**Contributor: Tony Ullyatt**

**Entry: Van der Post, Laurens (Jan) (1906-1996)**

Laurens van der Post was born on 13 December 1906 in the village of Phillipolis in what was then the Orange River Colony. He was the thirteenth of the family’s fifteen children and the fifth son. His father, Christiaan, who came from Dutch stock, was a lawyer and politician who had fought against the British during the Second Anglo-Boer War. Van der Post’s mother, Lammie, was of German origin. Growing up the farm, van der Post came into contact with the black people and the wilderness, two major influences on his life and his writing.

Van der Post went to school in Grey College in Bloemfontein, where he was exposed to a line of political thinking embodying a racial philosophy entirely contrary to his own experiences of the indigenous peoples who were to play such a significant role in his adult life.

In 1925, he became a junior reporter for the *Natal Advertiser* newspaper in Durban. In 1926, with William Plomer and Roy Campbell, he founded *Voorslag*, a journal lasting only three volumes. It was forced to close through lack of support for its radical opinions and its promotion of a more integrated South Africa.

In 1926, van der Post and Plomer journeyed to Japan and back on board a Japanese freighter. The trip was to feature in the book, *Yet Being Someone Other* (1982). Ironically, van der Post was a Japanese prisoner-of-war in Java.

Soon after the 1926 Japanese trip, van der Post began travelling between Britain and South Africa, journeys precipitated by the political changes in South Africa as the country moved towards its nationalist apartheid policies. In England, he met his first wife, Marjorie Edith Wendt, in 1927, and married her on 8 March 1928. Their son, Jan, was born on 26 December 1928. A daughter, Lucia, was born in 1936.

Van der Post joined the British Army in 1939, and was posted, first to East Africa and, in 1942, to the then Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, because of his command of the Dutch language. In 1942, he was captured and sent to POW camps in Sukabumi and then Bandung. While interred, he did much to maintain the morale of the prisoners, although suffering severe beatings and the threat of execution by the Japanese. These experiences were the subject of his books, *A Bar of Shadow* (1954), *The Seed and the Sower* (1963), and *The Night of the New Moon* (1970), and were the basis for the film, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) starring David Bowie.

By 1947, van der Post had settled permanently in England, although he continued to visit South Africa, where he met his second wife, Ingaret Gifford, whom he married in 1949. He became advisor to Margaret Thatcher, counsel to Prince Charles, and Prince William’s godfather. He died on 16 December 1996, three days after his 90th birthday. His ashes are embedded in a wall of the Laurens van der Post Memorial Garden in Phillipolis.

Van der Post published some thirty books, including novels, non-fiction, travelogues, autobiography, biography, and memoirs, their subjects embodying his life as a traveller, journalist, prisoner-of-war, explorer, and conservationist. Perhaps the most famous of these are *Venture into the Interior* (1951) and *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958). He also made several television series for the BBC between 1951 and 1979, most notably *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1953).

J.D.F. Jones’s biography, *Storyteller: The Many Lives of Laurens van der Post* (2001), brought into question the reliability of van der Post’s own accounts of his life. Jones’s controversial book evoked considerable criticism from writers such as Christopher Hope and Christopher Booker, amongst others.

**References and further reading**

Carpenter, F.I. (1969) *Laurens van der Post*, New York: Twayne.

Jones, J.D.F. (2001) *Teller of Many Tales: The Lives of Laurens van der Post*, New York: Carroll & Graf.

**List of selected works**

*In a Province* (1934)

*Venture to the Interior* (1952)

*The Face Beside the Fire* (1953)

*A Bar of Shadow* (1954)

*The Dark Eye of Africa* (1955)

*Flamingo Feather* (1955)

*The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958)

*The Heart of the Hunter* (1961)

*The Seed and the Sower* (1963)

*Jung and the Story of Our Time* (1975)