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COMMENTARY

by Nicholas Ashford

The story goes beyond Biko

WHY, I found myself wondering as I left the première of Sir Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* on Thursday night, had I found it such an unsatisfactory film? Part of the answer, I suppose, is that I knew most of the central characters in the drama — Steve Biko, Donald Woods, Mamphela Ramphele, Jimmy Kruger and Bruce Haig (the Australian who helped Woods escape) — when I was working in South Africa as a correspondent, and their screen portrayal, although skilfully played by an exceptional cast, never matches the real thing.

Kevin Kline's Woods, for example, was far too earnest. The real Woods is an ebullient, jovial man, a brilliant raconteur and the life and soul of most parties. Denzel Washington's Biko I found more convincing, but it is almost impossible to recreate on the screen the special elements in Biko's personality which made him such a compelling leader.

But it would be unfair to condemn a film like *Cry Freedom*, so obviously well-intentioned, simply because the characters or some of the scenes are not quite as I remember them. My main criticism of the film is that it is rather dull. This really is inexcusable because Woods and Biko were never dull. And there can be few situations in the world with such dramatic potential as the black-white confrontation in South Africa. If ever there was a real-life tragedy of Shakespearean dimensions in the making, it lies in the southern tip of Africa, where a white minority is vainly defying the march of history and where the outcome already appears horribly inevitable.

Part of the problem with the film is that Attenborough has produced a celluloid hybrid which is part *Boys' Own Paper* adventure story, part docudrama and part political statement. The parts don't really sit happily together. For example, the first section of the film, which deals with Biko's black consciousness ideas in some depth, goes uncomfortably with the second half, which is a rather unconvincing dramatisation of Woods' escape from South Africa to Lesotho.

This is a pity because the film does touch on a number of themes which are of significance to anyone interested in South Africa. One is the importance of black consciousness ideas in the development of black opposition to apartheid. Biko is sometimes regarded as the originator of black conscious theology in South Africa, whereas its roots go back to the 1940s, when the African National Congress's youth league began emphasising that blacks had to recover their own self-confidence before they could liberate themselves.

Their ideas were put into more coherent form by Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the Pan-Africanist Congress which spearheaded the anti-pass campaign which culminated in the Sharpeville massacre. Sobukwe split with the ANC because he felt it was becoming dominated by whites, particularly by members of the Communist Party.

Sobukwe was every bit as charismatic as Biko, who used to visit him at Kimberley (where Sobukwe lived for 18 years under continuous restriction after being released from Robben Island in 1969) to discuss black consciousness ideas. Like Biko, Sobukwe was accused of being anti-white because he emphasised the need for blacks to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and to eschew paternalistic white support. I don't think I have ever met anyone

less racist than Sobukwe, with whom I spent one of the most stimulating days of my six-year stint in southern Africa.

Sobukwe once wrote of his vision of the future: "We stand for government of the Africans for the Africans by the Africans, with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Africa and accepts the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as an African. We guarantee no minority rights because we are fighting precisely that group-exclusiveness which those who plead for minority rights would like to perpetuate. It is our view that if we have guaranteed individual liberties, we have given the highest guarantee necessary . . . colour will count for nothing in a free Africa." This was to become Biko's philosophy. Sadly, Sobukwe did not have Woods as a biographer, although this will soon be put right when Benjamin Pogrund, former deputy editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, completes an important work on the PAC leader.

The South African authorities initially believed they could accommodate black consciousness ideas which they thought matched their own warped notions of racial exclusivity. However, when they realised the strength of the appeal of the message (it predominated, for example, during the 1976 Soweto uprising when the ANC was weak), they sought to crush its leaders. Sobukwe died miserably after a long illness, banned and silenced. Biko, aged only 30, died brutally at the hands of the security police. Today Azapo, the main black consciousness group, is leaderless and without influence.

Another theme touched on by *Cry Freedom* is the role of white liberals in a racially polarised society. The film makes the point, often overlooked in this country, that not all South African whites support apartheid. Many are bitterly opposed. They tend to be despised by fellow whites who believe in racial segregation and distrusted by blacks like Biko for failing to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the struggle for majority rule. But what can they do? Voting for the tiny Progressive Reform Party has not changed apartheid one iota, as Frederik van Zyl Slabbert acknowledged when he resigned as party leader two years ago.

They are left with three options: join the struggle and risk arrest or death; complain about the system but acquiesce in its implementation; or decide to leave. Growing numbers are doing the latter. Woods was one of them, and as he can testify, this is not a "soft option." It can be tough giving up a career, a home and a country to settle in a dismal London suburb.

Sadly, the people who are leaving are those the country can least afford to lose — businessmen, professionals, academics; people who feel themselves to be South African, believe in racial equality, but are not prepared to face years of growing racial conflict. Many, like Woods, hope to return one day when apartheid has been scrapped and a democratic government installed. Sadly, that day is still far off.

□□□ South African censors announced yesterday they had cleared *Cry Freedom* for public screening following speculation it would be banned or censored. The Director of Publications, Braam Coetzee, said "it is one of the endeavours of all involved in publications control not to be influenced by any outside factors but to have an objective and scientific examination as far as possible".

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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