

In search of Neil Aggett

Beverley Naidoo

Beverley Naidoo was born in Johannesburg. Detained under the '90 days' law in 1964, she was later exiled in England. Her award-winning Journey to Jo'burg was banned in South Africa until 1991. She won the Carnegie Medal with The Other Side of Truth. She holds a PhD for educational research into challenging racism through literature. Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett (Merlin Press) is her first biography. It is reviewed on page 95.

Bertrand Russell slated the British government for supporting apartheid in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in September 1963.

Sir, – A nightmare of terror is underway in South Africa. People are imprisoned and subjected to solitary confinement for unlimited periods ... The British Government has sold arms to the Government of South Africa, supported it in the United Nations and allowed its secret police to abduct people from British-administered territories. They are party to the tyranny in South Africa, and stand condemned before world opinion.

Russell wrote shortly before the trial of Nelson Mandela and his African National Congress colleagues. Each faced a likely death sentence as a 'terrorist'. Russell rightly pointed to the terror and tyranny of the regime.

At the same time, Kenya was on the verge of independence. Aubrey Aggett, a settler farmer who had helped track and lock up Mau Mau suspects in the 1950s, decided it was time to move his family to South Africa. Prime Minister Verwoerd's government welcomed white families escaping black rule.

His youngest child Neil, ten, wept as the boat sailed away from Mombasa to South Africa. He had been born in 1953, at the height of the Emergency, in a cottage hospital guarded by soldiers from the King's African Rifles. Despite the climate of fear, Neil had loved the farm beneath Mount Kenya.

His mother Joy was my older cousin and, as a child growing up in Johannesburg, I had been aware of the Aggetts as family 'up north' who were 'sticking it out' under the

threat of attacks from Mau Mau fighters, hiding in the forests on the mountain. As a white child, I hadn't the slightest idea about colonialism, loss of land and the concept of resistance. I suspect neither did Neil.

However, by the time the Aggetts arrived in South Africa, early in 1964, my blinkers had been removed. That July, following the life sentences handed down to the ANC leaders, I was amongst a swathe of activists arrested and detained in solitary confinement under the '90 days' law. Fortunate to be released after eight weeks, I set off for England and exile when others began their prison sentences.

I thought very little about the Aggetts but, on 5 February 1982, I heard the news that a 28-year-old man, Neil Aggett, had been found hanging in his cell in John Vorster Square, the Johannesburg Police Headquarters. It was a shock. No one from home had even mentioned that he had been arrested.

Years later I began to trace the transformation of this young cousin, a colonial child born to be a *bwana kidogo* – a little boss.

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Neil went to Kingswood, a premier Methodist college modelled on the English public school in the eastern Cape. Later, at University of Cape Town's Medical School, he was outwardly still a conventional high-achieving, sports-loving white middle-class student. But his journal reveals an avid philosophical reader, deeply concerned with ethics, who was growing in political awareness. A huge row ensued with his father, ostensibly about the length of his hair and beard. But the rift was more deeply located. No doubt Kenya came into it and, more immediately, apartheid. From now on, he would only visit his mother occasionally, when his father was out. A bursary ensured financial independence. Before his fourth year, Neil had moved into a small community in the mountains above the Constantia vineyards, with no electricity or hot water. His partner Elizabeth Floyd, also a medical student and activist, joined him there.

In 1975, Neil travelled to Europe – London, Germany, Paris. Staying in attics with broken windows, open to the bitter cold, his visit was quite different from the usual white South African 'European tour'. In a letter to his mother describing his visit, he also tried to explain his feelings about the 'rift between us'. But on his return, he expressed to Liz his disappointment in Europe. However much he had learned from European writers, it seems he had realised he was African.

The events of June 1976 in Soweto – police shooting hundreds of young

black students – seem to have been a turning point. As a white male in his final year of medicine, conscription was now imminent. How could he join the army of a state that killed children?

Neil's first internship at Umtata (Mthatha) General Hospital in the Transkei, living and working with black doctors, was his first real African experience. He was open, engaging with both Black Consciousness and ANC ideas. On the eve of the Soweto uprising's first anniversary he wrote to his mother:

'I am always grateful for the love and care you gave me as a child, but at some point I had to evaluate the world from an independent perspective and make my own decisions. I am sorry for all the hurt I have caused you, but I am sure you realize that I am not standing against you or the family in particular, but against the whole social order.'

Having realised that apartheid was the disease, Neil committed himself to its eradication.

For his second internship, Neil went to Tembisa Hospital, near Johannesburg. By chance he met Gavin Andersson, an older brother of a friend from university. Gavin was a union activist who, with his comrade Siphso Kubeka, had been 'banned' for five years. The pair had already undergone much cross-cultural learning and, despite their banning orders, continued to meet and work secretly. Gavin warmed to Neil's idealism but warned him about openly displaying his political sympathies. Siphso was impressed that Neil was 'strikingly humble'. A deep bond grew between the three young men.

After this internship, Neil rented a simple cottage in a poor white working-class area of Johannesburg. He began working in Casualty at Soweto's Baragwanath Hospital, known as 'Bara'. He and Liz also volunteered at the offices of the Industrial Aid Society (IAS), where they offered medical advice on workers' injuries and compensation.

Many of their friends lived at Crown Mines where they had created a commune of largely white intellectuals. Gavin set up a vegetable growing co-op, with Neil becoming one of its most passionate members. Where better to reflect on Gramsci and Marx than when you are tilling the earth? Their motto became 'When in doubt, dig!'

Neil's goal was to work in the unions but his association with banned comrades made the union leadership wary. Union activists were divided over the question of political alliance to the underground liberation movement and engagement in wider community struggles. Those promoting political engagement were labelled 'populists' and accused of

endangering the key task of building strong democratic worker organisation. Those arguing for focus on the latter were labelled ‘workerists’. This fierce conflict of perspectives was little known outside South Africa where the struggle was presented as a unified ANC-led popular struggle for liberation. (Indeed, it provides historical context for the 2012 massacre of workers at Marikana by the ANC’s militarised police force.)

Neil realised his dream of working for a union in 1979. Veteran ANC activist and unionist Oscar Mpetha was impressed by Neil’s dedication. ‘Baba’ (father) Oscar recommended his appointment to the floundering Johannesburg branch of the African Food and Canning Workers’ Union (AFCWU). Neil was delighted and willing to work unpaid.

His unassuming manner, with his ability to listen and share, gained him the respect of workers. Israel Mogoatlhe, mentored by Neil, recalls that it was the workers who worried about Neil’s safety. He would insist on staying late, becoming vulnerable in a society where most white people did everything possible to raise the barriers of self-protection.

Extremely busy, Neil nevertheless tried to meet with Gavin regularly, usually between his weekend night shift at Bara and day shift at the union office. Meanwhile, Neil and Liz knew they were under surveillance and would leave a radio on to make ‘bugging’ more difficult. The couple operated a ‘need to know’ policy, sharing only what was necessary. The pressure on their personal relationship was intense.

Neil was excited by the rising tide of worker mobilisation by the middle of 1981. Following an historic meeting of bitterly divided unions in August, he was delegated to form a committee to bridge the divide. The mass arrests began in September, following a police ‘sting’. Gavin was amongst those detained in the first tranche. He was lucky to be released after two weeks and managed to escape over the border.

Others not so fortunate were severely tortured. More arrests followed, with Neil and Liz being taken through the iron gates of John Vorster Square – Johannesburg Police Headquarters – on 27 November. Neil was the only detainee, out of some sixty activists, who did not come out alive. His body was found hanging in his cell in the early hours of 5 February 1982.

Neil was the 51st detainee – and only white person – to die in detention. Johannesburg came to a standstill as his coffin was taken through its streets. Desmond Tutu wrote of an ‘incredible demonstration of affection and regard for a young white man by thousands of blacks’.

When Aubrey Aggett heard of his son’s death, his immediate response

was ‘They killed him!’ He began a painful journey, committing his life savings to pay the best lawyers, including George Bizos, Mandela’s lawyer and friend. With similar evidence of torture, given under oath by former detainees, the Aggett lawyers argued ‘induced suicide’. It was a groundbreaking approach. The inquest verdict, however, was predictable.

The magistrate’s findings of no one to blame were later challenged by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1998, the Commission found that Lt Stephan (Steven) Whitehead and his superior were ‘directly responsible for the mental and physical condition of Dr Aggett which led him to take his own life’. The Commission also held the former state, the Minister of Police, the Commissioner of Police and the Head of the Security Branch ‘responsible for the detention, torture and death of Dr Neil Aggett, constituting gross violations of human rights’.

The Aggetts were informed that apartheid perpetrators who did not apply for or receive amnesty were liable for criminal prosecution. Yet, in 2012, following South African publication of my biography *Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett*, the national weekly *Mail & Guardian* discovered that Steven Whitehead ran a counterintelligence business and had contracts with the South African and other governments.

On 27 November 2013, exactly 32 years after his arrest, Neil’s school friend Brian Sandberg laid the charge of culpable homicide against Stephan Whitehead on behalf of the Neil Aggett Support Group (NASG). The group is supported by the Food and Allied Workers’ Union (FAWU) and the apartheid victim organisation Khulumani Support Group. It is hoped that a successful prosecution will open the door for others.

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More than thirty years on, Neil’s story offers insights into a veiled and forgotten history. But it is more than this. When the humanitarian organisation MSF SA (Doctors across Borders) recently renamed their Advocacy programme as the Dr Neil Aggett Unit, it noted that the issues that concerned Neil were present in contemporary South Africa, adding how his ‘spirit of dedication and critical analysis’ is something they wished young medical practitioners to emulate.

Remembering Russell’s great passions, there is a strong sense in which Neil’s own search for knowledge and truth, his pity and outrage at human suffering, and a belief in love over hate have also fuelled the Neil Aggett Support Group campaign to remember his story so that it might shine a light on the present.

South Africa today is not the same as the tyrannical regime about which

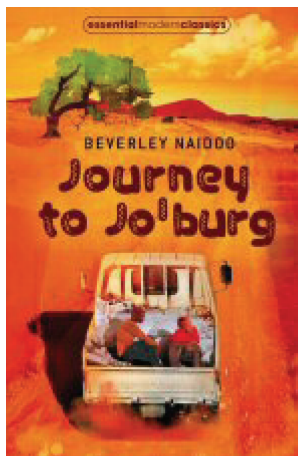
Russell wrote. The country has a fine Constitution which proclaims the equal rights of all. Yet reality is starkly different and the future for millions is bleak. Widespread corruption has led to disillusion, indeed, cynicism. Neil and many others died for a deeply moral cause. Were he alive today, I have no doubt that he would still be pursuing the dream of an equal, just society.

***Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett
by Beverley Naidoo***

*Available from Merlin Press at www.merlinpress.co.uk
and as an e-book via*

http://www.beverleynaidoo.com/death_of_an_idealist.html

Journey to Jo'burg



UK edition

Inside illustrations by Lisa Kopper

The sun rose higher. On they walked. The heat sank into them and they felt the sweat on their bodies. On they walked. Alone again ...

Another baby has died in the village and Naledi knows that her little sister Dineo might die too. But what can she do? Their grandmother has no money and there are no doctors in their village. So Naledi makes up her mind. She will have to get Mma who works more than 300 kilometres away in Johannesburg. The only way to let her know was to get to the big road and walk. So Naledi and her brother Tiro did just that ...

Banned by the apartheid government in South Africa, this is the story of two children's courage and determination to find their mother and bring her home.

Beverley Naidoo writes:

*When I sent two copies of my first children's book to nephews and nieces in South Africa in 1985, they never received the parcel. Instead, my sister-in-law received a letter telling her that the books had been seized and banned. However **Journey to Jo'burg** soon found its way into many different countries, in English and in translations, so that hundreds of thousands of children elsewhere were soon reading it. It was only after the release of Nelson Mandela from jail that the book was unbanned.*