

A Prophet Out of Africa

Sir Laurens van der Post

Writer, explorer. Born South Africa, December 13, 1906.

Died London, December 17, aged 90.

IN an age of rampant materialism, Laurens van der Post was a passionate and prominent champion of spiritual values.

The nature of his spirituality was not always clear, and his more Messianic pronouncements could seem both portentous and imprecise, but the views he expressed in more than two dozen books struck a chord with millions of readers. They also made him an influential confidant of public figures as diverse as Margaret Thatcher and the Prince of Wales.

He distilled in his work a lifetime's varied experience. He had been an explorer and a soldier, a farmer and a conservationist, a campaigner and a dreamer. But it was as a prophet out of Africa that he won for himself a niche in English life and letters, with his intensely felt and emotionally expressed evocations of that continent's landscape and peoples, and his insistence on the message he believed it to hold in trust for the West. "I feel myself," he wrote, "to have become a kind of improvised footbridge across the widening chasm between Europe and Africa."

Laurens Jan van der Post was born, the 13th of 15 children, at Philippolis in the Orange Free State (of whose Volksraad, or State legislature, his father had been chairman) and educated at a country school and then at Grey College, Bloemfontein. In his late teens he became a journalist on a newspaper in Durban, eventually becoming its shipping correspondent. After travels that included a series of journeys with a Norwegian whaling captain, and a trip to the Far East with the novelist William Plomer, he arrived in London. There he struck up the first of his many friendships with famous 20th-century figures, when he made the acquaintance of John Maynard Keynes, the Woolfs, and the other leading lights of Bloomsbury.

Married to a South African, Marjorie Wendt, and with two young children, for a while in the 1930s he combined writing—his novel *In a Province* appeared in 1934—with dairy farming in Gloucestershire. He was later to describe these years as the unhappiest of his life; the writing and the farming went well, but he was oppressed by a sense of impending world catastrophe.

Packing his wife and children off to South Africa, he enlisted in the British Army. In 1941 and 1942 he served with the commandos and led guerrilla groups behind enemy lines in Abyssinia and the Dutch East Indies. In 1943 he was captured in Java by the Japanese.

Three years in POW camps forged in him a philosophy, mystical in character and therefore elusive in words. His toughness and bravery in the face of appalling treatment from his guards is well documented. He later ascribed it to the discovery within himself of "another person" or "other voice". Although he had no doubt of the rightness of bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he always insisted that he bore no rancour towards the Japanese. In *A Bar of Shadow*, a memorable portrait of a brutal yet honourable Japanese sergeant lent weight to

what may claim to be a minor classic in the literature of war. In 1983 it was filmed as *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, with pop star David Bowie in a leading role.

On release he joined Mountbatten's staff, took part in quelling disorders in Java and attained the rank of lieutenant-colonel. In 1947 he was appointed Commander, Order of the British Empire (CBE). Regarding himself after the war as a changed man, he set about building a new life. His first marriage was dissolved in 1948, and in 1949 he married Ingaret Giffard, an English actor, novelist, and playwright.

With her support, he resumed what was to become a prolific career as a writer. From an investigation into the economic possibilities of the forests of Mount Mulanje in Malawi, van der Post found material for his *Venture to the Interior*, in which the introspective and the romantic were happily blended with a sensitivity to the spirit of place that recalled the early D.H. Lawrence.

Meanwhile he had fallen under the spell of Carl Gustav Jung. *In The Dark Eye in Africa*, published in 1954, he developed his theme of the complementary nature of those elements in the human psyche symbolised by black and white. The black he equated with the instinctive and pagan aspects, the white with logic, reason and intellectual discipline.

In 1952 he had visited the Kalahari Desert, and he returned there later to make television films. The nomadic bushmen he saw as almost the last survivors of an ancient Stone Age culture complete with the intuitive, semi-magical powers in which he so ardently believed. In two resulting books, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* and *The Heart of the Hunter*, his powers of vivid description, sensitivity to atmosphere and human sympathy found full scope.

In 1964 he brought out *Journey Into Russia*, and four years later a *Portrait of Japan* that, written without bitterness, sought out beneath the ugliness of Westernisation an ancient beauty and faith. In 1976 *Jung and the Story of Our Time* told of his relationship with the great philosopher-psychiatrist and of the origins and growth of Jung's philosophy. In lighter vein, *First Catch Your Eland* (1977) discoursed on African and other exotic ways of cooking. "Studying grasses and cooking in winter" were listed in *Who's Who* among his recreations.

A CHARISMATIC personality and a persuasive speaker, he had a high public profile for so introspective and private a man, and he was not afraid to enter political debates. He was an early and outspoken opponent of apartheid, and was to be equally critical of opposition leaders; he insisted that Desmond Tutu did not deserve the Nobel Peace Prize, and described Nelson Mandela as "a miserable figure who speaks with a double tongue"; he was a keen supporter of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

His wisdom and personal qualities came to be deeply appreciated by a number of people who occupied more active positions on the public stage. He was a personal friend of Margaret Thatcher during her premiership, and was among those who counselled her to a policy of firmness during the Falklands crisis. He hailed her handling of the invasion as "a brilliant enterprise of war" and dismissed accusations of jingoism as "radical and liberal slush". The importance of the individual in van der Post's world view, together with his belief that socialism was "a rotting corpse whose smell in our midst has tainted the political atmosphere far too long", undoubtedly endeared him to the Conservative prime minister. He was knighted, on her recommendation, in 1981.

But it was perhaps his emphasis on the collective unconscious, and the link it suggested between a monarch and his subjects, that appealed to the heir to the throne. He was a close and valued friend of the Prince of Wales for decades, and his influence on Prince Charles's interest in spiritual matters was widely felt to be profound. In 1982 he acted as godfather to Prince William, a decision viewed with suspicion by some within the Church of England in the light of his advocacy of a generalised notion of faith rather than adherence to any one faith—a notion apparently since espoused by the Prince of Wales. In 1987 van der Post and Prince Charles went on a five-day retreat in the Kalahari. Last year van der Post was a vigorous defender of the Prince in the aftermath of Diana Princess of Wales's BBC *Panorama* broadcast.

Although van der Post never relinquished his links with South Africa, he looked on England as his home for more than 50 years, and in the last decades of his life he lived much of the time between Chelsea and Aldeburgh in Suffolk.

He is survived by his second wife, who became a Jungian therapist, and his daughter from his first marriage. His son and his first wife predeceased him.

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Read Jeremy Griffith's essay on Sir Laurens van der Post's vision at
www.humancondition.com/freedom-essays/sir-laurens-van-der-posts-vision*

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