterness against his government for having restricted his freedom to travel abroad. He candidly admits that events in South Africa have not taken the course he foresaw. "Eight years ago," he said, "many people expected great changes, and I was one of them. Since then the disarray in the United Nations, the dilemma of Britain and the United States in formulating their policies vis-a-vis white and black Africa, and the lesson of Vietnam for the United States have all combined to strengthen the position of the South African Government.

"There have, however, been some improvements in this country, particularly in the administration of justice. A white man can no longer, for example, do what he likes to a black man with impunity. And the standard of living, for blacks as well as whites, has risen. But the gap between the two races has not narrowed. The key to evolutionary change in South Africa still lies in the hands of the Afrikaner, and, while it's true that his sense of security has increased a great deal in the last 20 years, he still fears the preponderance of non-whites. How that can be overcome is difficult to see at present."

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