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Hymn to Dorrie

By W. Ward-Jackson

Kontakion for You
Departed. By Alan
Paton. (Cape. 25s.)

GRIEF often has rich fruits
and this short book by
Alan Paton is one of them.
His wife, Dorrie, died of lung cancer in 1967. Soon afterwards Paton began painfully to write down a daily detail of grief together with glances back at the family life of the tender village schoolmaster who, years ago in the foothills of the Drakensberg, fell awkwardly in love with a very recent widow, six years his senior.

These reflective pieces form a hymn to Dorrie—a homage in Christ as implied by the book's title and the quoted text, which is the Russian Kontakion for the Departed.

Mr Paton has never made any secret of his religious inspiration but has the gift of rendering his Christianity as a precise and mundane thing — not without its confusions in practical politics. These pages have much to say to anyone who may reflect now, days on the quality of Christian marriage and life but not, as Paton has earned the right to say, "the Cross-less geniality that passes for Christianity." There is more than that — as good a portrait of Mr Paton himself as we are likely to have.

From self-communion there emerges the story of his life of breaking and re-entry; escape from an austere Christadelphian upbringing; marriage to an Anglican who actually drank wine and, sadly as it turned out, smoked cigarettes; their blissfully fulfilled attachment to the almost Arcadian countryside around Ixopo. There followed a sudden breakaway to the dire reformatory for African boys in the Transvaal where he and Dorrie opened the gates and tore down the barbed wire.

Later came another move into the wider literary world and the discovery of limitations there. Then the plunge into the more constricted and afflicted half-world of those who openly and unrelentingly opposed apartheid in South Africa. Finally, when his Liberal party, disastrously tainted on its fringes with sabotage and violence, was dispersed, a hint of a possibility of joining a religious order.

It makes a more inspiring modern story-line than any liturgist, Russian or other could devise.

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