**Contributor: Hermann Wittenberg**

**Entry: Paton, Alan (Stewart) (1903–1988)**

Alan Paton, born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1903, is one of South Africa’s most widely read writers. His famous novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), has sold millions of copies world-wide, and remains a classic account of the racial injustice in South Africa and the need for reconciliation between black and white. It has been widely translated, with multiple adaptations for the stage and screen. Following the international success of his novel, Paton used his public reputation to make his mark in liberal politics, opposing the apartheid policies of the Nationalist government. He died in 1988, after a long career as writer and campaigner for freedom and social justice.

Alan Paton was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1903, in the then British colony of Natal. After his schooling at Pietermaritzburg College he attended Natal University College, a precursor to the present University of KwaZulu-Natal. Paton graduated with a B.Sc degree in Mathematics and Physics and subsequently became a school teacher in Ixopo. In 1935, Paton was appointed principal of the Diepkloof reformatory near Johannesburg. Under Paton’s progressive and energetic leadership, the institution, formerly run as a prison for African juvenile offenders, became transformed into a place of learning. Paton’s experiences at Diepkloof exposed him to the deleterious social consequences of South Africa’s racial policies and shaped his increasingly critical political stance.

In 1946, on an extended study tour of European and American prisons, Paton wrote the novel that would bring him world-wide fame. The enduring success of *Cry, the Beloved Country* also secured him financial independence, and Paton resigned from Diepkloof in 1948, the same year that brought to power the National Party. In the years that followed, Paton became increasingly involved in opposing the Nationalist’s apartheid policies, culminating in his election as chair of the non-racial Liberal Party in 1956. Paton led the Liberal Party for more than a decade, until its forced disbandment, enduring continual security police harassment. His liberal political outlook and critique of racial segregation however continued to be articulated through his speeches and writing.

*Cry, the Beloved Country* is the story of the Kumalo and Jarvis families whose fates become irrevocably intertwined through the violent deaths of their respective sons. The novel dissects the social causes and consequences of racial division and injustice, but ends with the possibility of reconciliation and forgiveness. The book’s unaffected modern prose and its poignant moral message of human hope and spiritual renewal resonated with a post-war generation weary of conflict and violence, but it has continued to appeal to successive generations of readers. *Lost in the Stars* (1949), a musical version, set to a score by the German modernist composer Kurt Weill, had a highly successful run on Broadway, and two big-budget film adaptations have appeared (Korda 1951; Roodt 1995). Remarkably, more than fifty years after publication, *Cry, the Beloved Country* briefly became the best-selling novel in the world, following its adoption as Oprah Winfrey’s inaugural book club choice.

Alan Paton also wrote the novel *Too late the Phalarope* (1953); biographies on Jan Hofmeyr and Geoffrey Clayton; *Tales from a Troubled Land* (1961), a volume of short stories; as well as plays and poetry. Before his death in 1988 at the age of 85, he also had completed two volumes of his autobiography, *Towards the Mountain* (1980) and *Journey Continued* (1988). A travel narrative, *Lost City of the Kalahari* (2005), was published posthumously.

Paton received numerous international awards, including honorary degrees from Yale and Harvard universities, and South Africa’s premier literary prize is named in his honour.

**References and further readings**

Alexander, Peter. (1994) *Alan Paton: A Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bloom, Harold (ed.) (2004) *Alan Paton’s ‘Cry the Beloved Country’*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House.

**List of works**

*Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948)

*Too late the Phalarope* (1953)

*Tales from a Troubled Land* (1961)

*Towards the Mountain* (1980)

*Journey Continued* (1988)

*Lost City of the Kalahari* (2005)