

South Africa's neglected martyr

Lindy Wilson, *Steve Biko: A Jacana Pocket Biography*

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Lindy Wilson's short biography of the late anti-apartheid activist, Stephen Bantu Biko (1946–1977), has already been in circulation for 20 years in the form of an introductory biographical chapter to the edited collection, *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black*

Consciousness (1991).¹¹ With this Jacana Pocket Biography, Wilson has revisited her text to make it more accessible to a wider reading public and used the opportunity to reflect again on the life of Biko. This is the only book-length account of Biko's life to date, a stark contrast to the vast amount of literature on other anti-apartheid activists and African National Congress leaders, and indicates an uneasy silence over the life of Biko.

Wilson sets the scene well in the chapter "Early Years" with a detailed introduction to the formation and early history of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), the black-only student organisation started by Biko and other like-minded black student leaders in 1968. We are presented with Biko's "life-giving force" and "vitality" (p 13) and his anti-authoritarian leadership style, which facilitated and developed those he led. The longest chapter, "Bantu – Son of Man, 1973–1977" (pp 75–111), details his banning from Durban to his mother's house in King William's Town, Eastern Cape. It begins with the poignant return of Biko to his community, empty-handed without a degree (p 78), after having left for Durban seven years earlier to begin his medical studies.

Wilson shows that the banning of Black Consciousness activists in 1973 spread the discourse yet wider into black communities: "Banning failed to destroy the spirit and development of Black Consciousness. The next few years saw the flowering of the most imaginative and practical projects it was to produce" (p 91). As Biko switched from medical to legal studies, he developed his rhetorical and critical skills and used court appearances, related to minor offences against his banning, to spread the message of Black Consciousness across a much wider audience. As a native of the Eastern Cape, Wilson is particularly interested to explore this stage of Biko's personal and political development, and as such the early part of his life in Durban receives less focused attention.

11. B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds), *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1991).

Appropriately, Wilson's biography is as much about the group of people around Biko. He was essentially a social person and developed a circle of loyal friends, lovers, and fellow activists who supported him. Through interviews Wilson allows their voices to communicate Biko as they knew him. A most valuable aspect is Wilson's sensitivity to the experiences of female activists and family members associated with Biko; she reminds us that "Biko was surrounded by women who loved and nurtured him" (p 114). Wilson emphasises the importance of medical doctor, fellow activist and now prominent academic, Mamphela Ramphele, as "a constant sounding board in his political thinking and this made a huge difference in the restricted environment of King William's Town" (p 115). As the narrative moves on, the deepening crisis in Biko's personal life is apparent, with a triangular love relationship between Biko, his wife Ntsiki, and Ramphele (p 116). In 1977 Biko's marriage finally broke down as Ntsiki filed for a divorce. Biko's blind-spot, Wilson asserts, was his approach to his wife, which remained "traditional", that of "a role-model wife who was supposed to understand and accept whatever her husband chose to do" (pp 116–117). Wilson is particularly concerned with violence against women and children in South Africa and draws on the essential message of Black Consciousness to apply to women, "Do not be a part of your own oppression" (p 151). In so doing, she shows the richness of Black Consciousness as a deep emancipatory vein in South African politics.

Wilson has a particular view to establish the crucial role of Black Consciousness in relation to the struggle against apartheid. After the Soweto uprising of 1976, she writes that there were concerted efforts to bring the liberation movements together, and that there was "a growing political consensus that the Black Consciousness Movement was the 'least contentious' of the political organisations to attempt some kind of unity of focus" (p 120). There are other small allusions to contemporary historical debates. For example, Wilson makes a short remark on the influence of Black Consciousness on the labour unrest of 1973, that Durban dockworkers refused to elect a leadership in the first three months of that year, mirroring the strategy of SASO to avoid a rigid hierarchy that could be targeted (p 77). Wilson also

represents Black Consciousness as a fresh new energy, breathing life into a tired exiled liberation movement (p 148) with the exodus of young activists from South Africa after 1976 to join the armed struggle.

Wilson's biography of Biko confirms the emphasis of new research on Black Consciousness, which asserts the importance of the theological framing of the discourse. She uses Christian imagery early in her account to paint a messianic picture of Biko, using his African name, "Bantu" (people) to draw the parallel with Jesus Christ as the "son of man", a title which Biko also often evoked for himself (p 18). Echoing the doctrine of the Incarnation, Jesus equally being "the son of God", Wilson writes of Biko, "He was essentially human but also exceptional" (p 15). Christian imagery reappears at crucial stages in the narrative. Wilson describes Biko as "a religious person in the broad sense of the word" (p 81) and emphasises his close friendships and deep respect for Aelred Stubbs and David Russell, both celibate Anglican priests, and his belief in God but rejection of the church, which he considered to have been compromised by tradition and power. In the conclusion, religious language again comes strongly to the fore as Wilson searches for language to describe Biko's death, describing a crucifixion scene in Biko's cell (p 147), as he was chained to the walls of his cell, bleeding and dying.

The final chapter, "A Life Still to be Dug out" implies the need for continued engagement with the life of Biko and a more extensive critical biography. It was Biko's death as a young man, which "left a life of such promise in the air, so to speak" (p 147). Wilson attempts to use her knowledge of Biko's life and character, to present an instructive conclusion and mandate for the "what if"-role Biko would have played had he not been murdered (p 151). Wilson criticises the hierarchical form of leadership that is widespread in South Africa and contrasts it with Biko, a leader who "freed people to take their destiny into their own hands" (p 153). Has South Africa unwittingly fallen into a new form of inequality? Wilson quotes Biko, recalling the strength and moral clarity of his voice: "If we have a mere change of those in government positions, what is likely to happen

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is that black people will continue to be poor ... and our society will be run almost as of yesterday” (p 150). Wilson’s portrait of Biko is particularly apposite given the dearth of accountable leadership in South Africa and will help address a significant gap in the biographies of anti-apartheid heroes.

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