

Kevin Shillington, *Patrick van Rensburg: Rebel, Visionary and Radical Educationist. A Biography*

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Whatever you thought you knew about Patrick van Rensburg will be a small fraction of the life so thoroughly documented here. Biographer Kevin Shillington, familiar to these parts as an Education and History lecturer at the University of Botswana in the 1980s, publisher of key works on the nineteenth century Batlhaping, and author among others of the long-selling *History of Africa* (Macmillan, Red Globe, now in its 4th edition) brings his research skills and knowledge of the region to deliver a first-class rendition of one of Botswana's signal figures in the late colonial and early postcolonial period. Shillington's account is based on extensive familiarity with persons who knew or worked with Van Rensburg, his autobiographical and other writings, and a firm grounding in the major events unfolding in Southern Africa when Patrick made his mark. The publication is sponsored by The Foundation for Education with Production (FEP), among Van Rensburg's many progeny.

The account begins with Van Rensburg's early, formative years as an illegitimate son born Patrick Lagesse in 1931 in English-speaking Natal with an absentee mother and inscrutable paternity, raised by his maternal grandmother with Mauritian relatives, shouldered by 'uncle Pat' Maxwell, studying French at school, and awakening as a teen to his Afrikaner name, learning Afrikaans and living all the while in a white world shorn of any social interaction with Indians or black Africans of South Africa. Shy, bookish, attuned to the national newspapers, athletic (rugby and cricket), and good looking, the clean-shaven and bespectacled Van Rensburg rose through exams as he discovered his partying side, transitioned to sexual manhood (remaining unattached), and entered apartheid's officialdom, becoming a young vice-consul in the foreign service, posted in 1956 to the Belgian Congo (later independent Zaire) on the strength of his French.

In short order, his time in Leopoldville (later Kinshasa) reinforced what Van Rensburg's memoir claims were misgivings about apartheid and 'black political stirrings' that had been brewing in him all along. Within a year he resigned, returned to South Africa, joined the Liberal Party, savoured Sophiatown, milled with African National Congress (ANC) figures and Treason Trialists, ginned pro 'non-racialism' articles in the *Rand Daily Mail* newspaper, and seeded his contempt for 'comfortable, middle-class Anglophones'. In 1959 he sojourned for nine months in England, where he directed a boycott of South African agricultural produce and beat the anti-apartheid drum in the Netherlands. Afoul of the security branch, his return to South Africa via Paris, Tunis, Accra and Leopoldville was a 3-day stopover after his passport was seized and he was driven overnight to Swaziland, where in March 1960 Van Rensburg began his long life in exile.

Until May 1962, when he arrived in Serowe at age 30, Van Rensburg had lived in London where he met his future wife Elizabeth (Liz) Griffin, established his exile *bona fides* by publishing *Guilty Land* an autobiographical critique of apartheid, obtained a British passport, and decided on setting up a school in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (colonial Botswana). From this point, many readers who know Van Rensburg as the founder of Swaneng Hill school, which he and Liz modelled in part from Clutton-Brock's Cold Comfort farm spin-off at Radisele, may revisit the emergence of his self-help project as a familiar story. But Van Rensburg's busy life in Bechuanaland and his full transition to socialism was only getting started. In truth Swaneng Hill was a partly successful experiment that drove him to launch other Serowe projects, among them five brigades and several cooperative societies inspired in part from his reading of Karl Marx, Mao Tse Tung, and Fidel Castro. A loving spouse and father, yet Van Rensburg's heart was in propelling himself and his educational ideas as an agent against 'elitism' and 'capitalist' dominated notions of development. He lived on the physical and mental edge as an ascetic workaholic often away to attend international conferences and milk financial support and short-term volunteers, and at home generating

after-hours think pieces published on rural development. He gained international recognition. Van Rensburg was among the first to receive the Right Livelihood Award, the ‘Alternative Nobel’ (for ‘offering practical and exemplary answers...to urgent challenges’. *Climate-change activist Greta Thunberg is among the award’s recent recipients*).

At his new home (he became a citizen of Botswana in 1973), Van Rensburg’s ideas encountered mild support at best. Though he elevated minions of youth and adults academically and as community go-getters, introduced Development Studies into the national secondary curriculum, and engaged many at the community level, Van Rensburg made no meaningful inroads into the bureaucracy’s development thinking. He gained government funding for his schools and brigades, but they lost their distinctiveness and ending up part of the established, academic approach to learning in schools sponsored by the government. He had sympathisers in cabinet minister Dr Gaositwe Chiepe and Vice President and later President Dr Quett Masire, two proud alumnae of Tiger Kloof, where the educational approach anticipated Swaneng Hill’s, but an embittered Van Rensburg judged the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) as a pro-capitalist movement bound to create another privileged elite class he so despised. He was allured to Dr Kenneth Koma’s opposition Botswana National Front (BNF) class-based thinking about the world, awaited their political triumph over the BDP, and became downhearted when internal quarrels collapsed their chances.

Ever shifting his approach but remaining rigid in his convictions, Van Rensburg turned to journalism (having established permanently the *Mmegi* newspaper in 1984), pursued projects in Zimbabwe and emerging democratic South Africa, and continued to experience disappointment without abandoning his quest to plant a flag for Education with Development in the region. Yet, Van Rensburg was a visionary whose thinking remains timely as he indicated in his 1981 Right Livelihood Award acceptance speech:

[development must] make people creative, not simply work seekers within the enclave economies, enable them to develop with their own skills and energies the agricultural resources of the country, take part in small-scale industrial development, use alternative technology, [and] develop systems and models of development...on their own, in a self-reliant way.

In part a heroic figure with an exemplary mind and practitioner, Van Rensburg regretted having failed to sway the country to his side. He admitted he was no politician. But in choosing to work in Botswana, which apart from Zambia, was the region’s only democracy, and having adhered to development models originating in the authoritarian regimes of China and Cuba, Van Rensburg looked askance at the drawn-out, sometimes flawed manner in which his adopted government pursued a similar goal while following another path, i.e., one that provided clinics, water, veterinary, power, roads, schools, pensions, and other national, standardised services to rural Botswana.

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