

Another example of the power of the biography

Beverly Naidoo, *The Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett*

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Beverly Naidoo's *The Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett* is at once an intimate account of the author's attempt to discover a distantly known first cousin, as well as a story of the late years of apartheid. The book intertwines personal narrative with public history, to offer another example of the power of the biography as a mode of historical analysis, at once able to capture a society in microcosm while drawing in the historical macro. In her explanation for writing the book, the author recounts hearing the news of the death of Neil Aggett in police custody in 1982, while she was living in exile in England. Her return to South Africa, resurfacing her own history as a political prisoner who had left for exile in the 1960s, are the launch pads for the "search for Neil Aggett".

We are first to discover a stereotypically colonial upbringing of the young Neil in Kenya, and the role of his father, Aubrey, in the repression of the *Mau Mau*. The story follows the Aggett family's departure for South Africa, in search of greater "security"; a painful miscalculation, as it will later emerge, that spins the meaning of the word on its head. Following the Aggetts arrival in South Africa, the reader is taken through Neil's school career, where his diaries provide an interesting insight into his early ethical sensitivity, as demonstrated in his New Year resolution: "Be friendly to *everyone*" (p 41).

The narrative moves quickly to Neil following his older brother Michael into medical school at the University of Cape Town, a source of much pride to parents Aubrey and Joy. Neil's own metamorphosis from a conventional student into a romantic outsider is narrated through his letters home as well as a discussion of his early poetry. We are introduced to a student increasingly critical of societal norms and turning to Western philosophy. The reader is then introduced to Elizabeth (Liz) Floyd, a young fellow medical student, who was destined to form a lifelong relationship with Neil and is a vital source for the author.

"Searching" is the title of a poignant chapter detailing Neil's visits to London, Paris and Germany. Neil returned to South Africa, somewhat disillusioned by Europe, to complete his medical studies and headed to the Eastern Cape, with a gradually developing sense of his place in the wider scheme of things and where he encountered young black doctors, shaped in the political crucible of the Durban Medical School, for a time the centre of the Black Consciousness Movement. Here Neil showed an openness that allowed him to learn and was to set a pattern for his later years as a trade unionist. As Naidoo writes of Neil, "his ability to listen, and his openness to understanding Black Consciousness ... [became] a positive starting point" (p 76).

Naidoo's account of Neil Aggett describes a post Soweto white left world, riven by "disputes and feuds" (p 81), of which one feud was between so called "workerist" unions that favoured a narrower focus on the interests of the unions, as opposed to the so called "populists", who strove to align the unions with wider

political aims, specifically the overthrow of apartheid. Perhaps one of the most evocative elements in the book is the recreation of the day to day lives of a counter cultural group of people in Johannesburg, who together in varying and inchoate ways, attempted to refashion a new form of society, which emphasised communal work and sharing, and rejected the materialistic values that were (and still are) dominant. At the time, unions were viewed with a great amount of respect, as avenues through which meaningful change could be initiated, and were difficult to gain access to. As Naidoo explains, Neil was initially viewed with suspicion by those in trade union circles, as a naïve radical, too outspoken for the *realpolitik* of the unions. A happenstance meeting with Gavin Andersson, the brother of a previous classmate, led to Neil's induction and maturation from a radical outsider into a more seasoned and canny unionist. Andersson's role as political tutor is recreated with the author, who acknowledges her debt to him for introducing her to the subtleties of political debate in the activist circles of the time.

The narrative quickly gathers pace with the arrest of Barbara Hogan, a University of the Witwatersrand student and African National Congress (ANC) operative. There is an intimacy that bares witness to Beverley Naidoo's own experiences more than a decade before. Naidoo explains how Hogan is cruelly tricked into surrendering the names of "close comrades", which leads to Gavin, Neil and Liz's arrests among others. The reader is then introduced to the dark world of John Vorster Square, which Naidoo memorably compares to the spectacles of the building's namesake. The cut and thrust of police questioning form the substantial part of the narrative, as the macabre characters of the old South African secret police are introduced: Neil's chief interrogator, Lieutenant Steven Whitehead, and his maniacal superior, Major Arthur Benoni Cronwright.

Naidoo's account is able to point to the tension between the ANC in exile, and its underground "structures" in the 1980s, highlighting disconnects between the two branches, as well as the myth of formal organisation and a looser structure in reality. It was tragically the state's own obsession with a more formal hierarchical system, closer to the fantasy of the ANC in exile, which led to the police's frenzied search for a grand ANC cell structure and the brutal torture of Aggett and others in that quest. What Naidoo's account describes instead are the efforts of unionists, of an older generation and younger activists, to organise within the realm of the law; what Barney Pityana, the Black Consciousness activist, described as pushing the "Bounds of Possibility" to the limit. It is introduced in the book as "reformist practice, revolutionary content", a delicate juggling for which Neil was initially judged to be ill suited. It was this formal, legal face, that the police set about to dismantle through brutally long hours of interrogation. Neil Aggett's statements in custody are used as a valuable source and their gradual incoherence is used to depict his growing mental anguish in the hands of his tormentors.

Naidoo describes two possible scenarios of the circumstances surrounding Neil Aggett's death: a simulated suicide, orchestrated by his torturers, or a genuine taking of his own life. As the evidence is presented it is the latter which seems more probable; a suicide which nonetheless implicated the security police, who had reportedly "broken" Aggett. The subsequent inquest into Aggett's death is told in a compelling way. Reported as the longest ever, drawn out over nine months, and compared with the inquest into Steve Biko's murder in detention four years before, Naidoo patiently follows the twists of argument of the prosecution and defence, leading to the magistrate's shocking final dismissal of the culpable

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homicide of Neil Aggett by his torturers, and the exoneration of the secret police force. Sadly, it was only through Aggett's death, at the funeral in central Johannesburg, where the city was brought to a virtual standstill by a sea of "young blacks" from the townships that for a brief moment the ideals for which he had died were realised.

Naidoo devotes a few short chapters to the Aggett family's own search for justice through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and once again Liz Floyd emerges as the powerful narrator, and indeed Naidoo accords her the honour of the final words, given at Neil Aggett's former high school, Kingswood College: "You need to learn about ... the country we live in: the effects of the past on people ..." (p 432). The importance of such an account of aboveground anti-apartheid activity, as that presented masterfully by Beverley Naidoo, must surely be emphasised. The book led to a series of articles in the *Mail and Guardian*, exposing Aggett's chief interrogator Steven Whitehead's career as a security specialist, at one time in the hire of the South African government. Such revisiting of history is able to provide both an instructive model for engagement today, as well as to balance the personal with the broader political canvas on which "History" is usually sketched.

There is a danger in the eulogy, and especially where the person's death approaches a form of martyrdom, to valorise the individual beyond recognition. The painful aspect of the book, as noted by Naidoo, is that: "The fact that he was white, and the first white detainee to die in security police hands, finally focused white attention on an issue that black South Africans had known for years" (p 310). Aggett's fame is thus in part, perversely, due to South Africa's racialised history. Part of the power of Naidoo's narrative is the way in which it links generations of activism, mentioning her own experience in the 1960s, to the role of Black Consciousness Movement activists in the early 1970s, to the trade union leaders in the post 1973 to 1976 era, and ending her account with the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. Aggett's place in that struggle was tragically cut short, but nonetheless this biography serves to illuminate the courage of generations of one, and many, young South Africans who embraced a non racial vision for the country.

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