

We know truth not only by reason

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EVERY CULTURE has its heartlands, a locale of its quintessence, its microcosm. In Spain it is the Andaluz, in Scandinavia the boreal regions, in America the mythical Centerville of the midwestern plains. In South Africa it is Kimberley, at the Big Hole from which modern, industrialised South Africa began.

Dr. Arthur Letele was from Kimberley. That he died recently in dusty Maseru under the eroded mountains of Basutoland is unjust.

He died a most distinct victim of apartheid. Former treasurer of the African National Congress, he was a Treason Trial defendant. But first he was a medical doctor, the doctor who tended those nearly fifty Africans shot dead or wounded in the Kimberley Riots of 1952. He lived his last years in fear and intense reflection in his Maseru exile. The relentless possibility of kidnap and his almost saintly awareness of the problems of his people left him no peace. He had made his decision, like that of his much more famous compatriot, Albert Lutuli, to remain in South Africa, when he passed up an opportunity to escape to Bechuanaland the first night of the Treason Trial arrests. And like Lutuli today, he existed in the political void of a supervised exile. But unlike Lutuli's stirring example to all the world through his sheer existence, Dr. Letele was abandoned in exile with little more than his private compassion.

I first saw Dr. Letele in his surgery on a brilliant October afternoon two years ago. He thoughtfully gave me twenty minutes or so, taking a short respite from the dozens of Basotho patients who waited outside for consul-

tation. He was soft, gentle, almost droll, but he was also the sort of presence which made me timid about taking the chair he offered me. His eyes were quizzical and tired as he patiently bore my inanities — it was exactly my fifth day in Southern Africa. But I left him that first time with more than a glimmering of what he and what his nation's tragedy were all about.

After living near Cape Town for six months, I came to Maseru again and this time spent a long evening with Dr. Letele in the home of friends. In a way the whole evening had been arranged for our conversation, but in the careful modes of recognition and identification which are so necessary in South African underground politics, I was suspect simply because I was an American. Yet after over an hour of generalities and bantering we fixed on each other, sitting at opposite ends of a couch in the corner of the room. Three hours or more later I rose to leave after the single most profound experience I had in all my time in Africa.

Cecil Rhodes began his empire in Kimberley and Arthur Letele began his life's profession in Kimberley: concern for his fellow man and the practising of an awareness of the universality of life. If Dr. Letele had been born of a milder culture he would have spent his life in simple kindness, but he was thrown into the flux of modern South Africa, a black man.

THE NIGHT I LAST TALKED with him he was nervous and his forehead was deeply furrowed. His face was a map of the

awareness of the vicious realities of apartheid. Yet he was hopeful, much more optimistic in terms of time than I sensed he had any reason for being. He seemed to have a deepening belief that it was just impossible for the agony of his people to go on for very much longer. That belief must have been a nonregressible component of his profound compassion.

He spoke of these things in the terms of a revolutionary, for indeed his second profession in life was that of a political revolutionary — and he had travelled widely both in the East and in the West. But he was not of the common breed of revolutionaries; there was nothing of the justifier in his make-up. He was a pacific man who knew only too well that his impacted society could not revise itself solely by good thoughts.

He talked of racialism that might in a more compact and conclusive manner than I have ever heard any man talk of it. He was still able to forgive the Afrikaner and the English-speaker in South Africa for what they had done and what they were doing to his people. This was the only instance in which he ever spoke to me of race; all else was in terms of "we South Africans," and "all South Africans."

He talked with manifest hope of his country's future role in the world, of the wonder of South Africa, of its wide potentials. He seemed to refuse to expect the worst for his country and intimated that we would soon meet again under what he called "happier circumstances," but I knew very well that what he hoped was to soon be able to walk with me, talking through the streets of his beloved Kimberley.

We parted and that was all. But he is dead now; dead long before the amelioration of the agony of his people.

There is no doubt that the grotesque circumstances of apartheid killed Dr. Letele. He was a magnificent negation of Nietzsche's old cynicism that, "... nobody dies nowadays of fatal truths: there are too many antidotes to them." Dr. Arthur Letele died of a fatal truth as surely as any man ever has. ●