

Alan Paton and Neville Nuttall: A Literary Friendship

My father, Neville Nuttall, kept a diary for over sixty years, from 1 March 1921, the day he registered as a student at Natal University College (NUC) in Pietermaritzburg at the age of seventeen, until 1982, the year before his death at the age of seventy-nine. The diary extended to twenty three volumes, the entries being made at intervals varying from daily to twice weekly and, in later life, to weekly or longer.

Among the many threads running through the diary were details of his lifelong relationship with the South African author Alan Paton, whom he met during his first year as a student. I have extracted from the diary a record of their time together as students and as young schoolmasters and this has been published under the title *A Literary Friendship*. Also included in the book are extracts from hitherto unpublished letters and poems exchanged by the two in the period during which Paton's best-selling novels *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) were written.

Neville Nuttall was among the first – if not the very first – of Alan Paton's many friends to recognise that he was a person of prodigious talent. The first reference to Paton by name occurs in a diary entry dated Thursday 5 October 1922 after the two had

Neville Nuttall (left) and Alan Paton as young men



appeared in a play together, first on the Pietermaritzburg campus and then in Durban. My father notes:

Alan came down on Tuesday & I saw a good deal of him...he...came to dinner on Friday...Alan is distinctly entertaining & I am finding a good deal of pleasure in his company. This is due to more than his humour – though I can't exactly determine what...

It was Nuttall's and Paton's deepening literary interests that drew the two closer together as this entry later in October records:

I suppose I really must work this term – but I would much rather smoke & read Swinburne & write all sorts of stuff & some delightful letters & chat rot with Alan...I shall try a little French prose as an antidote.

In January 1923, my father recorded in his diary:

Yesterday I had a splendid letter from Alan Paton – almost brilliant – he has the true literary gift...

The relationship grew in my father's third year at NUC. His entry on Saturday 17 March 1923 reads:

On Thursday evening Alan and I had one of our 'rare Ben Jonson' stunts – Mermaid Tavern indeed! We spent two hours in the Creamery (Hotel in Longmarket Street in central Pietermaritzburg) comfortably ensconced, listening to exquisite music, smoking delicious cigarettes & talking poetry – a splendid time.

On 9 May 1923 he wrote:

Alan & I sat in the Creamery last night till 11.15 p.m. – sipped coffee – smoked & talked literature. He is remarkably original – I imagine he has a spark of genius... .

In an entry on Tuesday 12 June 1923 Nuttall reflected on those friends who influenced him most in those days. About Paton, he writes:

Alan brings chiefly an intellectual stimulus – chiefly? – no – I am not sure about that – he's not so exceptionally intellectual – aesthetic? – aye, but more than that. I wonder if it's not just a fine sense of understanding...

Then he notes briefly and succinctly on Saturday 21 July while on holiday at Umhlanga Rocks:

I had a delightful letter from Alan – he is a genius!

The two remained friends for life, encouraging each other, urging each other to write and publish, consulting each other at critical moments in their lives, exchanging letters and verse at varying intervals.

In addition to the diaries, I have a small box of Alan Paton's contributions to these exchanges, kept by my father and, subsequently, in our family. Two of the letters are

particularly relevant to the emergence of Paton as the author of an international bestseller and reflect the on-going stimulation and encouragement that each invested in the other.

The first of the two is written from Johannesburg on 17 January 1941. By this date, after having taught initially at Ixopo High School, Paton was well ensconced as principal of Diepkloof Reformatory, a post he had taken up in 1935 at the youthful age of 32. My father was Senior English and Latin master at Durban High School (DHS) at the time. He opens:

My dear Neville

I used to be a great letter writer. But I dare not promise you that it can happen again. I can only say that your last letter has made me write this one. I wonder often if I shall ever again be able to sit still & look out over the hills or in my study – as you do – and read poems or submit myself to the discipline of writing...

Later in the letter, he writes:

I sometimes wonder if this deep conviction that I could write a great story is not mere compensation for a much deeper conviction that I couldn't.

Two days later he continues the letter:

I am proud to think that you believe I am destined to Great Things. I am glad to say that I do nothing to hasten such a destiny. If it comes, it comes. But I do live, at times greatly, at times cheaply, with a zest that thank God does not seem to abate...

Later Paton lets his mind dwell on a deep nostalgia for all that is past,

...for the days when we were young together, which for all their crudities...were sweet beyond recapture. I long for them at times, as man longs for a perfect love that cannot be recalled, with an ache that can only be described as being at the 'heart of things.'

My father's passion for English literature never flagged and he often wrote poetry while castigating himself for not settling to a novel. One other passion sustained him and that was his love for trout fishing. Expeditions to trout streams in various parts of the Natal Midlands and the Drakensberg represented an escape from routine in the city and led, in turn, to a further outpouring of poetry and prose. In 1947, four years after he had been posted as headmaster to Newcastle High School in the Northern Districts of what was then Natal, far from the nearest trout stream, he published a slim volume entitled *Trout Streams of Natal: A Fisherman's Philosophy*. It was a gentle, nostalgic little book, punctuated with his poems.

While he had been writing it, a momentous process was underway in Alan Paton's career. In 1945, after ten years at Diepkloof Reformatory, he decided – as he put it in *Towards the Mountain*, the first volume of his autobiography – to 'qualify myself for the eminent national post of the Director of Prisons'. This entailed studying prisons in several countries of the world, including Britain, Sweden, the United States and Canada. He decided in addition to visit Norway 'not to see prisons, but to see the country where Knut Hamsun wrote *Growth of the Soil* and the many adventures of August.'

It was in the Norwegian city of Trondheim, after a visit to the cathedral, that Paton – intensely homesick – sat down in his hotel room and wrote the famous opening lines:

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.

As is well documented, he continued to write what was to be called *Cry, the Beloved Country* on his travels, visiting prisons during the day and writing feverishly at night, and he finished the novel in the United States. He returned to South Africa in March 1947, knowing that nine publishers out of the fifteen to whom six chapters had been sent had asked to see the rest of the book and having made the legendary Charles Scribner's Sons of New York his choice. The book was to be published in January 1948 and Paton described the wait as 'being akin to an agony'.

Meanwhile, my father's slim volume appeared and, having been told by his friend that he had begun a novel in Trondheim and completed it in San Francisco, Nuttall inscribed on the flyleaf of the copy he sent to Paton: 'Started in Newcastle and finished in Dundee, two towns in KwaZulu-Natal about twenty-five miles apart.'

On 14 December 1947 Paton wrote from Johannesburg the second of the two letters to which I referred earlier. He was warm and generous in his praise, describing the book as 'a natural, Nuttall in essence... I enjoyed every page... I could see you & hear you in every line & I think it is a lovely piece of work...'

He adds:

I think I told you that we hope to come back (to Natal) next year. Well, that hope is rekindled & the desire to achieve it strengthened by this most lovely book... the heart leaps up to hear again the names of the loveliest places on the earth. For we have been in exile. I have never regretted what I did, but it's time to bring it to an end.

Thus Alan Paton signalled his intention to leave Diepkloof, even though the reception to be given to his novel remained unknown at that stage. His involvement at the reformatory, he wrote:

...made possible another kind of creative activity, in which the creative imagination was employed as much as in writing. It developed gifts of its own, it taught me to know South Africa in the very place where South Africa was being made & it filled my memory with such a store of events, pictures, visions, that no novelist could ever have had a richer. The story I wrote could never have been written had I stayed amongst the streams and hills.

Paton concludes:

I hope I shall do with your approval what you always said I should do, write, write, write & do with words what I thought I ought to do with men.

On 15 February 1948 he sent my father one of the first six copies of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In a covering letter to a book that over the years was to sell not 'hundreds and thousands of copies' as Charles Scribner predicted but millions, Paton wrote:

I am not sending you any reviews... I want your review first.

Then he adds:

Yes, we are leaving for certain on June 30. Where can you find me a house*? I hope to come down & look for one in March, & to see you all too. A chapter is finished, thirteen years long; and a good one too. But the next one will be better.

* *Not near any town or city*

Reviews of the novel filtered through before Paton left Diepkloof and it became clear that the book was going to be a triumph. Some eight months after the Scribner edition, the London firm of Jonathan Cape published an edition that was to circulate in Europe and South Africa. By 1952 Cape had issued the twentieth impression, and translation into other languages followed. Film rights were sold in the first year and so were the rights to create a musical. Royalties began to flow in – as indeed they would for the rest of his life – and Paton settled to the life of fulltime writer.

His success was to sour his relationship with some of his friends from his university days and Paton must have wondered whether it would have the same effect on my father. It did not – and Paton acknowledged this in *Journey Continued*, the second volume of his autobiography. He wrote:

For at least two of my old friends, my shooting into the world sky was painful. They continued to be on speaking terms with me, but the warmth was gone... Some of my readers will remember the name of Neville Nuttall, with whom in my student days I entered the world of English literature. His admiration for *Cry, the Beloved Country* was unbounded. But more remarkable was his total lack of envy. After all, it was he who had been the student of English and French and Latin, whereas I had been the student of physics and mathematics. And still more remarkable, one of his dearest desires was to gain recognition as a writer... His generosity towards me and my writing continued until his death in 1983.

Thus a friendship founded on a love of literature became a lifelong relationship of mutual encouragement and support.

JOLYON NUTTALL

NOTE: Copies of *A Literary Friendship* can be ordered from the author at 22 Thistle Street, Newlands 7700, Cape Town, at R65,00 a copy including postage.