ROY CAMPBELL – ALMOST A LIBERAL

by David Robbins

Natal's wild and unpredictable poet has been described at various times as a fascist, an instinctive right-wing reactionary, a fierce individualist who ran easily to extremes. In his foreword to **Light on a Dark Horse**, Laurie Lee comments: "His (Campbell's) romantic paternalism, imbibed from his South African background, was out of date even before he was born. He was burdened with more than his share of right-wing mumbo-jumbo . . ." And in 1954 when the University of Natal conferred a doctorate on him "he spoke (Laurens van der Post tells us) almost like a disciple of Dr Verwoerd". It is certainly true that in the thirties Campbell was an open admirer of both Hitler and Mussolini, although he ultimately fought against them in the war; and that he felt nothing but contempt for the leftist forces in the Spanish civil war.

Campbell was born in Durban in 1901 into a distinguished and comfortably well-off family. By his own admission he was "of the old colonial school with regard to natives". Here was the son of an intelligent and public-spirited professional man, exposed to the best of local education, and, being allowed to spend any amount of money on books, which apparently he did, reading avidly and widely from an early age, who nevertheless possessed what can only be described as a typically South African short-sightedness, a sort of lameness of response to his own social environment. His quick and restless mind, capable of producing a flamboyant brilliance which will be remembered in this country so long as poetry itself is remembered, was capable also of statements like: "The abolition of the slave trade, of course, aggravated trouble, and put an end to a perfectly natural relationship between the races . . ."

It is not difficult to realise why Campbell, who went to Europe in 1918, developed such an intense dislike for the "effette English intellectual" as a class, those great grandchildren of the abolishers of slavery. It was the instinctive hostility of a mind out of touch with the mainstream of social thought as it had developed in Europe through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

Apart from this hostility, which manifested itself in his long poem, **Georgiad**, Campbell's stay in Europe was a romantic adventure. He met many influential literary people, liking some, quarrelling with many. He married before he was twenty, and lived in a precarious state of poverty, careléss both of the accepted niceties of existence, and the social and political influences exerted by the European environment. Indeed, the existence of these influences seemed merely to harden him against them, and he remained a typical colonial, delighting in his own prejudices.

After the publication of his widely acclaimed **The Flaming Terrapin**, Campbell returned to South Africa, invited to do so to launch and edit a literary magazine for his wealthy friend, Lewis Reynolds. The result was the notorious **Voorslag**. In the second issue, Campbell contributed **Fetish Worship in South Africa**, a caustic and penetrating article on local white race consciousness. Consider the brief extracts below in relation to the picture already painted of Campbell's earlier sentiments.

"You people get an ideal like 'White South Africa' tied to your noses and then you can't see anything else. You consider White South Africa to be more important than South Africa itself. It is all the fault of that dear old colour-fetish. It is the incarnation of all that is superstitious, uneasy, grudging and dishonest in our natures."

"The colour-bar is the first official recognition of the mental equality of the races: the second can only be the removal of the colour-bar . . ."

The contrast is startling. How could this proud and hardheaded young man, so full of "old colonial attitudes", change so fundamentally and in so short a space of time? The answer, simply, is that he met William Plomer.

Born in the Northern Transvaal two years later than Campbell, Plomer was living in Zululand when he heard of Campbell's return to South Africa, and on one of his visits to Durban he invited the poet to lunch with him at Twine's Hotel on the Esplanade. "We had much to talk about," recounts Plomer, "and got on well, and after lunch we walked on the sand of the bay, the tide being out, and talked for hours." It was at this first meeting that Campbell asked Plomer to help with the production of **Voorslag**, and invited him to visit Umdoni Park where he and his wife were staying as guests of the Reynolds. Plomer accepted both invitations; indeed, it was not long before Plomer went to live with them on the South Coast.

Initially Plomer considered Campbell's attitude towards blacks, as we have seen, to be typically white South African, "an amalgam of tolerance, contempt, and impercipience". Obviously they spoke of these things at their first meeting, guided to the subject by the fact that Plomer had told him about his novel.

This novel, **Turbott Wolfe**, which dealt candidly with miscegenation, and with the deepest emotional foundations of the "colour question" in South Africa, probably shocked Campbell as much as it did the complacent colonial critics who called it "subversive", "garbage", and more politely "not cricket". Yet to his credit he attempted to come to terms with the book, and with the ideas of the young man who had written it, a young man who at the time was profoundly concerned "with the situation of the black African, whom I had been brought up to regard as a human being with a head and heart and vast potentialities".

"Mr Plomer is one of those extremely unpleasant individuals who can see further than their own noses," wrote Campbell in the first issue of **Voorslag**. "**Turbott Wolfe** is an extremely bold and sincere piece of work. If it can make a few people, from time to time, think very hard, it will have achieved a very definite purpose."

As we have seen, Campbell was one of those few people, and the effects of this thinking went deep into his creative life. There can be no doubt that it was under Plomer's influence that he wrote such fine and sensitive poems as **The Serf** and **The Zulu Girl**. Plomer relates how one night, "just after I had gone to bed, he (Campbell) came hurrying in with the manuscript of **The Serf**. He was very excited, and said it was the best thing he had ever done. I think he was right."

But something was seriously amiss. Listen to Campbell, some seven or eight years later, commenting on this period of his life, and obliquely on Plomer's influence on him: "I have to admit that for six months in Africa I joined the

universal 'racket' out of sheer moral exhaustion and defeatedness . . . There was an enormous wave of Hogarth Pressure (The Hogarth Press had published **Turbott Wolfe**) and I simply surfed it, instead of swimming against it. When I look at the stuff I then wrote, I see how much more 'fertile' the line of least resistance — and most sensationalism — can be to an artist. I have destroyed all that I can of what I wrote then, and have publicly recanted in the **Wayzgoose** by turning on my associates in **Voorslag**."

Can we accept that Plomer's manifest and seemingly profound effect on Campbell was simply the result of the latter's "moral exhaustion and defeatedness" at the time? So vacuous a statement seems absurd. It is true, however, that Campbell was not so much exhausted as he was disturbed and unsettled. His brief career as editor of **Voorslag** soon ended in bitterness and recrimination. The death of his father had affected him deeply, and he was troubled about the future of his family (he now had two daughters). Moreover, even then in his middle twenties, he suffered from a form of acute hypertension and was drinking heavily. Yet none of these things can explain why, with considerable courage, he rallied to the flag of Plomer's liberalism, nor why, all too soon, he so vehemently forsook it. It has been mooted that he had an idea of himself as "a wronged and persecuted hero", and that he took up Plomer's cause and ideas so as to share some of the notoriety and criticism which fell to Plomer after the publication of his novel. There is probably some truth in this, as there is also in the contention that he was always politically naive, easily swayed and deceived.

Whatever the hidden complexities of his responses, never again was he to come so close to creating for himself a humane, just, and liberal foundation, as he did during his association with young William Plomer. Thereafter, his life and work is a series of extremes, spoiled at times by a grandiose and bragging self-esteem, at others by saddening inconsistencies. In a perceptive examination of Campbell (**Theoria** 9, 1957) Alan Paton remarks: "I remind you . . . that this Campbell who wrote so warmly of men and women, was the same Campbell who flawed **Adamastor** by including that contemptuous poem called **A Song for the People** . . . the man whose love of Christ was unable to save him from an admiration for Hitler . . ."

Can we conclude, as does Laurie Lee, that Campbell's essential vision did not encompass political ideologies or social theories, but simply the open spaces of the veld and the sea? He loved horses, bulls, buck, all wild and primitive things with a simple and terrible intensity, and he "had the words to celebrate them — their power, vulnerability and beauty — in a sort of poetry that will never be equalled".

Had he been able to extend this intense vision to embrace his fellow human beings, he would surely have been a great poet. □

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