

NEIL ALCOCK: A TRIBUTE

by PETER BROWN

On an evening late in September Neil Alcock was returning from a meeting at Tugela Ferry which was designed to bring peace between warring factions of the Mthembu tribe of Msinga. His vehicle was ambushed and he and five other men were killed.

I cannot remember exactly when I first met Neil. It must have been soon after the 1960 State of Emergency. I remember being told by Olga Meidner, whose husband Hans, the then Chairman of the Liberal Party in Natal, was detained in Pietermaritzburg, and who used to drive around with a placard on her car announcing how many days it was that Hans had been held without charge, that she had been approached with expressions of sympathy and support by some nice person from Underberg. So it was probably later that year that Neil first called at the Liberal Party in Pietermaritzburg. He was at that time Chairman of the old United Party in his area and although he was clearly unhappy with the United Party he was afflicted with all the old doubts about leaving it which so many of its supporters suffered from – splitting the anti-Nationalist vote and so on. Eventually, however, he took the plunge and joined the Liberal Party.

Soon after this the Bulwer/Underberg area experienced what I am sure was its first multi-racial political meeting, a house-meeting in the Alcock's home. A branch was formed and others soon followed, most of them based on threatened black freehold areas, where Neil had many friends. Multi-racial workshops to train members in organisational and other skills were held at the Alcock's farm. New things were happening in the Underberg and Bulwer areas, and they continued to happen. Christopher Shabalala, a Liberal Party worker, had the distinction of having a train stopped specially for him between stations, so that he could be removed from it by the Special Branch and prevented from going to a Party meeting. A Security Policeman nearly froze to death when he commandeered a room at a store, so that he could listen in to what was being said at a Party meeting being held on the verandah, and found when he was safely shut inside it that it was the store's cold-room.

Not long after joining the Liberal Party Neil conceived the idea of trying to get surplus milk, of which there was a glut at the time, to poor rural people. Out of this was eventually to grow Kupugani. In the mid-sixties he sold his farm and gave all his time to Kupugani. By then his thoughts had travelled far beyond the distribution of surplus milk and he was concerned to get surplus food of all sorts to people who did not get enough to eat throughout the country.

From Kupugani Neil moved on to inspire the formation of the Church Agricultural Project (CAP), an organisation designed to develop and make productive the farmlands which were attached to many missions, most of which were sadly neglected. His base for many years was the Maria Ratschitz Mission near Wasbank. There, in order to achieve correct grazing practices, he managed to persuade the local black residents to pool their cattle in a common herd, each person being credited with the value of the stock placed in the pool. This amount was to be seen as the original owner's

share in the project, and he was to be paid interest on it. Increases in the numbers and value of stock would benefit all shareholders, members being entitled to withdraw cattle for their own needs at an agreed price.

It was while he was at Maria Ratschitz that Neil learnt about, and proceeded to reveal to the world, the iniquities of the Limehill resettlement plan, and so focussed attention on "relocation", one of the most sordid evils of Nationalist policy. In 1975 CAP moved from Maria Ratschitz to Mdukutshani, on the banks of the Tugela river, in that corner where white Natal meets the black Msinga area of KwaZulu. Losses from disease and stock-theft reduced the cattle which had come from Maria Ratschitz to such an extent that stock-farming became a secondary activity and instead Neil initiated a series of small, cheap irrigation schemes based on individuals and small communities. The results were remarkable. The desert really did start to blossom. But these last years of devastating drought have taken their toll of these. There has simply been no water to keep the plants alive.

In recent times as unemployment and starvation have spread other projects have been started. Mealie-meal has been exchanged for labour on water conservation schemes, or for acacia pods for stockfeed, or for bones for fertilizer. By coincidence Reality had asked Neil's wife Creina to write something on the "bones" shortly before Neil's death. It appears alongside these tributes. Its tables tell, with brutal starkness, the tragic story of Msinga. But it also tells how a simple idea, put into practice against great odds, and at enormous expense of time and energy, has made survival just possible for many people there.

Neil Alcock's background was completely non-academic, yet his knowledge of our environment, and of how to accommodate pastoral and agricultural practices to it, was profound. He was a man of ideas, a great innovator. He pursued his unorthodox thoughts with the greatest persistence and courage and, mostly against the advice of the experts, often with success.

His greatest achievement, however, was to win the trust of the people of Msinga. The relationship he achieved with them was quite remarkable. He became for many of them their most trusted friend – one of **them**. In a strange way the manner of his death confirmed this, for he died as so many of them have died.

But that trust was not won easily. It was won the hardest way of all – by never turning away from an Msinga problem, however intractable it seemed, whatever the cost in time, energy, danger and ostracism its pursuit to the end might need. For the people of Msinga Neil Alcock was one man who really practised what he preached and their loss is irreplaceable.

His other friends' loss is great too, not least in the fact that, while he was alive, whatever you were doing in your own particular area of opposition to apartheid, you always felt that, in his field, Neil was doing more. Our best tribute to him may be always to have in the backs of our minds that sharp spur to greater efforts.

(For those who would like to contribute towards a continuation of his work a Neil Alcock Memorial Fund has been established c/o P.O. Box 100, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.) □