A performance of great power

Alan Paton remains a major South African writer and political figure, with Cry, the beloved country still the best-known literary work to come out of South Africa. In the past, his novels, short stories, aspects of his poetry and some of his prose writings have attracted critical attention, but little has been paid to his work for the theatre and none to the many addresses he gave, often to distinguished and influential audiences. His speeches, published for the first time in English in this book, are a most significant part of his work that has remained almost unknown until now. In this book we intend to remedy this gap by including and discussing some of Paton’s most powerful speeches related to socio-political and religious issues. The volume is designed to be accessible both to specialists and to the general informed reader. Hence it is not particularly technical in approach, and explains the background fully while reproducing significant primary texts for future researchers in history, linguistics, literature, politics, South African studies, theology and related fields.

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A PERFORMANCE OF GREAT POWER: A SELECTION OF ALAN PATON’S SPEECHES

María Martínez Lirola

David Levey
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5. “Two loves- The land and the word”. Pietermaritzburg, 19-04-1983. 17 pages. This address, late in his life, reflects Paton’s rounded perspective on his life as well as his gifts for oratory.

2.2.2 Cluster of religious speeches


2. “Alan Paton’s Sermon” – Bloor St United Church, Toronto, May 30, 1971. 7 pages. In this address Paton emphasises the practical nature of true Christian religion, in his view. He begins with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but also makes many trenchant comments about South African politics at the time.

3. “A Christian in South Africa”. A sermon preached at Great St. Mary’s, the University Church, Cambridge 27 April, 1975. 5 pages. Typical of Paton’s many meditations on the challenge and difficulty of truly living out Christianity in the South Africa of the 1970s.
4. “Help me where faith falls short”. Lecture I, Harvard University, November 1977. 12 pages. Paton in perhaps uncharacteristically humble vein; one of his numerous addresses to Ivy League universities. 220

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A PERFORMANCE OF GREAT POWER: A SELECTION OF ALAN PATON’S SPEECHES

Introduction

We publish this collection of a few of Alan Paton’s numerous addresses for a general readership in the strong belief that they should be better known, and because little work has been undertaken on them. It is our hope that this book will stimulate further research and interest in the work of a skilled orator and influential contributor, over four decades, to the social, political and literary milieu of South Africa. Referring to Paton’s verbal gifts, Alexander uses the phrase ‘a performance of great power’ (1994: 396) and quotes Anne Paton on ‘the almost mesmeric power he had as a speaker’, particularly when giving the Harvard lecture (1994: 377; f/n 47 [actually 46] (1994: 483).

His firm Christian faith had an effect not only on the language that he used in the speeches, but also on his philosophy and in his political career, as he points out in an article in Contact, later published in the book The long view (1958):

In my humble view, there is only one way in which a religious politician may approach the question of God’s will. He [sic] will do so humbly, not claiming to know what the will is, but will try to live his life in
obedience to the great and small commandments, notably those which command him to love God as his neighbour. That love will be manifested, not only in his acts, but in his spoken words, and all sorts of conditions of men and women will rejoice that he has power. He will pray like the saints, to be made the instrument of God’s love, not claim to be the instrument of His power. (Paton, 1958: 78)

To our way of thinking this excerpt constitutes the key to Alan Paton’s understanding of spoken language in the service of religious and political goals. Paton’s chief skill lay in the use of language, a language that is simple yet rich with vivid imagery, one that suggests a curious mixture of IsiZulu and English idiom. His language is prophetic (in the sense of truth-telling rather than foretelling) in nature, like the language of certain books of the Bible, especially his favourite passages, Isaiah, Chapters 11 and 46.

We have consulted various other publications by Paton where there might have been some overlaps with the speeches included in this volume, such as articles in Reality, Contact, Knocking on the door: Shorter writings (1975), and Save the beloved country (1987). There are indeed some parallels in and repetitions of themes, quotations, and the like, as there are between the addresses themselves, but in general Paton took a great deal of care over each address, tailoring it to its audience (Alexander 1994: 413).

We write against the background of the sense of provisionality, as regards the English language in South Africa but also applicable to its literature, discerned by Attwell (2014: 509). His remarks on three key features of Cry, the beloved country (1948) are applicable, except for the

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1 In his words, ‘writing in English by South Africans of all backgrounds is marked, not just by traces of transculturation across linguistic and racial divides, but also by a sense of provisionality, a sense in which historical forces constrain the continuities and undercut the assurances which might otherwise lead to the confident appropriation and/or transplantation of English’ (Attwell, 2014: 509).
last noun, to many of the speeches reproduced in this book: ‘its central focus on the race question, its appeal for national reconciliation across this central divide, [...] and not least, in its extraordinary lyricism, indeed sentimentality’ (Attwell, 2014: 516). We consider that Paton has occasional moments of mawkishness in this novel but rarely descends into sentimentality in his addresses, which are certainly at times lyrical but more often down to earth and hard-hitting as regards racial, political and economic conditions. He regards the hegemony of apartheid as temporary, to be combated by deeds as well as words, a provisional temporal state to be overcome by actions rooted in an awareness of a far greater eternity.

Attwell is typical of all other commentators on South African literature in that he disregards Paton’s speeches while praising ‘the record provided by Paton’s poetry, biographical writing, and memoirs as an important national legacy’ (Attwell, 2014: 517). Similarly, Cornwell, Klopper and MacKenzie (2010: 156-157) note Paton’s influence in these and other genres but make no mention of his prowess as an orator. While there is an enormous amount of ongoing research into the political speech as such (just one recent example is to be found in the work of Sim et al. (2013)), there is, oddly, little on this genre in South Africa and almost nothing on Paton’s work in this respect.

Recently Titlestad (2014: 52) has embarked on a series of studies of the pervasive apocalyptic trends in South African writing, and it should be noted that in his addresses Paton both acknowledges this mindset and counterpoises it by a hope, based in liberal thought, both of which he asserts are derived from Christian theology.