

Books

Edited by Joseph Henry Jackson

Remarkable Novel On South Africa:

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY. By Alan Paton. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; 278 pp.; \$3.00.

Reviewed by
Edith James

SOUTH AFRICA is a country of lush green hills and of other hills once rich and fertile too, but now broken down and bare from feeding too many cattle and too many fires. Ten million people call it home and a good home it is to some of them. The population is varied—one and a quarter million are white Afrikaans-speaking; three-quarters of a million are white English-speaking; one million are of mixed blood, and the rest are black tribes people. And there are the gold mines, too—the mines that made the country and the mines that are ruining it. It was the mines that destroyed the tribal system and exploited the unskilled labor of the natives and left them bewildered in a strange world.

When Alan Paton's remarkable novel of present-day South Africa begins, the valleys are the "valleys of old men and old women, of mothers and children. The men are away, the young men and the girls are away. The soil cannot hold them any more."

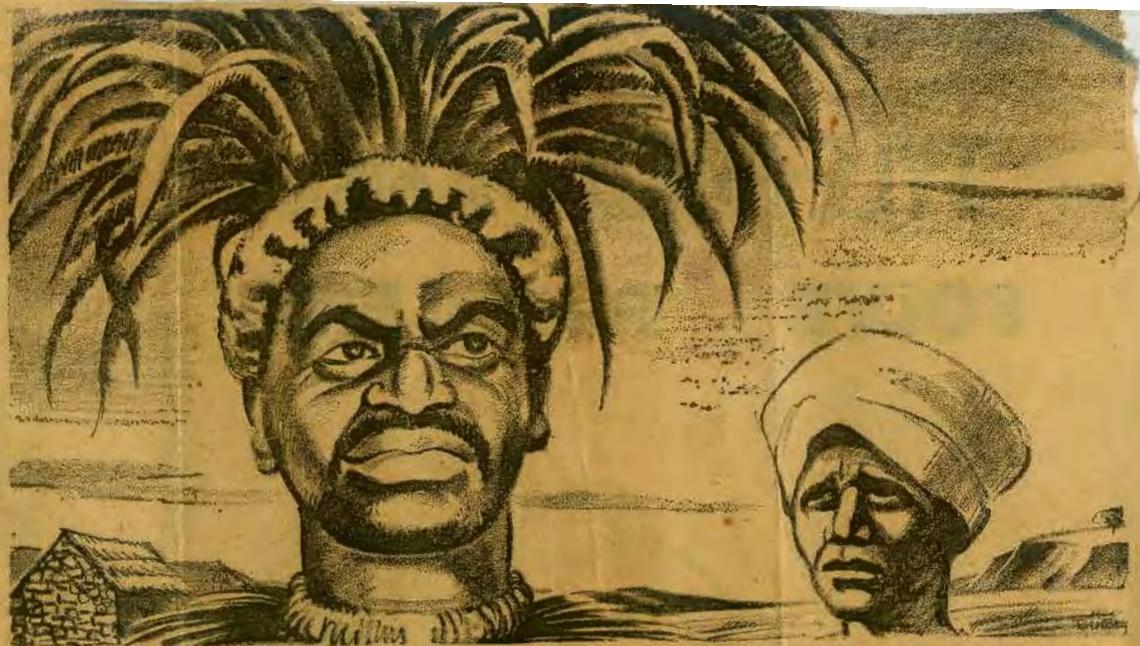
Absalom Kumalo, a young Zulu, falls under the spell of the "evil city" and his father, a parson, goes in search of him for "when

people go to Johannesburg, they do not come back . . . they do not even write any more." And while in Johannesburg, the parson will look for two others who did not come back and did not write. These are a brother and a sister.

Reverend Kumalo's journey is a sad one. The son's trail leads from lodging house to lodging house, to indications of bad companionship and crime, to a reformatory which has just released the boy and finally to prison. For Absalom, during a burglary, has murdered a white man. And it is ironic that the murdered man is from the Kumalo's home country and more ironic that he had directed all his time, talents and money toward helping the black people of the African tribes.

Old Stephen finds his sister too, now a prostitute. He finds his brother, a carpenter and spare-time politician "with a voice to move thousands, with no brains behind it to tell it what to say, with no courage to say it if it knew."

ALL OF THIS in less skillful hands might so easily have become a tear jerker of the most bathetic sort. But even in its



most tragic moments (and there are many of them) the book will rouse the reader's emotion without being in itself emotional. Mr. Paton has a wonderful way with words. His Zulus speak in short, choppy sentences of one syllable words and an extraordinary poetic beauty results.

And "Cry, the Beloved Country" is more than a good story exceptionally well told. It is an indictment of a society that takes away an established tribal system and gives the bewildered tribesman nothing in return but fear. For it is fear that runs all through this book—a fear of being bound that is in itself binding. It is fear that makes Absalom kill the white man; fear that turns the black man to crime; fear on the greatly outnumbered white man's part that keeps the black as the underdog. The author's message is plainly put and should hold meaning for all people in all places.

Surely the following passage, though it refers to South Africa, should provide serious thought for any reader who does not refuse to see intolerance and injustice in his own land, whatever land it may be.

"CRY, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply. Let him not laugh too gladly when the water runs through his fingers, nor stand too silent when the setting sun makes red the veld with fire. Let him not be too moved when the birds of his land are singing, nor give too much of his heart to a mountain or a valley. For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much."

Certainly, the black man of our own country knows as surely as the black man of Mr. Paton's the "fear of a man who lives in a world not made for him, whose own world is slipping away, dying,

being destroyed, beyond any recall."

Here, then, is a book which presents a clear and compassionate picture of one land and yet is universal in its basic theme. It is a book to read and enjoy and then to read again and ponder over. Whether Mr. Paton has written other books, we do not know—the jacket mentions none, although the excellence of this one makes it hard to accept it as a first novel. Its first paragraph will give you an idea of the book's beauty:

"There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys in Africa."

Now, you go on with it.