

Fighting Talk

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BOOKS YOU SHOULD READ



"CRY—THE BELOVED COUNTRY" (By ALAN PATON).

THE cry is up that South Africa is a backward, indolent, slavedriving, tyrannical outpost of Capitalism. Yet it is those things that breed criticism which give seed also to revolt, and out of this conflict, the humanities of the great novel can find ground on which to flourish.

South Africa has been waiting long for such a novel—ever since Olive Schreiner wrote her story of a Cape farm. In Alan Paton's "Cry, the Beloved Country," one finds the whole terrible panorama of a society which sets up white against black and black against white, in the seemingly endless struggle of those who dominate and those who are dominated.

Yet this is not a revolutionary saga, nor is it a tract for the pamphleteer. The mainspring of this book lies in "heart," the understanding of the motives and weaknesses of living people, the good that lies beside evil, and the co-existence of warring forces in the lives of men in every grade of society. In this novel no character is wholly bad, and none, with perhaps the exception of Kumalo, the Zulu Minister of the Anglican Church, wholly good, yet here too the ever human waverings and indecisions are clearly drawn.

In Paton's exposition of "man's inhumanity to man," he speaks out his own philosophy in the words of the African preacher, Msimangu: "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." Yet, "I have a great fear in my heart that one day when they (the European) are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating."

This is not a gay book, even though many of us may still associate the native with an irrepressible lightheartedness, for it is in the truest sense a social document, and social documents are seldom gay. Yet it is tender in the breadth of its conception, and at the same time sombre, impregnated with a realisation of that malaise that repression brings in its wake. He speaks as a poet with the insight of a poet. "We shall live from day to day and put more locks on the doors and get a fine, fierce dog. . . . We shall be careful and knock this off our lives and knock that off our lives, and hedge ourselves about with safety and precaution. And our lives will shrink, but they shall be the lives of superior beings, and we shall live with fear . . . and the conscience shall be thrust down; the light of life shall not be extinguished, but be put under a bushel, to be preserved for a generation that will live by it again, in some day not yet come, and how it will come, and when it will come we shall not think about at all."

Yet though this book is a fine novel, and a great one, and a bestseller in America and England, it is in this country that its real value must be most strongly felt, for the true failure and one of the greatest dangers in all our dealings between white and black, is that the South African is seldom truly aware of the native as an individual. He is conditioned to looking upon the African people as a mass, an alien group, un-touchable, bounded by a kind of moral apartheid; and here the reader is made conscious—conscious until it hurts—that these people live, love, anguish, sorrow and hate, with the same passion and intensity as himself.

If this book should do nothing but open the eyes of the man in the street to receive the smallest glimmering of this first and essential qualification for humanity, it will have done a very profound and wonderful thing in the history of our literature.

T.H.