

## BOOK REVIEW

# Remembering Heroes on the ‘Fringe’

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*Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner* by Billy Kenniston

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

*A sign of the resilience of South African historiography, often in the face of attempts to create (consciously or unconsciously) a new ‘patriotic’ consensus, is the fact that we still find the publication of what might be called marginal narratives, accounts of fringe movements, minority groups and biographies of relatively minor characters in our history. The publication of two new biographies – of the philosopher-activist Richard Turner and the trade unionist Dr Neil Aggett – highlights this important tendency, which has, I shall argue, significance beyond the discipline of history extending towards positive new South African democratic self-perceptions.*

Both Richard Turner (known to all his friends as Rick) and Neil Aggett share certain common features: they were white activists in the anti-apartheid struggle who cannot easily be fitted into any political tradition; they were both very young when they died (Turner was 36, Aggett 28) in ‘unusual’ circumstances almost certainly at the hands, directly or indirectly, of the State (Turner was assassinated in 1978 near the end of his five-year banning order<sup>1</sup>; Aggett probably committed suicide while detained without trial in 1981<sup>2</sup>).

The parallels in their backgrounds are also remarkable. Turner’s parents came out to Africa from England, settling first in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) before moving to Cape Town, where Turner was born. Aggett’s grandfather, of English stock, grew up in the Eastern Cape before moving to Kenya. Aggett himself was born in Kenya during the Mau Mau insurrection and moved to South Africa after Kenya’s independence. Both went to exclusive private schools and then to the University of Cape Town. Turner became an academic philosopher; Aggett became a doctor. Both were radicalised by what they experienced and studied. Ultimately they also became political martyrs.

Rick Turner (born 25 September 1941) grew up in Stellenbosch, on his

parents' farm, went to the elite St George's Grammar School in Cape Town before starting a degree in engineering at the University of Cape Town. Within a year at UCT he changed direction, graduating with an honours degree in philosophy before leaving, having married his girlfriend Barbara Hubbard<sup>3</sup>, to do a doctorate in Paris. Rejecting the normal English South African graduate options of Britain or the United States, he chose France because of his interest in Sartre and Existentialism.

Paris' milieu of continental philosophy and what would later be called New Left Marxism shifted Turner's liberal thinking, but unlike previous generations of white radicals it did not lead him into the ANC political camp. His thinking would always be a combination of libertarian humanistic Marxism and liberal values of freedom and responsibility.

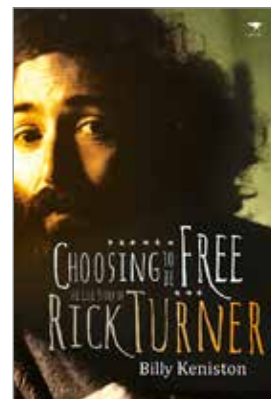
Helped in his French by Barbara, he completed his doctorate in 1966 and returned, not initially to a university, but to manage the family farm. This turned out to be a disaster, as his interests were focused more on philosophical debates with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) than fruit production. His marriage also broke down during this time.

Having done temporary lecturing at various universities, he finally got a permanent job at the University of Natal and moved to Durban in 1970. There, until his banning in 1973, he rapidly became a prominent and popular, if highly controversial, academic. Using Socratic methods in teaching, influenced by Sixties counterculture gurus Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, he gained a serious following among students, became an advisor to NUSAS and forged excellent personal ties with Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness movement<sup>4</sup>. He also married Foszia Fisher, in violation of the law prohibiting racially-mixed marriage, according to Muslim rites for which he formally converted to Islam. (Turner was by conviction an atheist, though not unsympathetic to progressive forms of religion, as we shall see below).

Turner's public engagement as an intellectual was focused in two areas. Drawing on his ties to NUSAS and liberal Christian movements like the Christian Institute, he set about creating a progressive white consciousness that would complement the BC movement. In an environment where the ANC presence was virtually nonexistent, he also saw the need for a revived trade union movement that would, at very least, mitigate the conditions of black workers.

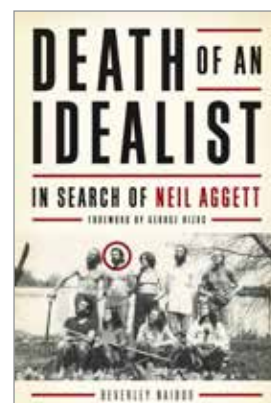
Rejecting the highly visible and politically sexy practise of student protest, which he saw as counterproductive, Turner encouraged students to rather try to educate the white community for democratic change. This he proposed should be done by producing cogent arguments for change and presenting them to white communities – even at times putting oneself forward (at the risk of all kinds of abuse) as candidates for local government.

The destabilisation caused by strikes (that started in Durban in the early 1970s) would force white society longing for stability to at least create better conditions for workers, that could in future be the basis for liberation. Educating workers for union leadership became part of Turner's extracurricular activity.



**CHOOSING TO BE FREE:  
THE LIFE STORY OF  
RICK TURNER** by Billy  
Kenniston  
ISBN: 978-1-4314-0831-3  
Publisher: Jacana, 2013

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**DEATH OF AN IDEALIST: IN  
SEARCH OF NEIL AGGETT**  
by Beverley Naidoo  
ISBN: 978-1-86842-519-8  
Publisher: Jonathan Ball,  
2012

His thinking was summed up in the single book he published in his life, *The Eye of the Needle* (1972). A humanistic Marxist argument couched in broadly Christian language, the book argued for 'participatory democracy' in South Africa. It drew heavily on his work with unions and reflects his own openness to any organisation working for positive change in the country. Unsurprisingly it was quickly banned, as was Turner in 1973.

During his banning, Turner continued to write philosophy none of which was published. He also, using names of Foszia and colleagues, wrote articles for the *South African Labour Bulletin*, which he helped found. Though nothing could be proven, the Security Police were probably aware of his activities. Near the end of his banning he applied for a passport to go to Germany to take up a Humboldt Fellowship. This was refused. A few weeks before the banning order lapsed he was shot dead on January 8, 1978.

Born in Kenya a number of years after Turner, on October 6, 1953, Neil Aggett's family moved back to South Africa after Independence. (Aggett's father, who had worked in the Kenyan police during the Emergency, was uneasy about staying on). Aggett completed his schooling at Kingswood College, Grahamstown, a Methodist establishment, where he appears to have been quite devoutly religious. This faith dissipated sometime after he began medical studies at UCT; indeed, Aggett seems to have embraced Marxism at this time, belonging to various socialist student study groups. He also immersed himself in continental philosophy, particularly that of Nietzsche and the Romantics, and wrote poetry in his spare time.

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He also began an often tempestuous relationship with a fellow medic Elizabeth Floyd, with whom he would live until his detention without trial and subsequent death. After completing his studies he

moved to Johannesburg, lived in a poor working-class neighbourhood, and combined work at Baragwanath Hospital with full-time trade union organising.

Neil Aggett's circle of friends and comrades represent both continuity and change with Turner's generation. Many of them were part of a cultural movement committed to communal living and simple lifestyle, an echo of a 1960s student radicalism that would have resonated with Turner. Interest in continental philosophy and humanistic Marxism was also part of the culture.

There were differences however. Though still banned, the works of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were more readily available (if one knew where to find them). The newly translated writings of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser (both familiar authors to Turner) were also doing the campus rounds. Marxist study groups in the 1970s were growing, however. More significantly, the ANC and South African Communist Party were quietly re-establishing a base in South Africa. The libertarian left of Turner's era was giving way to a more structured left, rooted in Leninist models of organisation and discipline<sup>5</sup>. Quite a few of Aggett's friends and union comrades were underground ANC members, though it seems that Aggett never formally joined either.

Having moved to Johannesburg in 1977, Neil Aggett started working with the

Industrial Aid Society (IAS), set up by a nephew of imprisoned ANC leader, Govan Mbeki, together with a number of activists, some of them already in the ANC underground. As a doctor who worked three nights a week at Bara, his initial interests were in setting up medical aid schemes for trade unions.

Working closely with the unions he soon became aware of the tensions within them. While some unions saw their primary role as meeting the interests of their members, others were increasingly committed to the idea of the union as a site of struggle for national liberation. In many ways the former were closer to the unions formed in Durban in the early 1970s; the latter represented an older ANC-rooted tradition of the 1950s which was undergoing a revival as the ANC started to regain lost ground within South Africa. In many respects, Aggett's thinking, at least initially, was probably closer at first to the former bloc though politically he was moving closer to the ANC.

Aggett's move into union organising per se was precipitated by the 1979 Fatti's and Moni's strike led by the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU). He quit the IAS and took up the task of building a union under difficult circumstances, amidst rising protest action and increased state harassment of unions. At the same time he found himself dealing with problems of corruption, more accurately misappropriation of funds, within the union leadership.

Within his inner circle he was also facing challenges – tensions in his relationship with Liz Floyd and concern over the ANC connections of close friends. The latter highlighted the question for Aggett over union autonomy versus ANC leadership. Though by no means anti-ANC, Aggett was deeply concerned about the AFCWU maintaining its primary mandate as he saw it: the interests of workers. Despite his reservations about the ANC using the union for political work, and though he seems never to have joined the Movement, Aggett remained close to a mainly white ANC cell in Johannesburg that included Gavin Andersson and Barbara Hogan, up until his detention without trial in November 1981.

After seventy days of intense interrogation at John Vorster Square, Neil Aggett died on February 5, 1982. It's almost certain that he committed suicide. He was 28 years old.

Unlike Turner's death, which rapidly found itself in the 'Unsolved Cases' files of the Durban police, Aggett's demise made political waves. His funeral from St Mary's Anglican Cathedral shut down central Johannesburg. The labour movement came out in force to honour him, as did the ANC. His parents' determined search for the truth led to an inquest which highlighted detention without trial – even if (predictably one might say) the Security Police were exonerated. For some of us who followed the inquest, it shone light on the extent to which our government was willing to use all sorts of dirty tricks to maintain increasingly tenuous control.

Billy Kenniston and Beverley Naidoo have admirably shone light again on

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incidents of South Africa's past that have been largely eclipsed by the dramatic decade and a half of resistance and negotiation that led to the emergence of universal democracy in 1994. In telling the stories of Rick Turner and Neil Aggett they have restored to public view two courageous marginal (and perhaps marginalised) heroes whose intellectual, political and moral contributions deserve examination and reassessment.

Turner's vision of participatory democracy, rooted in commitment to rigorous analytical reflection on social realities rather than ideological constructs, is an obvious issue that we need to retrieve today. How do we do politics today? Are we engaging in debate over grassroots realities – or ideological fantasies? Does public policy reflect the world, or does it somehow deflect it to serve particular interests? How do we pursue the realistic – while still having enough of a utopian vision to keep us morally honest enough to say that things can and must be constantly reassessed in the interests of the greater good for all?

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As a trade unionist, it might be worth speculating how Aggett might view organised labour today. Subsequent to his death, the labour movement became, for the most part, an agent of political liberation in alliance with what has become the new ruling elite. Has this created a kind of aristocracy within the movement that sees its interests with the elite rather than its rank and file membership? Would this help to explain incidents like Marikana? Would Aggett's more 'workerist' vision have placed COSATU in a different position at Marikana, for example? Indeed, and perhaps conversely, how might this vision have been affected by the new global economy South Africa finds itself in?

Neither Kenniston nor Naidoo, who are primarily biographers rather than political analysts, address these questions to any significant degree. What they do provide is historical material that can be the basis of such reflection. Nor do they really interrogate deeply in their narratives the sociological, psychological and philosophical questions of whiteness: what did it mean to be a white person opposing the apartheid order, to the point of death? How does whiteness, privilege and power affect the choices one makes?<sup>26</sup> Indeed, would the independence of their political positions represent the privilege of privilege, or does it suggest a more universal possibility – a kind of political 'believing without belonging' that may point to the maturation of constitutional democracy in contemporary and future South Africa?

In their own ways, and in terms of being biographies, both books have internal strengths and weaknesses. Common to both is the deep sympathy the authors have for their subjects.

Naidoo, a second cousin of Neil Aggett, draws on her personal ties to his family and friends to produce a very dense and personal picture of Aggett. The result, combined with close examination of what remains of Aggett's papers is a book that is very strong in presenting what novelist E M Forster once described as a 'rounded character'. Her reconstructing Aggett's detention and death and the events that followed is historical detection of high quality written with



the intensity of the novelist that she is. What I missed, however, was a more systematic examination of the political debates over the role of South African trade unionism in the late 1970s – are unions supposed to focus primarily on workers' 'bread and butter' issues or should that be subordinate to the national liberation struggle?

Kenniston comes to his subject without the personal connection, as a historian from the United States who first encountered Rick Turner as a MA student at the University of the Western Cape. This ideological 'freshness' makes him able to interpret Turner outside the often fixed 'positioning' of mainstream South African political debates, and approach Turner's combination of liberalism and New Left Marxism, support for unions and Black Consciousness while paradoxically being open to white civil politics and homeland politicians, free of local prejudices. He is also a skilful writer with considerable passion, with a near adoration of his subject. In truth, this is not uncommon with those who examine Rick Turner, whose personality and style give him an aura – even to those who never met him – of an 'intellectual rock star', analogous with the popularity today of someone like Slavoj Žižek.

With postmodern daring, Kenniston chooses to structure his biography, in his own words, as a kind of collage: the book is a mixture of the author's narrative, analysis of *The Eye of the Needle* (but very little of Turner's unpublished philosophical writings), and long accounts from some of Turner's family, friends and colleagues. The effect, for me at least, was to make the book disjointed. The fact that Kenniston does not interview a number of key people in Turner's life – with the effect that we never quite get a sense of his relationship with his children or indeed with many university colleagues.

Having said that, the book – like that of Neil Aggett – is an important contribution to South African biography. It is even deeply moving. Certainly there is enough here to make it essential reading to the small but growing number of us who identify with Turner and his noble vision of freedom, seeing it as a remedy for the addled reasoning, poverty of thought and self-centred posturing in much of what passes contemporary political discourse.

On a broader level it is good that these books have been published. Together with similar works, they offer us a more nuanced, more complex history of the anti-apartheid struggle. Insofar as they deal with white heroes, they challenge Manichean accounts of race that persist twenty years into our new democracy, while begging for a more systematic examination of the meaning of whiteness in South African history. They give the lie to the idea that patriotism is the preserve, and last refuge, of the party hack.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Though 'death squad' activity is well-documented from the 1980s onwards, the information on State assassination activities is very limited and often vague. See: Kevin A O'Brien, *The South African Intelligence Services: From apartheid to democracy, 1948-2005* (London: Routledge, 2011), 38-39. An exception to this, but a book that many consider somewhat suspect, is the partly-autobiographical Gordon Winter, *Inside BOSS: South Africa's Secret Police* (London: Penguin, 1981).
- 2 Many claimed at the time, based on previous 'suicides' in detention, that the State was lying. In the book under review the author accepts that it was almost certainly suicide.
- 3 Barbara Hubbard emigrated after Turner's death to the United Kingdom, where she later married bestselling novelist Ken Follett (one of whose earlier bestsellers, a World War Two thriller, was coincidentally titled *Eye of the Needle*) and became a long-serving Labour Party member of parliament.
- 4 How close this relationship was is a matter for debate. At least two friends of Turner have told me that though they had political disagreements, Biko and Turner were very good friends.
- 5 Ironically, as Kenniston notes, many of them had been Turner's former students.
- 6 Any examination of this issue must inevitably engage with the brilliant work of Ivor Chipkin. In particular, see: Ivor Chipkin, *Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, Democracy and the Identity of 'the People'* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007).
- 7 This debate can be found in the pages of many back issues of the *South African Labour Bulletin* and in the many works of industrial sociologists like Eddie Webster, Karl van Holdt and Sakhela Buhlungu.