

S.A. NOVEL MEETS WITH HIGH PRAISE



Impact Of Black And White In An Impressive Setting

"CRY, the Beloved Country," written by the Natal-born Alan Paton, has been hailed as the finest South African novel since Olive Schreiner's "The Story of An African Farm," of over half a century ago. And this high praise has come, with remarkable spontaneity and without a dissentient voice from Britain and America, where for some unexplained reason it was issued to the public before it reached South Africa.

Now that the author's compatriots have the opportunity to appraise its worth, the chorus of eulogy will certainly be re-echoed. This will give it a hall-mark that could not be supplied from overseas, for it is distinctly a novel of "South Africa first."

Those who have judged it from afar have probably done so as an outstanding piece of literature with most of the qualities to make it great. Readers in this country will look at it differently. They will be impressed first by the author's realistic understanding of some of the indigenous problems of this country, particularly those appertaining to race relations. Underlying academical, political and national approach to all problems is the human being and his reaction to the conditions that affect his welfare. Mr. Paton plumbs this depth with extraordinary insight. And he does so with a sincerity and sympathy that could only be born of a mind and heart whose prime concern is truth.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

Such a book as "Cry, the Beloved Country," could not have been written from any imaginative idea. The author, now the principal of the largest reformatory for Africans in the country, has always been, even when he was in the Natal Educational Department, closely associated with Natives. He knows their language, but what is more, he has obviously had personal experience of their ways of life and much of the mental processes that result in actions perplexing to the average White man. He would hardly claim to understand the Natives completely—the gap between their ignorance and civilised, logical thinking is still too great—but

his book reflects a knowledge of their fundamental feelings as human beings.

THE STORY

The story of the novel is simple. An elderly umfundisi (parson), Kumalo, living in a beautiful spot overlooking the valley of the Umzinkulu in Southern Natal, has an only son who goes to Johannesburg, where he has an uncle and aunt and a boy cousin. Both the son and his cousin get into bad company. The son, Absalom, becomes a thief, and having, with his cousin and another Native miscreant, broken into the residence of a man named Jarvis, shoots him dead when Jarvis comes downstairs to investigate.

Kumalo goes to Johannesburg on receipt of the news from a Native minister that his sister, Gertrude, is very ill, and while there engages in an intensive search for his son, eventually finding him under arrest for the murder. The boy confesses and his explanation that he fired through fear and not with intent to kill does not save him from the gallows.

The slender theme of four notes used by Beethoven was turned into a symphony that is immortal in musical history. So, with this story, it is the intensity with which it is treated that is the compelling force behind it. It is real and alive, yet it breathes poetry and philosophic meaning. The descriptive

SELECTION OF THE WEEK

and the characterisation have an appealing touch; they are vivid and at the same time show a tender and loving regard for beauty.

THE HEART OF THINGS

There are passages like this:

The grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. It holds the rain and the mist, and they seep into the ground, feeding the streams in every kloof. It is well tended, and not too many cattle feed upon it; not too many fires burn it, laying bare the soil. Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed. . . . But the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling, change their nature. For they grow red and bare; they cannot hold the rain and the mist, and the streams are dry in the kloofs. Too many cattle feed upon the grass, and too many fires have burned it. Stand shod upon it, for it is coarse and sharp and the stones cut under the feet. It is not kept, or guarded or cared for; it no longer keeps men, guards men, cares for men. The litoya does not cry here any more. And this:—

But there were times, some in the very midst of satisfaction, where the thoughts of his son would come to him. And then in one fraction of time the hills with the deep melodious names stood out waste and desolate beneath the pitiless sun, the streams ceased to run, the cattle moved thin and listless over the red and rootless earth. . . . Who indeed knows the secret of this earthly pilgrimage? Who knows for what we live, and struggle and die? Who knows what keeps us living and struggling, while all things break about us? Who knows why the warm flesh of a child is such comfort when one's own child is lost and cannot be recovered? Wise men write many books, in words too hard to understand. But this, the purpose of our lives, the end of all our struggle, is beyond all human wisdom. Oh, God, my God, do not Thou forsake me.

No one who knows the conditions that obtain in the large urban centres in South Africa will think that Mr. Paton, in spite of his effort to be impartial in picturing the life of the Africans on the Rand, has fully represented the complexity of the problem that weighs so heavily upon the White races in the sub-continent. But the pathos and tragedy, so inherent in all effort for the welfare of the whole community, irrespective of race, is epitomised in the murder of the engineer, devoting himself so unselfishly to Native causes, and the capital punishment that was the final rent in the heart of the culprit's saintly old parent.

Over the whole novel there is a brooding anxiety. The objective is apparent. The author not only wants to draw attention to conditions that we know should not exist and which urgently need amelioration, but also to give unmistakable warning of the danger ahead if apathy and delay in dealing with the welfare of so many millions is allowed to continue.

This is expressed in essence by Msimangu, the large-hearted minister working in Johannesburg's Shanty Town, when commenting on the violent speech of a Native agitator. He says:—

CAUSING HATE

Some of us think when we have power, we shall revenge ourselves on the White man who has had power, and because our desire is corrupt we are corrupted and the power has no heart in it. But most White men do not know this truth about power, and they are afraid lest we get it. . . . There is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love. Because when a man loves he seeks no power, and therefore he has no power. I see only one hope for our country, and that is when White men and Black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it. . . . I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating.

Though "Cry, the Beloved Country" is such a notable book, and is specially remarkable as a first novel, it is dated. It could not have been true to conditions of even a few decades ago; with the rapid development and the increasing sophistication of the Natives it will probably, in a short time, be but a tale of yesterday. None the less, it must, as it deserves, go to the credit of the author and the land of his birth as literature of the highest quality.

"Cry, the Beloved Country," by Alan Paton; publishers, Jonathan Cape, London.