

“Nkosi Sikekel’ I Afrika”

## EVERY SOUL HAS ITS SOUTH AFRICA

By Robert A. Rees

“Every soul has its South.  
Especially a Mormon’s.”  
—Karl Keller

LAST YEAR I TOOK MY YOUNGEST SON, MADDOX, TO SEE Richard Attenborough’s film *Cry Freedom*. I was interested in the film because I had been working with a group of South African students at UCLA to organize a concert in honor of Bishop Desmond Tutu in order to raise funds for South African school children.

*Cry Freedom* is about two men: Steve Biko, the black African Nationalist who was brutally murdered by the South African police for his fight against apartheid, and Donald Woods, the white newspaper editor who championed Biko’s cause before his death and published a biography of him after escaping from South Africa himself.

Some reviewers criticized the film because of this dual focus, feeling that the second half, which deals with Woods’s escape, is anticlimactic and weakens the effect of the first half, which ends with Biko’s death. But every story about South Africa must be as much about whites as blacks, for both are linked inexorably and tragically by the white man’s failed humanity in that heart-torn country.

Attenborough made *Cry Freedom* as a work of the imagination based on history. In an interview in the *New York Times* he said he made the film as “propaganda”: “My objective was straightforward—to insure that having seen the movie, nobody will be able to remain indifferent to the situation in South Africa, and to encourage them to stand up and say, ‘This is intolerable!’” (1 November 1987, p. 33).

AS I viewed *Cry Freedom*, I thought about my own life. I grew up in a racist home, a racist community, and a racist

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church. My parents, our friends and neighbors, and the members of the branches and wards in which we lived, for the most part considered blacks as cursed and inferior. We learned little ditties like, “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo, / Catch a nigger by the toe, / If he hollers, make him pay / Fifty dollars every day,” and “Two on one is nigger fun,” without ever stopping to consider the terrible injustices they contained. My parents spoke of blacks as “niggers,” “coons,” and “sambos.” Blacks were considered lazy, shiftless, and intellectually and morally inferior. I witnessed discrimination (and was guilty of it myself) without awareness of its moral implications. At church I was taught that blacks were cursed and would never hold the priesthood because they sat on the fence in the pre-existence. All of this was part of my cultural inheritance.

I don’t remember when I first began to shed these beliefs and feelings, but at some point I arrived at the conviction that the kind of discrimination I witnessed, and at times was party to, was not consistent with the teachings of Christ or with my own inner sense of what was right. This change was affected by our moving, when I was fifteen, from a small town in Arizona in which there were no blacks to Long Beach, California, which had a large black population. At least half of my high school was black and ninety percent of my paper route was. For the first time I began to see blacks as real people and to see something of their humiliation and pain. But it still made me angry to see a black man with a white woman (that one took a lot of years to let go). I had been taught that such pairings were a violation of an ordained order.

When I went to BYU in 1953 I still held many racist views. Many of these were reinforced in that environment. There was not a single black on campus. But it was at BYU, in Bruce Clark’s Modern English Novel Class, that I first became emotionally involved in South Africa through Alan Paton’s poignant and moving novel, *Cry The Beloved Country*, the sadness and loneliness of which still resonate for me some thirty years later.

On my mission we were forbidden to proselytize “negroes,” although I found from the few I accidentally stumbled onto that there was a deep spiritual power in the black experience that was perplexing. Later I experienced this power in all its joyful

and *felt* exuberance when I visited black churches.

The Army provided a new kind of experience for me when it took me to the deep South. I flew to Orlando, Florida, with a former missionary companion and a new-found black friend from Haiti—all on our way to military police training at Ft. Gordon, Georgia. When we got off the plane in Orlando and boarded a bus for Augusta, the driver said to my black friend, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to move to the back of the bus." Thinking the driver felt it was just too crowded, I moved over and said, "That's okay, there's plenty of room here." The driver patiently said again, "You'll have to move to the back of the bus." Still not understanding, I looked to the back to see why the driver was so fixated on it, and it was then that I saw the color line. That was a shocking experience for me, as it was to see overt racism in the red-necked soldiers I was in training with, or to see blatant examples of racism in the communities I passed through. I will never forget driving through the Georgia countryside and seeing a sign at the entrance to a small town that read, "Black Man, don't let the sun set on your head in this town."

I suppose the scales of racial prejudice finally fell from my eyes during the Civil Rights movement when I was in graduate school. When I read in the newspaper of lynchings and saw blacks beaten on television, when I saw an increasing number of whites becoming involved in the struggle for black equality, I realized that this was a problem that concerned me. In literature courses I learned what it meant to be black and American as I read Langston Hughes's poetry, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and James Baldwin's *Notes of A Native Son*. It was also about this time that I read Karl Keller's 1966 *Dialogue* article, "Every Soul Has Its South," and realized that my soul indeed had its South.

Like many Mormons of my generation, I continued to be disturbed by the Church's practice of denying priesthood ordination to blacks. At the same time, because I had a firm conviction of the Church's divine mission, I continued to try and find ways to explain our "Negro doctrine," but found myself increasingly uneasy with the rationalizations I and others used. The more I read, the less sense it made, and yet I continued to try and harmonize it with my testimony of the gospel and my devotion to the Church.

As editor of *Dialogue* (1970 to 1976), I felt it my responsibility to foster and publish as responsible a dialogue as possible on this subject. I was intrigued by all of the new research and thinking that Mormons were doing, but it wasn't until Lester Bush sent me his manuscript, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview" (*Dialogue*, 7:1, 1973), that I was finally able to make sense out of something that didn't make sense before. In the interest of balanced dialogue, I asked Gordon Thomasson, Eugene England, and Hugh Nibley to write responses to Bush. All of them had important and interesting things to say.

After Lester's article, I found it harder and harder to reconcile the Church's practice with my own sense of what was right. And yet I continued to be active and supportive of the Church.

After all, I have been blessed with a witness of its truth, and I felt both a joy and a responsibility in that witness.

It is hard to describe how I felt on the morning of 8 June 1978 when our good friend David Egli called from Salt Lake to say that President Kimball had just announced that the priesthood was to be given to all worthy males regardless of race. At first, I couldn't believe it. I had been told by some Church leaders not to expect this change in my lifetime; while I had prayed for this to happen, I scarcely dared hope that it really would. Certainly, I was not prepared for it to happen so soon. But there it was! I immediately began calling friends all over the country and delighted in being the first to tell them the good news. We rejoiced together in this miracle. And when the day was over and the reality of the news had really sunk in, I knelt and expressed my gratitude to the Lord for so great a blessing.

And what a blessing it has been for the Church. Who would question the positive effect of this change, not only on our ability to teach the gospel to others, but on the quality of life in the Church through the gifts with which our black brothers and sisters have enriched us. How grateful any parent in Zion must feel not to have his children have this particular cross to bear.

The extent to which we have accommodated to this change (and perhaps an indication that we were ready for it long before it came) was illustrated to me recently in our priesthood meeting. Shortly after participating in the ordination of a black convert to the priesthood, I asked, "What have we witnessed here today that we wouldn't have witnessed ten years ago?" There was a puzzled look on most faces, and several guesses before someone finally said, "Ordained a black to the priesthood."

**I**N working on the Bishop Tutu concert I have become good friends with a South African student at UCLA, Charmaine Modjadji. Charmaine, like many of her countrymen, is in exile. While in South Africa she was arrested by the police and put in jail. Many of her closest friends are either in prison, in exile, or dead. Her younger brother was killed by the police when he was still in high school. She carries the scars and burdens of apartheid, and yet her spirit is as filled with love as almost anyone I know. Quietly, she is working for change in her native land even though she must do so from a great distance.

South Africa may seem a long way from the heartland of America, from the mountains of Zion, but when a gang of white youths brutalizes blacks in New York, causing one of them to be killed, when discrimination is on the rise and its manifestations increasingly subtle, when suicide among young blacks far exceeds that of whites, and when, until recently, a white supremacist radio talk show, "The Aryan Nations Hour," flooded the Salt Lake Valley with its hateful racism, we need to understand that what is happening in the townships, the shanty towns, and the cities of Paton's "Beloved Country" is happening to some degree all around us.

And even if it weren't, what is happening in South Africa should be sufficient to awaken our Christian consciences, to

call us to moral involvement. We cannot be free from the blood and sins of our generation simply by not sinning or not committing violence. This refining process demands also our involvement, our commitment. As Karl Keller said in his essay, "Involvement is after all the *only* dialogue a man has with God, action the only angel, risk the only kingdom." The terror and tyranny experienced by our black brothers and sisters in South Africa begs for our moral courage to manifest itself in some way on their behalf. At the very least, it asks of us not to be indifferent.

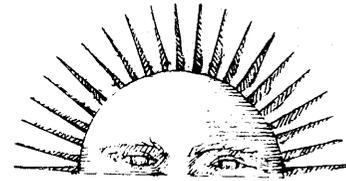
When I learned last April that Paton had died, I decided to reread *Cry The Beloved County*, the opening lines of which I had remembered for over thirty years: "There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it." What I had forgotten, however, is how Christian a novel it is, how it calls for a Christian response to what has been happening in South Africa for more than two centuries. Two brief examples illustrate this point, both words spoken to the novel's central character, the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, who has come to Johannesburg to find his lost son. Kumalo is taken into the home of Mrs. Lithebe, one of the sisters of the church, who later also takes in his sister and nephew. In response to this kindness, Kumalo says, "Mother, I am grateful. Indeed, you are a mother to me." To which Mrs. Lithebe replies, "Why else do we live?" Kumalo is assisted in his search for his son by some fellow Anglican priests. When Kumalo thanks one of them, Father Vincent, for his help, Father Vincent replies, "We do what is in us and why it is in us, that is also a secret. It is Christ in us, crying that men may be succored and forgiven, even when he himself is forsaken."

Paton's novel is a powerful story of the redemptive power of love—God's and man's—to transform individual lives, if not the world. As another priest, Misiumangu, says, "There is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love. Because when a man loves, he seeks no power, and therefore he has power." Someone has observed that South Africa is the only Western nation to have escaped the Enlightenment. That's a profound insight, and it may explain why conditions are still so terrible there. Perhaps it was the recognition of such a condition in his country that caused Paton to write more than forty years ago, "Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end." Nor are they yet.

As we left the theater after seeing *Cry Freedom*, Maddox and I walked together a while in silence and then he said, "I hate to admit it, Dad, but it took that film to make me really understand what is going on in South Africa." I felt somewhat the same way. I also felt connected in my soul to that beautiful yet tormented country and to its people, both to the majority of whites who must somehow live with a lie in their hearts and especially to the blacks who continue to suffer injustices, inequities, and indignities. When in the film all those gathered at Biko's funeral begin singing the black nationalist anthem,

"Nkosi Sikekel' I Afrika" ("God Bless Africa"), I thought that the only way God can really bless Africa is through those of us who care about the suffering there.

When Karl Keller wrote that every soul, especially a Mormon's, has its South, I assume he was suggesting that the light of the restored gospel should make us more responsive than others to the inhumanity in the world, more intolerant of injustice, more sympathetic to human suffering, more involved in the struggle for human freedom. If he was right, then it is also true that every soul, especially a Mormon's, should have its South Africa. Time will tell. ☞



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