

***PATRICK VAN RENSBURG: REBEL, VISIONARY AND RADICAL EDUCATIONIST:***

**BY KEVIN SHILLINGTON**

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Tiro Sebina

University of Botswana, Department of English

[sebinat@ub.ac.bw](mailto:sebinat@ub.ac.bw)

This biography chronicles the life Patrick van Rensburg (1931-2017). Kevin Shillington, the biographer, marshals clear prose and expert knowledge of African history to render a comprehensive and credible account of the driven life of an educationist who was always bursting with creative energy and always conceiving a hubbub of plans and schemes for a favourable future. The biography depicts Patrick van Rensburg as a livewire keen on devising applicable remedies to seemingly intractable problems. Shillington scrupulously assembles the details of Patrick van Rensburg's life and skilfully narrates his endeavours for the sake of historical record.

The biographer commendably locates Patrick van Rensburg's life and work in a wider geo-political context of the period immediately following the independence of many African countries. The restless energy, dynamism, and optimism that Patrick van Rensburg incarnated typifies the positive hope for a better future for all that prevailed in the newly independent nation-states of Africa. Patrick van Rensburg, it must be decisively registered, was one of the long-distance crusaders who carried the flame of self-determination, self-reliance, all-inclusive development, and equal opportunity. The biography portrays Patrick van Rensburg as a person of remarkable zest devoted to finding solutions to pertinent challenges of the developing world.

Convinced that there was an egalitarian solution to Africa's developmental problems, Patrick van Rensburg made it his life-mission to conceptualise and enact a vision of a non-elitist approach to education that combined academic knowledge with practical and technical skills. By dint of dogged inventiveness, dedicated application, and practical experimentation, he designed an educational model whose graduates would be sufficiently informed and technically proficient to play a meaningful role in directing their country towards fair and equitable development and distribution of resources. The educational prototype that he devised is predicated on the principles of self-help, voluntarism, teamwork, and community orientation. These exertions earned him accolades as an alternative educationist who championed an innovative, civic-minded approach to education that blends academic learning with vocational training.

The biography presents Patrick van Rensburg's life journey in a chronological sequence. It begins with the hazy and inauspicious circumstances of his birth and then follows his formative years, his schooling as well as his growing awareness of the world around him.

It then provides the specifics of his early career in public service as a clerical officer and later as a diplomat. Repulsed by South Africa's racist policies, he resigns from a diplomatic posting and participates in anti-apartheid boycott campaigns. He goes into exile and while in London writes his first book titled *Guilty Land*. After much reflection and consultation with associates, Patrick van Rensburg decides to return to Africa and settle in Serowe, a large village in Botswana that became the locale of his experiments and innovations.

With no prior experience or formal training in education, Patrick van Rensburg set up Swaneng Hill School. The school began operating in 1963 with a target intake of 28 students. The school buildings were constructed by volunteer students and members of the community. The students were assisted by more volunteers from the South African Work Camps Association. The volunteers cleared the site, levelled the ground, and built classrooms and staff accommodation. Patrick van Rensburg zealously threw himself into physical labour. He was actively involved in every aspect of the projects together with his spouse, Elizabeth, or 'Liz', who was adept at coordinating logistics thanks to her previous experience in voluntary workcamps. Patrick and Liz spent evenings writing letters requesting funding for the school project.

The first cohort, admitted on a first-come first-serve basis, included South African students and a couple of unmarried mothers. The school's unorthodox orientation was established from the outset. For instance, at the morning outdoor assembly students observed two-minute silent self-reflection instead of hymns and prayers. Students were urged to elect their own leadership and they were accorded representation in the school governing council. The school initially offered subjects such as English Language and Literature, Setswana, History, Geography, Mathematics, and Science.

The students eagerly accepted the ethos of volunteerism. The principles of voluntary, cooperative labour and democratic consultation became the foundation of the Swaneng way of thinking. Staff, students, and members of the community volunteered to work on Saturdays constructing the school's sports field. The spirit of volunteerism and the cooperative ethos found fertile ground as they built more classrooms, additional accommodation for teachers, a common-room block, a library, laboratory, and offices. Students and staff established a rota for cleaning the school surroundings and for cooking their own meals.

The school received support from the community. Patrick van Rensburg's network of friends from the South African Liberal Party visited the school to provide further assistance. Left-leaning volunteer teachers from Europe, America and South Africa were magnetized to the school by the self-help component. Volunteer teachers relieved Patrick from some of his teaching duties so that he could devote more time to canvassing for funding and managerial responsibilities. Charitable entities and funding agencies responded favourably. The school secured funding from organisations such as British Humanist Association, International Voluntary Service (IVS), Rowntree Trust, 'War on Want', Oxfam, Norwegian Aid Agency (NORAD) and later the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (DHF).

Van Rensburg initiated a consumer's cooperative in response to community grievances regarding the price of food and essentials at local trading stores. Powerful business interests in the villages made futile attempts to lobby against the formation of the consumer cooperative. The Serowe Cooperative Society was registered in 1964 and a cooperative store built by student work campers and members of the cooperative was officially opened in the same year. In addition to the consumer cooperative, van Rensburg instituted a secondary-level night school at which volunteer teachers from Swaneng Hill School taught.

In 1965, van Rensburg started the brigades. While teaching a Development Studies course, Patrick was experimenting with the feasibility of expanding and diversifying his projects. His ideas were receiving international recognition and earning him acclaim in progressive education circles. He proposed an educational scheme which promoted a fusion of simplified academic education and training in specific technical skills. Students were encouraged to use their technical training to undertake productive work that generated income. Van Rensburg proposed a Builder's Brigade. The Builder's Brigade trainees, an initial intake of 30 youthful males, built their own training centre. The practical projects that the trainees worked on contributed to the cost of their training. Trainees also received lessons in basic English, Mathematics, Science and Development Studies. The local community got involved in the brigade project through the formation of Serowe Youth Development Association. (SYDA)

The biography singles out Robert Oakeshott, a British journalist and economic planner, as one person who contributed a great deal in the improvement of the Development Studies course. Together with van Rensburg, they formulated a Swaneng Development Plan based on the most pressing community needs in Serowe. A Farmer's Brigade was established with financial assistance from Danish International Development Agency. Through the assistance of yet another volunteer teacher called Aaron Kibel, a trained toolmaker and computer engineer, a Mechanical Engineering Brigade was set up. Later, a Textile Workshop, a Thatcher's Brigade, a Tanner's Brigade, a Printer's Brigade, an Electrician's Brigade, and a Weaver's Brigade were set up. The brigades were hubs of expertise in the village as well as focal points of community development. One of the major projects that Patrick van Rensburg initiated and successfully executed is the establishment of the Tshwaragano Hotel. He was also tasked by the Government of Botswana to help construct and establish secondary schools, which are now under government control, such as Shashe River School in Tonota and Madiba Secondary School in Mahalapye.

In the 1980s, Van Rensburg travelled a great deal attending international and regional conferences and seminars at which he disseminated his vision of education with production. He wrote extensively elaborating and articulating his vision. He also established a journal called *Education with Production* under the auspices of his Foundation for Education with Production (FEP). He lobbied education authorities in Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia to consider incorporating aspects of education with production into their respective national curriculum. To a limited extent, Botswana education authorities incorporated some aspects of education with production into the vocational training curriculum.

One of his big disappointments was the indifference of the post-apartheid South African government to education with production despite his efforts to initiate some projects in the country of his birth. The Botswana opposition parties on the main pledge to implement education with production when they clinch the mandate to govern the country.

In 1984, van Rensburg launched a national newspaper called *Mmegi wa Dikgang*.

This biography of Patrick van Rensburg is a riveting account of the life of a singularly zealous personality who contributed significantly to the building of modern Botswana. Readers interested in educational issues pertaining to developing countries, in political economy of Botswana and in the general history of the country as well as in the pedagogical challenges of Southern Africa will surely benefit from it.