

*The Natal Society Annual Lecture
Wednesday, 10 August 1988*

Alan Paton: Often Admired, Sometimes Criticized, Usually Misunderstood

My title may seem a little aggressive, perhaps even rather arrogant. Who am I to say whether Alan Paton has been misunderstood or not? Who indeed is *anybody* to make statements on this matter?

Until a few months ago one could find out something about the real aims and views of Alan Paton by asking the man himself. Of course literary and social critics are always a little wary of the views of writers about their own works, especially when those works were written some years previously. Writers (like other people) sometimes forget what was in their minds when they wrote something, or perhaps their views and attitudes change and they deny that they meant this or that, or — subtlest of all, but not uncommon — for one reason or another they weren't fully aware even at the time of the implications of what they were saying. Indeed there are some contemporary critics who would regard a writer's views of his or her own works as being significant only because they provide a pointer towards the writer's lack of self-knowledge, and (the argument goes) it is that area — that area of blindness, of tell-tale revelation — that criticism can most usefully focus on. Whatever use one would wish to make of a writer's statements, however — whether paradoxical or not — the sad fact is that we can no longer consult Alan Paton when we are thinking either of his life or of his works. He has gone from us. We are left on our own.

In fact one could say of Alan Paton what W.H. Auden said in his poem on the death of the great poet W.B. Yeats:

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

Perhaps one needs to adjust Auden's statements a little. When a writer dies he becomes not only his admirers, but also his critics, his detractors — and those who find themselves somewhere in between. But on the other hand — certainly in the case of Paton — if his words are 'modified in the guts of the living' (as of course they must be), at least he doesn't yet need to be 'wholly given over to unfamiliar affections'. Many of those who respond to him and to his work are the sort of people he knew quite well; some of them, indeed, are people he knew personally.

What is happening now, then, inevitably, is that — whether they realize it or not — different people, different groups of people, are creating their own Paton, their own image of Paton, while insisting of course, as must always happen, that their Paton, their image of the man and his works, is the authentic one. And what I intend to do in this address is to join in this process, recognising (at least to some extent) what I am doing. I shall offer some features of my Paton, my image of Paton, and I shall criticize some of the views held by others. Of course I believe my image to be the true one, or at least a true one, or I wouldn't be speaking at all. But at the same time I must concede that my view can't help being my own.

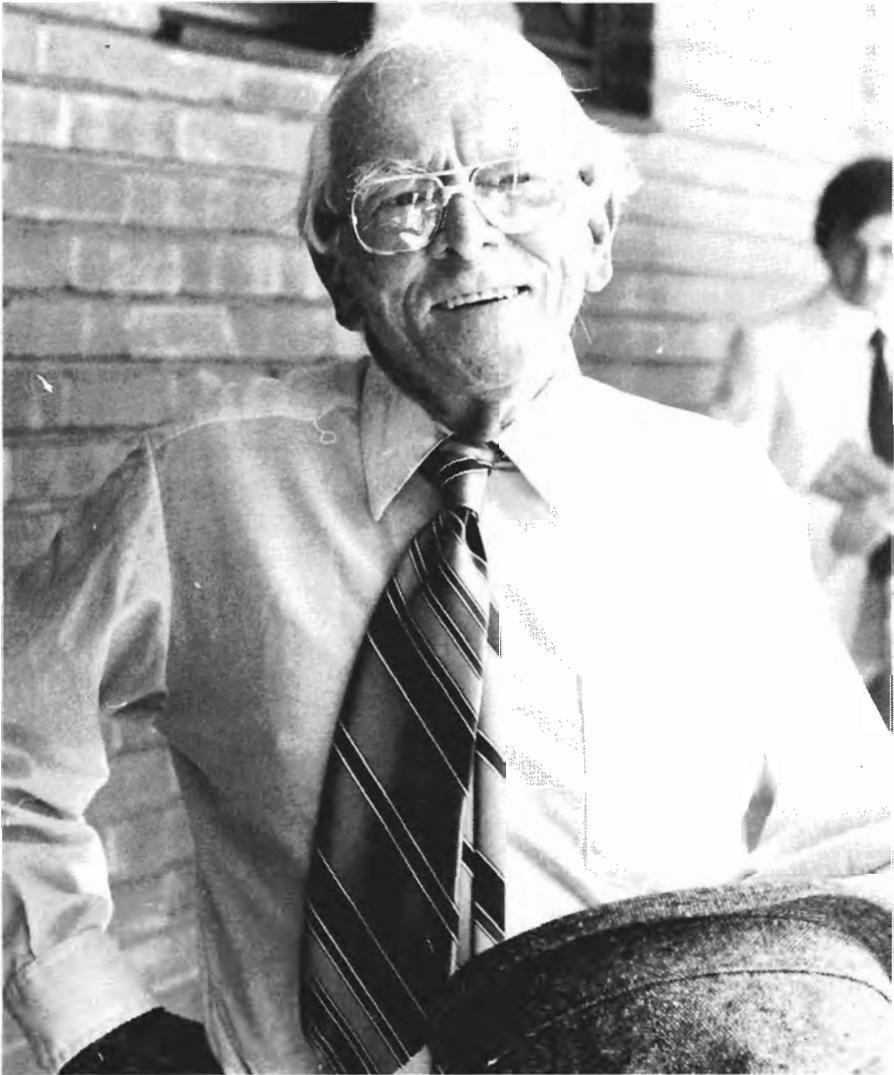
And since my view can't help being my own, I think it would be reasonable for me to say just a little about myself and my relationship with Alan Paton — if only to put you on your guard! No, not just for that reason: I hope any snatch of the Paton life-story, told from a slightly different angle, is of some interest.

Like so many other people, I was bowled over by *Cry, the Beloved Country* when I first read it, as a schoolboy. I think I later joined the Liberal Party in response quite as much to the main thrust of Paton's novel as to the slightly dry abstract principles of the Party. And it was through the Liberal Party, in the early 1960s, that I got to know him. A little later, a group of us from Maritzburg (one of whom was Edgar Brookes, another was Marie Dyer) used to drive down along the single carriageway road to monthly committee meetings at Alan Paton's house, which was then in Kloof. I remember particularly the dark days from 1963 and 1964 onwards, when so many members of the Party had been banned: Peter Brown, Elliot Mngadi, Christopher Tshabalala, John Aitchison, almost all the notable members. Alan himself would certainly have been banned if he hadn't been so eminent (his passport had been taken away). So probably would Edgar. At our meetings Alan's sharpness, his wisdom and his wit helped to keep us going.

In 1968 the Liberal Party was forced out of existence by the piece of legislation with the fantastic name of the Improper Interference Act. But the intellectual life of the Party continued, to some extent, in the journal *Reality* — which is still going strong, I may add, and has just a few days ago brought out Vol. 20 No. 4, which consists of a series of articles on Alan Paton. Alan and I were members of the founding editorial board. As the months went by, different members of the board reacted in slightly different ways — as was inevitable — to new developments in political thinking and strategy; and in 1972 several members, of whom I was one, felt that, in order to keep in the mainstream of current opposition thinking, the subtitle of *Reality* should be changed from 'A Journal of Liberal Opinion' to 'A Journal of Liberal and Radical Opinion'. Alan who was the chairman of the editorial board, was not very happy with this proposal; but our view prevailed. I wrote the editorial for

the following number, the one for November 1972, and among other things I said:

The editorial board hopes that each issue will bring out many of the ways in which liberalism and radicalism coincide or merge into one another. The board is also aware, however, that there are some tensions between liberal and radical viewpoints: we hope that the journal will reflect these in an honest and fruitful manner. Any valid political attitude needs to be constantly evolving in order to meet a changing situation, and at the same time constantly in touch with the past and with its underlying values.



Alan Paton usually produced a dour expression for photographers. Not this time!

(Photograph: Natal Witness)

Alan remained humorously a bit sceptical, and was from that moment convinced, I think, that Gardner and a few others had dangerously left-wing tendencies. In the following issue of *Reality*, however, there appeared a little poem, signed A.P., which went like this:

Sometimes I was a glad lib
 Sometimes I was a sad lib
 No more I'll be a bad lib
 For now I am a rad lib.

I never was a mad rad
 I would have made a bad rad
 Although I hate the glib rad
 Myself I am now a lib rad.

Lib now takes its sabbatical
 But I'll not be fanatical
 I shall remain pragmatical
 Though I am now a radical.

No more I'll lie and fiberal
 Nor talk a lot of gibberal
 Nor will I quake and quibberal
 I now am a rad liberal.

I really now have had lib
 Now I am a rad lib
 I pledge to the new *REALITY*
 My firm and true feality.

It was a humorous conclusion, but a gracious one too. I don't want to give the impression that Alan Paton was suspicious of me: he invited me to edit his collected shorter works, which came out in 1975, and I gave one of the celebratory lectures in Cape Town on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. Mind you, that may all have been partly because I was a Professor of English, and Professors of English are meant to be used to doing that sort of thing. (I must record here that Alan, as a person happily removed from the trials and the pretensions of the academic life, had a wonderfully ironical and almost scornful way of pronouncing the word 'professor'.) But he and I were on good terms, and he must have known that, though as the years went by our political positions diverged to some extent, I had a profound respect for him and for his writing. If he were looking down on us now, however — and I have little doubt that he is — he would probably say: 'Humph! Professor Gardner! I suppose he will make me look like a spokesman for the left wing'.

I must now switch from the narrative mode to what I suppose might be called the literary-and-social-critical mode. And as I am going to attempt an assessment of Alan Paton as a writer and as a person (though, as I've suggested, the image that I offer can't help being my own), I shall move, soberly, from saying 'Alan' to saying 'Paton'.

My bold subtitle for this address was (you'll remember) 'often admired, sometimes criticized, usually misunderstood'. It's clear that I'm going to offer some criticisms, both of many of those who admire Paton and of many of those who criticize him. This will mean that what I want to say — or the remainder of

what I want to say — will fall roughly into two parts. I hope however that these two parts will be held together by one or two common themes.

Let me turn my attention first to those who have been critical of Paton. This group of people, too, obviously falls into two sections. There are those who have criticized Paton because he is too liberal, too far to the left, and those who have criticized him for the opposite reason, because his liberalism is too timid, too conservative, analytically inaccurate, or just plain ineffective.

When *Cry, the Beloved Country* was first published, a large number of white South Africans situated themselves in the first of those two categories. Paton died a respected figure, a figure indeed (as I shall argue) shrouded rather too voluminously in that kind of public esteem which tends (maybe half-deliberately) to mask a person's real views and achievements. But we must not forget that for about twenty-five years of his life — from 1948 well into the 1970s — he was regarded by many of his fellow whites with a curious mixture of horror and awe. A few previously fairly close friends avoided having much to do with him for fear that they too might be suspected of being communists. For many years the security police watched him constantly, and from time to time they raided his home. On one occasion his car's windscreen was smashed. But in spite of this massive history of hostility and (at a fairly rudimentary level) of intellectual disagreement, in 1988 it seems impossible to take this whole area of opinion seriously. The view that Paton was a dangerous character is simply absurd; the notion that it is sacrilegious to want to change the traditional white South African way of life has evaporated in the minds of all those whose thought is in any way coherent and reputable; and Msimangu's fear 'that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating' has long since become a classic articulation of the anxiety of very many South Africans of all races.

Far more important, far more worthy of our consideration, are the criticisms from the left. There may be some people who doubt this. I think such doubt can only be based on ignorance. The liberal movement, most of which locates itself somewhere between the left and the centre of the political spectrum, is obviously of great significance in South Africa; it has been so in the past, and it will continue to be in the future. But the left is clearly not only important but powerful too, and it has been especially so in the last ten or fifteen years. Not only (I would guess) are the majority of blacks to be found on the left, particularly the intellectuals and the community leaders, but many very thoughtful and dedicated whites, particularly young ones, are radicals of one kind or another. I have to say that I am in many respects a radical myself.

It wouldn't be easy or sensible to try to make a catalogue of all the left-wing criticisms that have been launched over the years at *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Paton's best-known and most controversial work, and at liberalism and the Liberal Party (which Paton describes and celebrates in *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*), and at the views of Paton in his last years. (It may seem rash to bracket all these items together; but in fact they are all subtly interrelated: those who admire Paton and those who criticize him agree that the man and his work — the ideas, the actions, the writings — make up almost a seamless garment — not of course that either liberalism or the Liberal Party were wholly Paton's own work.) Many of the criticisms could be said to focus on points of historical or socio-political detail, or matters of personal or political strategy. Of course different critics have varying views of the magnitude or significance of these points of disagreement; some would regard them as so

important that they would amount to a rejection of Paton's whole literary and political thrust.

Let me give some examples of these criticisms. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is thought of as offering, in the two Kumalos, an inadequate picture of black socio-political consciousness: the Reverend Stephen Kumalo is too simply rural, too naive, too passive, whereas John, his brother, the urban activist, is treated largely unsympathetically. Johannesburg is presented rather too simply as a place of sin, as a corrupt alternative to tribal tradition or pastoral reconstruction, instead of as the place where, to a large extent, the future South African society will be built. Then, related to this, there is a tendency in the novel, and in Paton's other literary and political works, and in traditional South African liberalism, to place too strong a stress on the emotions, and on the notion of a voluntary, personal, religious or quasi-religious change-of-heart, rather than on those aspects of political reality which a radical would tend to highlight: the need for structural analysis of the overall situation in terms of classes and of interest groups, and the necessity then for organization and mobilization (of the kind witnessed in recent years in COSATU and the UDF) so that real and ultimately irresistible pressure can be brought to bear on the political rulers. I think most of the radical criticisms of Paton and of his works fall roughly within the scope of the points that I have sketched. A typical radical critique of his prose style, for example — with its stark insistences, its resonant haunting phrases, its occasional hints of the biblical — would be that, in its brooding poetic intensity, it tends to turn the mind inwards, towards the feelings and the conscience, rather than outwards, to the difficult realities of a complex socio-political situation. Similarly the Liberal Party, with its fine ideals and its real generosity of spirit — that Party which, as Paton tells us in his second autobiography, Donald Molteno accused him of regarding as a church — this Party never came near to devising a political strategy which would bring it any real power. Again — it is perhaps a related point — in his later years he took his own path, and went against (and therefore arguably partly undermined) the broader liberation movement by opting not for a unitary state but for federalism and by seeing the Natal/KwaZulu Indaba as a possible move in that direction.

What can one say about all this? Well obviously different people would respond in different ways. What do I say about it all, since it is I who am creating for you my own image of Paton?

I must honestly assert that every one of those criticisms seems to me to have a certain degree of cogency; I don't myself think that any of them can be simply refuted or swept aside. But I have to add, firstly, that *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and indeed the Liberal Party, need to be seen in historical perspective. Considering the way socio-political facts change, even under a Nationalist Government wedded to the ideal of granite fixity, it is remarkable how many of the human and social elements of the 1948 novel have retained a real currency. The Liberal Party, too, has to be seen in realistic historical terms. It may seem to have achieved very little in terms of the immediacies of power politics; but in the 1950s some valid and significant alliances and friendships were formed; and as for the 1960s, the opposition was having a rough time on every front. No other group achieved much.

But my further response to the radical criticisms — which, I repeat I recognize as having a real and often important validity — is that they miss something central. And this is what I mean when I talk of a misunderstanding.

I concede that both Paton's writings and the Liberal Party offer a vision of the strategies for liberation which is in some ways a limited one. But what they do represent at their best is something which is, I would argue, at the very core of all valid and strong political opposition in South Africa — and of course elsewhere. That is a certain spirit, a restlessness, a determination to remove injustice and tyranny and to establish harmony among individuals and in the larger society, a courageous willingness to put oneself on the line, a refusal to acquiesce in the mediocrity of thoughtless and selfish social conformism, a recognition that any humane society must be based on co-operation between equals and upon a broad compassion. 'Ah, but,' Donald Molteno might say if he were here, 'this is again the idea of liberalism as a religion.' Perhaps it is, partly. My point is that at the root of all lively human action, within the individual and within a group, there lies a commitment, an emotion, an enthusiasm, an *impulse*, which is in some sense religious or is akin to what one associates with religion. That impulse may express itself in various tactics and strategies. But the impulse is the starting-point. It is that impulse, I believe, that animates the range of opposition groupings in South Africa. And it is that impulse which is powerfully expressed in Paton's writings and which, in a thousand subtle ways, has been fed by those writings. That impulse was expressed in the Liberal Party too, and has now transferred itself to many opposition groups — the PFP, the Christian Institute (till that too was blotted out), the NDM, the trade unions, the UDF. To suppose that socio-political activity of a vigorous and creative kind can take place without such an impulse is, I think, simply wrong. Indeed, in his powerful articulating and promoting of that impulse towards justice and a true human community, Paton has to be seen as, in the fullest sense of the word, *radical*.

By no means all radicals, of course, have failed to realize this. Here, for example, are some of the words of Eddie Daniels, who spoke at the Memorial Service for Paton in St. George's Cathedral, Cape Town. (Daniels had spent fifteen years on Robben Island.)

I feel honoured and humble to have been asked to pay tribute to the memory of Dr Alan Paton. I can assure you that if Mr Nelson Mandela was free he too would be paying tribute to the memory of this great South African.

Now I want to move on, more briefly, to what may perhaps be considered the more surprising part of my analysis: the ways in which some or many of those who admire Paton seem to me partly to misunderstand him. I have already suggested that in his last years he was in some danger of being shrouded or swaddled in a sort of wet blanket of reputation and respectability. As a fairly old friend of his, I must confess that I watched the spread of his popularity among white South Africans with some alarm. (I hope I wasn't motivated by envy.)

I am not suggesting that his popularity was bogus. Clearly (as I have already implied) the thinking of many white South Africans has moved some way in the last ten or twenty years, and equally clearly Paton's writing has played an important role in pushing that thought forward. But — after the bitter wilderness years of the 1940s, 50s and 60s — there was apt to be something a little too easy and glib about the admiration of the 1970s and 80s. On the whole people admired him for the right things. There wasn't much misunderstanding in terms of simple comprehension. They respected his love

of justice and fair play, his compassion, his humanity, his probing insight and irony. But what they missed often and still miss, I think, is the depth of emotion and commitment, the capacity and willingness to transform one's thinking and one's living.

Can I show a little more exactly what I mean by this? I want to read a part of his account of the memorial service for Edith Rheinallt Jones, who died over forty years ago. Mrs Jones was a person who, though she had been warned by her doctor not to exert herself, had decided that she did not wish to abandon her various benevolent activities, one of which was to travel to black areas all over South Africa inspecting and encouraging certain self-help projects. The vision of a future South Africa which Edith Jones had, and which no doubt Paton shared at the time, was no doubt in various ways imprecise and unstructured. There may even have been, for all I know, in the manner of those days, a slight element of the patronising in Edith Jones's attitudes. But for all that there is no gainsaying the reality and the importance of the experience that Paton describes. He was writing in 1968.

They had a farewell service for her in St. George's Presbyterian Church, Johannesburg. That was my deep experience. Black man, White man, Coloured man, European and African and Asian, Jew and Christian and Hindu and Moslem, all had come to honour her memory — their hates and their fears, their prides and their prejudices, all for this moment forgotten. The lump in the throat was not only for the great woman who was dead, not only because all South Africa was reconciled under the roof of this church, but also because it was unreal as a dream, and no one knew how many years must pass and how many lives be spent and how much suffering be undergone, before it all came true. And when it all came true, only those who were steeped in the past would have any understanding of the greatness of the present.

As for me, I was overwhelmed. I was seeing a vision, which was never to leave me, illuminating the darkness of the days through which we live now.

To speak in raw terms, there was some terrible pain in the pit of my stomach. I could not control it. I had a feeling of unspeakable sorrow and unspeakable joy. What life had failed to give so many of these people, this woman had given them — an assurance that their work was known and of good report, that they were not nameless or meaningless. And man has no hunger like this one. Had they all come, no church would have held them all; the vast, voiceless multitude of Africa, nameless and obscure, moving with painful ascent to that self-fulfilment no human being may with justice be denied, encouraged and sustained by this woman who withheld nothing from them, who gave her money, her comfort, her gifts, her home, and finally her life, not with the appearance of prodigality nor with fine-sounding words, but with a naturalness that concealed all evidence of the steep moral climb by which alone such eminence is attained.

In that church one was able to see, beyond any possibility of doubt, that what this woman had striven for was the highest and best kind of thing to strive for in a country like South Africa. I knew then I would never again be able to think in terms of race and nationality. I was no longer a White person but a member of the human race. I came to this,

as a result of many experiences, but this one I have related to you was the deepest of them all.

When in his later years Paton was interviewed on television by people who knew nothing about that sort of experience, and would have been scared off it if they had known; when he was revered as a Grand Old Man by people many of whom had no idea what he had been through or what his true grandness consisted of; when one realised that white South Africans with almost nothing of Edith Jones in them were signing up for the Paton fan club and that even the Nationalist establishment was prepared to try to co-opt Paton and his past (in rather the same sort of way as the SADF has recently tried to co-opt the Allied victory over Hitler) — I sometimes felt that the old lion was in danger of being turned into a Chipperfields Lion Park lion, that the Old Testament prophet was being converted into a respectable old codger whom everyone loves and can feel comfortable with.

Of course the process that I complain of is to some extent inevitable. No doubt fame is always a bit like this. I have already quoted Auden's lines:

The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

And perhaps one could add that the words of the old are modified in the guts of the young, and the words of the experienced are modified in the guts of the inexperienced. But still, I believe one has to try to keep alive what one sees as the truth of the man. The fact is that if all those white South Africans who claim to admire Paton had in them much of the true Paton fire and feeling, the deep Paton conviction and commitment, that essential *impulse* towards justice and community, South Africa would perhaps by now be a totally transformed country.

But maybe there's one more question that I as a radical liberal — a lib rad or a rad lib — need to put. Had his views in his post-Liberal Party days softened? Had he perhaps — from my point of view — actually become a bit more conservative and a bit more comfortable? Was there in fact a slight resonance of the Lion Park in his later roars?

To some small extent, perhaps yes. It isn't easy for an old man to maintain his earlier militancy or to keep up with every new thought. But on the whole, no. And I speak as a person who disagreed with him about federalism and about the Indaba and about sanctions. I think Paton's later positions were essentially compatible with his earlier ones; and indeed I take it upon myself to suggest that his disagreements with the broad liberation movement were largely on points of strategy. I think Paton himself might well have preferred a unitary South Africa, but he opted for a federal concept because he thought that was in the long run more likely to work. (He perhaps became more of a strategist as he grew older.) The UDF insists on a unitary state, because that is what it wants and believes in; but who is to say for sure what might happen when the real negotiations start? And in similar ways one might analyse the other points of disagreement. Paton accepts the Indaba as a step in the right direction. The UDF rejects it — inevitably — as being not properly representative, and as anyhow inappropriate at the moment when so many crucial people are exiled, detained, imprisoned or banned. But in the long run of course, the Indaba, if it ever produces anything, may possibly prove of some value in future planning.

I am drawing towards a close, and I am conscious that I have dealt with only a few aspects of the great Paton phenomenon. In fact I hear Alan calling from above: 'Professor Gardner! Must you always be so damned serious?'

And I remember of course his words about obsession, spoken on several occasions but most recently at a Speech Day last year:

I want to say a few special words to those of you who take the problems of life and the world too much to heart. Beware of doing that. It is good to care for the life and happiness of others, but care for your own too. Your life wasn't given to you to be spent in suffering. It was given to be enjoyed. It is good to fight against injustice, but don't become obsessed by it, for such an obsession — indeed any obsession — will eat away your life. I know, because I've seen it happen.

Well, that is the other side of the coin. Or perhaps I might call it — in humility — the point at which I, the lib rad speaker, have been in real danger of misunderstanding Paton.

He had a very wide range of interests. His knowledge of birds and plants was astonishing. He loved a joke. He loved a drink. He loved people.

I'd like to conclude with an anecdote told by his son Jonathan. (Like one or two of the other things I've quoted, it's in the latest *Reality*.) Jonathan says that many people have had many important contacts with his father, but 'not one of these people can claim to have spent as many hours in a motor car with him as I have'. And he recounts a number of amusing motor-car stories. Here is one of them:

And then after 1948 and *Cry, the Beloved Country* there would be Journeys with an American Visitor. The Visitor would sit in front and hold forth in a loud American accent: 'Well, Alan, it seems to me that the funnermental difference between our constitootion and yours is . . .' My father's voice would suddenly intervene: 'What's that bird, Jonno?' — and the car would draw to a dramatic halt. Little did the visitor know that my father had been paying no attention to him whatsoever for the previous twenty minutes. Out would come the binoculars as Mr P. peered up into a maroela tree. 'Yellow beak' he would say, clutching his nose. 'And red breast.' Rubbing his chest. And for the rest of the journey the American Visitor said not a word, the 'constitootion' having been thrown out of the window.

And perhaps, in the end, that should be the fate of my speech . . .

COLIN GARDNER

ALAN PATON
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