

# NEIL ALCOCK REFLECTIONS OF AN IRRESOLUTE DISCIPLE

I ache at the loss of Neil. In this week following his death, as to a drowning man, all my life memories of him came flooding back. I realize anew how much he meant to me and how much I learned from him. He changed my way of seeing reality.

Hence these reflections are difficult for me. My recollections of Neil are mainly those of the disciple, my reflections those of one not so committed. I hope that they will still outline the greatness of the man.

I first met Neil Alcock at the founding meeting of the Pietermaritzburg branch of Kupugani on the 6th of September 1962. I was a first year student at University, ran the African night school there, and had been asked to attend with some SRC representatives. There was this tall, somewhat gaunt, man on the platform of the church hall. He looked slightly uncomfortable in his suit and at being where he was. He was no public speaker and he said "um" at about every second sentence. But he was persuasive because of the dogged intensity with which he pursued his theme — malnutrition existed, food was available, people could organize to do something about it. I don't think I ever again heard Neil on a public platform but I heard him speak on innumerable occasions — I sat in on committee meetings, indabas, conversations.

Neil became a speaker of deadly effectiveness. He spoke to convince and though he was in no ways a master of rhetoric, he convinced. His logic was deadly, he used a homespun version of the Socratic method, and he had a bulldog tenacity that refused to let an issue go until the audience had conceded. It could be quite entrancing! He also had immense stamina. I remember travelling with Neil to mission station after mission station in Northern Natal and hearing the same performance. It was done each time with the same passionate intensity.

At that first Kupugani meeting I was elected to the committee and so my association and friendship with Neil began. Kupugani was a magnificent achievement, though it never became what Neil envisaged. I think I came to understand more than most what Neil was getting at and so our relationship deepened. Neil had a vision of Kupugani as a network of not just food distribution but also of development in every magisterial district and area in the country. It was all to be democratic and participatory. What Kupugani became bears no resemblance to this. It is well run, urban controlled, effective but with restricted perspectives. Nobody in their right mind would see Kupugani as a revolutionary organization today. To many of us it was an exciting vision — it enraged MDC de Wet Nel, the then minister of Bantu Administration and Development.

In the Kupugani context one can begin to assess both Neil's strengths and weaknesses as an organization man. He had the drive and the vision to initiate. Kupugani and more recently AFRA (the Association for Rural Advancement)

bear witness to that. But Neil was not an organization man. He fitted uneasily into any organization. I think he found himself helpless to control the direction that Kupugani took. In part, this was self created. Neil had a tendency to seek support (and possibly in the time of state clampdown on opposition in the early 60's, some protection) from the well connected and powerful. Some of them supported him loyally to the end. One thinks of Archbishop Hurley and Duchesne Grice. But many of them could not conceivably be expected to understand what Neil was about or to genuinely support him. By 1965 the Johannesburg (head) office of Kupugani looked like the executive suite of a multinational, complete with its dreadful OXFAM import in the person of Richard Exley, the general manager. That all collapsed and Kupugani slowly rebuilt itself into the much less pretentious and more down-to-earth organisation it is today but Neil came to find himself alienated in the very organization he had founded. Did Neil again and again fall into this trap? To some extent he did. Step by step, organization by organization, Neil was forced back until he came up against the wall in Msinga.

One can rephrase that last question. Why did Neil never find the organization man who could implement his visions? Or why did no one ever volunteer? Maybe there were deep reasons why Neil never found one. And I bear guilt because (though with sufficient humility not to think that I was the answer) I often was on the brink of volunteering but never did so.

The second great project of Neil's, Church Agricultural Projects, suffered a similar fate. Brilliant in conception, by the end of the process CAP was limited to Mdukutshani on the Tugela and Neil had no real influence on any Church farms. He continued to receive support from Church leaders but it was essentially personal support, based on loyalty, and not the commitment of the institution.

In the midst of these organizational disasters what did succeed? What was achieved by Kupugani (and still is), at Maria Ratchitz farm, and at Mdukutshani has been documented, though one hopes that Creina Alcock will write a fuller account one day. It is in many ways a truly astounding achievement by one man in 21 years. But I would rather concern myself with some more personal observations.

Neil made disciples. I think I was one of the first. It was real discipling he did. Not just getting someone to agree with him. He took me on the road with him. I spent nearly every university vacation with Neil. We roughed it, sleeping in his Peugeot station wagon. (Neil was considerably tougher than I was and could sleep in any position under any circumstances — even clouds of Tongaland mosquitos). He showed me South Africa. I marvel now at his skills as an educator. He didn't teach me. He looked and invited me to look with him. He never once criticized me

though I think I must have asked innumerable silly and ignorant questions. I saw his gentleness with people — a patience that is yet strong. I saw him meeting with blacks, sitting for hours, literally hours, discussing some point. I came gradually to see partly as Neil saw and for that great gift I am thankful. In some respects Neil almost became a father to me. And he was a good father. He even taught me how to drive and when I rolled the car off the road, once righted, immediately ordered me back into the driver's seat.

There were other disciples. Over the years a host of mainly young people worked with Neil and took from him. There were some great learnings — one thinks immediately of Cheryl Walker's Natal volume of the Surplus People Project's report as owing a lot to an Mdukutshani genesis. There were also some failures.

The educational forte of Neil's was the story. He told wonderful stories. They were his art form. More especially they were "atrocious stories", usually particularly directed at the state of agriculture and the church (though real atrocities were also described — in early 1963 Neil got hold of some eyewitness accounts of truly appalling tortures committed in the Transkei).

Were Neil's stories true?

This is not just an 'ethical' question but an important historical one. What assessment do we make on all that Neil wrote or influenced others to write? In answering this I would make three main points:

Firstly, a personal experience. One of the great disappointments of my life was the result of a story written by Ian Garland (doyen of Natal nature conservationists). I was a schoolboy and nature mad. Ian had written a beautiful description of himself canoeing on the dune vleis among the waterlilies and jacanas. I was invited to spend a holiday on his farm. I was ecstatic. On arrival almost my first words were, "Where is the canoe?" There was no canoe. There never had been a canoe. I was devastated. It was all artistic embellishment. **Neil's stories often had canoes.** But the vleis and the jacanas and the waterlilies were really there!

Secondly, another personal experience. I once edited an Anglican student magazine and published one of Neil's church atrocity stories, only to be publicly reprimanded by Bishop Inman (who had gained a quite undeserved reputation as a fearless opponent of apartheid) who stated baldly, "It's not true!" I think that in many cases Neil's stories were not true **IF** by true you mean the whole truth and nothing but the truth, approved of by a lawyer (popular wisdom in the Liberal Party of those days was that a lawyer's advice however legally true was **always** politically wrong!), and stamped with approval by a sociologist as having the right amount of quantifiable and empirically observable data. But all this misses the point. Even though some may have been tendentious parables based on hearsay, taken as a whole they did tell "the truth" about South Africa. And many were indeed coldly factual because court cases, initiated by Neil via CAP, AFRA and the new Legal Resources Centre, have been won.

Thirdly, Neil had a somewhat acerbic pen. I would never describe Neil as a bitter person. I don't think bitterness was ever in his nature. But he was rather like William Blake who was genuinely astounded when someone cut

him dead in the street one day merely because Blake happened to have denounced him as a murderer the day before. Neil accused all sorts of people of "atrocities", it was like a prophetic burden on him to do so, and never weighed up very carefully what effect this would have on the recipients.

Oh they were wonderful stories (I admit there were some rather long and less entrancing ones as well). I can remember laughing myself into a state of helplessness when Neil told the one about his visit to the Pomeroy Mission. But that, like many others, will have to remain unpublished. What can be done to preserve those told? The Mdukutshani newsletter documented many. Some people have tried to respond academically to some of the material. In 1965 I wrote a paper on the rural situation which I suspect started Colin Bundy's research into the history of the African peasantry. Cheryl Walker's resettlement research has been mentioned already. But more needs to be done.

Neil Alcock was not just a teller of stories. He knocked on doors. Like the friend of the parable in Luke 11:5-10 he was totally importunate. I know that some came to dread the arrival of this John the Baptist from Msinga because they would have to reorder their priorities and do something, even against their better judgement. He had a dreadful purity of heart that man. He willed one thing. And it is here that the curious ambivalence the good people have about Neil manifested itself. And it is really a curious ambivalence about the rejected — and really, without even being too melodramatic — the doomed. Urban life has won dominion in the hearts of men and we, good people all, know where the power is and want to stay close to it. We complain about powerlessness, but then powerlessness is a relative matter. Neil located himself with the powerless, the really powerless, and we couldn't make that our goal or priority.

Ironically then, people such as myself, who were conscientized and transformed by Neil, often couldn't commit ourselves wholeheartedly to his causes (though I very nearly left university to work for Kupugani and years later nearly went to Mdukutshani). Political theorists might say that we simply moved into a more political frame of reference. The struggle against apartheid was not going to be won here and our Benthamite calculations didn't encourage us to join Neil in a hopeless cause. Which may be true, but it is also more comfortable and I feel guilty all the same.

Also ironic was Neil's curious unwillingness to use religion and politics as weapons. What was Neil's relationship to religion? To me he seemed the most naturally religious man I have known. He loved the creation. Although he was a practising Anglican in the early 60's and to some extent spoke out of this tradition, he, like Ghandi, fitted uneasily into any religious categorising. I can think of no clearer expression of what I think Neil believed than Traherne's words:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world: and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs, as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

Why then did Neil never seem to really take the power of organized religion seriously? Possibly he had too much insight into the corruption and hypocrisy associated with religion and politics. And yet — it has always seemed to me that two things can make people do impossible things, radical politics and radical religion. Religious community often blends both. But Neil seemed to distance himself from this. It left us, the church people and the politicals rather helplessly looking on. Perhaps the constraints were such that Neil could never develop this aspect of his life. I know he was a good political organizer. In the 1961 stayaway when the Republic was declared the one area that had a 100% strike was Charlestown, which Neil handled. In the middle 60's Neil backed away from direct political involvement because he was in real danger of being banned and his agricultural vision seemed too important to jeopardize.

Finally, what does this man gunned down in Msinga say to us? Is he simply a reversion to some sort of rough polemical Saint Jerome, gaunt with zeal, isolated and extremist in the desert doing daily battle with devils? Or does Neil's growing dissonance with the bourgeois world that you and I inhabit suggest something significant? I think that it does. We all agree on the need for rural development and we get all sorts of middlemen to do it for us. And the corpses of failed and corrupted projects litter the countryside. Neil cut out the middlemen, be they white experts or black salary collectors.

Some called him paternalist because after years of work CAP hadn't produced any acceptable black petty bourgeois who spoke English, could write reports and "run it". Even if CAP had produced such "middlemen" they would probably have been run out of Msinga by the locals. So

it is classed as a failure? Or is it? Something beautiful happened at Mdukutshani, the place of lost grasses on the Tugela. Small brief intimations of what real development is about. Mixed up with a whole lot of failure and disaster. Tantalizing. Some notes towards a non-bourgeois agricultural development? Some hopes for a non-bourgeois church? A barefoot school? A university under the acacias? I think something significant happened here. I cannot prove it, only believe it.

Does it matter? Do not those who voluntarily choose to stay with the doomed have a grandeur? Neil came at the end to live and die for the rejected. In the regime of scarcity, said Sartre, society chooses its own victims. In the regime of apartheid, degradation and death have been chosen for Msinga. The present referendum merely decides whether this choice shall be enshrined in the constitution or not. Neil chose to be with the victims. And he died still fighting the devils of despair and death in Msinga. He had hope to the last.

And so I will hear no more stories and I will now have to remember and treasure those I have heard. I will not meet Neil again in his torn shorts and leather sandals in that sun gutted landscape he fitted into so well. I will hear no more visions and will feel no more guilt because Neil will not knock on my door anymore.

But I will remember him. In the acacias of the drylands and in the dry heat burning off dusty roads. Whenever I see the Tugela I will remember him. And I will hear Neil in the voice of the oppressed for he is now inseparably in death a part of them.

And because I know I too will pass away and my memories too, I put hope in there being a God who hears the voice of the oppressed and will remember Neil also. □

### Emigrés

Our two sons.  
First floating  
in the liquid of the womb.  
Then pulsating  
in the laughing crying  
fluid of our home.  
And now: static, though smiling,  
two photos on the piano.  
Elsewhere, they are alive,  
flowing, rich, and keen;  
but here, they've been shot dead  
by the military machine.

*Vortex*