

FEATURED BOOK REVIEW

Tyrone August. *Dennis Brutus: The South African Years*. Cape Town: BestRed, 2020. Distributed in North America by Lynne Rienner Publishers. 358 pages. Notes. Photographs. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1928246343.

Tyrone August, for nearly three decades a veteran journalist and editor of the *Cape Times* and South Africa's prestigious *Leadership* magazine, managed to find time to complete a doctorate on the poetry of Dennis Brutus at the University of the Western Cape in 2014. Impressed with what he had done, the English department at Stellenbosch University subsequently awarded him a postdoctoral fellowship from 2016 to 2018, which he used to work on a biography covering the first forty-two years of the poet's life, from his birth in Southern Rhodesia in 1924 to his departure from South Africa in 1966 on an exit permit that prohibited him from ever returning. This was an ambitious task never before undertaken by anyone in South Africa or elsewhere, but August proved equal to the challenge. *Dennis Brutus: The South African Years* can serve as a model of how to carry out effective research on a unique individual who is deeply immersed in the political and cultural life of his society.

In an introductory chapter, August lays out his strategy for the book, first noting:

[T]he subject of attention is Dennis Brutus, who lived in Port Elizabeth in the eastern Cape during the first half of the twentieth century—a tumultuous period that saw the emergence of apartheid, a legally codified system of racial segregation and discrimination, followed by the development of a ruthless state apparatus designed to systematically eliminate any resistance. It was within these grim circumstances that Brutus, who was classified as coloured under the Population Registration Act of 1950, distinguished himself as a student, teacher, poet, journalist, sports administrator and anti-apartheid activist. (2)

The difficulty in writing about such a complex person was that not much was known about certain aspects of his life, especially those concerned with aesthetic matters, particularly his strong interest and involvement in writing poetry. Brutus had achieved some attention in South Africa for his political activities, but few there knew him to be a practicing poet, largely because

banning orders had prevented much of his early verse from being published locally.

It didn't help that Brutus was disinclined later in life to write an autobiography because he failed to see any coherent pattern to his life. He even discouraged others from writing his biography, seeing such efforts as intrusive and potentially misleading. In a sense, he seemed intent on self-censoring precisely the kind of intimate personal record that August was hoping to provide.

Fortunately, after leaving South Africa, Brutus was not at all reticent about granting interviews that revealed details about his private life. August tracked down a great many of these, supplementing them with interviews he himself recorded with Brutus as well as with some of his family members, friends, colleagues, fellow prisoners, and former students. In addition, he retrieved through correspondence the memories that other close acquaintances retained about Brutus, and he gathered a trove of relevant published and unpublished biographical documents held in various archives in South Africa and the United States.

This made it possible for August to adopt an unusual approach to his subject:

Based on such evidence, this biography places Brutus's own voice at the centre of its depiction of his life and interior world. His life story is told primarily in, and through, his own words—newspaper and journal articles, tape recordings, interviews, speeches, court records and correspondence. My primary role is to place these personal accounts into a chronological narrative and to provide a context for this narrative. (11–12)

Among the documents of greatest importance in exposing Brutus's interior world were the poems themselves. Many of his most moving lyrics were autobiographical, having been inspired by interactions with a particular person or place or by recollections of emotional experiences that touched him deeply. So when August is talking about an event or an individual that made an impact on Brutus, he illustrates it with a poem that captures his mood or state of mind at that moment. These quotes reveal Brutus to be a remarkably introspective artist with a strong social conscience.

Consistently and verifiably, there is a direct correlation between his poetry and his life. In fact, he often chooses to reveal and illuminate his experiences, feelings and thoughts in his poetry rather than through other modes of expression. Poetry, to him, was not an activity separate from his life; it was, in some ways, the very essence of his life. Through his poetry, he conversed with himself, and with the rest of society; it was through his poems that he explored his innermost being, and it was through his poems that he tried to raise awareness about injustice and oppression, and to galvanise opposition to it. (13)

The first chapter of the book, covering 1912 to 1943, opens with some background information on Brutus's parents and two of his grandparents

before focusing more intently on his childhood memories of his father and mother, both of whom were schoolteachers. His father, reticent and introverted, was a distant, uncommunicative person who sometimes became enraged and terrified young Brutus. His mother, in contrast, was very sociable, outgoing, and warm. She used to recite poems and read stories aloud, instilling in him “an ear for sounds, for language and words” (41).

Growing up in Port Elizabeth, Brutus initially had an antipathy to schooling and preferred to spend his time at home reading or wandering about the neighborhood, but when his education began in earnest at age eleven at a Catholic mission school where he was taught by Irish nuns, he quickly caught up, was promoted, and excelled in his studies. He remembers having written his first poem at age 14 or 15 about a full moon rising over a nearby lake. He followed this up with a lyric in Afrikaans about his infatuation with a schoolgirl.

When Brutus entered Paterson High School in 1939, he contributed poems and articles to *The Paterson Spectator*, a school publication he eventually wound up editing. He also studied the classics of British Victorian literature, especially the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning, on which he became such an authority that one teacher invited him to lecture others on the subject. From teachers who were Marxists or Trotskyists he was exposed to left-wing political ideas, and as he grew older he became increasingly aware of the economic consequences of racial segregation and discrimination. During this time, his parents were in the process of getting divorced, so his mother no longer could afford to send him to school, but his academic record was such that he won a municipal scholarship enabling him to complete his last two years at Paterson and graduate in 1943. Better yet, the results of his final matric exam were so exceptional that he was awarded an additional three-year municipal scholarship that made it possible for him to pursue higher education.

Chapter Two (from 1944 to the 1950s) deals with Brutus’s university education and early teaching career. In 1944, he registered for a Bachelor of Arts degree at South African Native College (later renamed the University of Fort Hare). The old-fashioned curriculum in the English department there began with Chaucer and ran through the Elizabethans and Victorians, but no works by twentieth-century authors were taught. Hence, the poetry and other contributions that Brutus started publishing in university media such as *The SANC* and *The Fort Harian* tended to follow patterns established long before. However, he soon discovered on his own a number of important contemporary writers by devouring what he found in issues of *Horizon*, a literary and art journal produced in London. In addition, he studied Afrikaans literature as a second major subject, giving him a perspective on a younger indigenous expressive tradition. He also took courses in history, geography, education, and psychology.

Brutus participated enthusiastically in available extra-curricular activities. As president of both the debating society and the drama society, and as a member of the editorial board of both campus publications, he was drawn

into frequent intellectual engagements with fellow students. He also interacted with them in team sports, playing football, rugby, and cricket and taking part in cross-country running. Fort Hare had a diverse student body composed not only of Black, Indian, and colored South Africans but also of Africans from other parts of the continent. Brutus enjoyed living and learning in such a stimulating heterogeneous environment.

In his third year, Brutus was forced to drop out of Fort Hare and take up teaching at a Catholic mission school in Fort Beaufort in order to help support his family. He returned to his studies and finished his degree in 1947 with a distinction in English, after which he spent a few years as a railway porter, schoolteacher, and social welfare officer before returning to Paterson High School as a teacher of English, Afrikaans, Latin, psychology, religious instruction, and astronomy.

His students at Paterson remembered him as an exceptional teacher of British poetry who had a strong interest in classical music, African jazz, and jiving. He challenged his students to think critically about society and encouraged them to participate in local political protests. But the area in which he may have made his greatest contribution to school life was as a coach of various sports: cricket, tennis, table tennis, baseball, and softball. He took his teams to play at other schools, and this gradually led him to become increasingly involved in sports administration in the entire area and later to serve as a secretary in several provincial and national sports bodies. He once acknowledged, "It's through sports that I became aware of the discrimination that existed by law...I was beginning to be aware of the whole race and sports issue and its significance" (76–77).

This heightened awareness and the actions he took as a consequence got him into serious trouble, because as he rose to prominent positions in these organizations, with the power to direct their policies, he gained greater visibility as a dedicated opponent of apartheid. In 1959 he helped to found the South African Sports Association (SASA), becoming its secretary as well. Two of SASA's first campaigns were to cancel tours of South Africa by an all-black West Indian cricket team and by a New Zealand rugby team. SASA's main strategy at this time was to persuade the International Olympic Committee to prohibit racial discrimination in South African sport. So the Government labeled Brutus as a troublemaker whose political activities had to be closely monitored and harshly punished.

Chapter Three (from the 1950s to 1962) tells of Brutus' participation in numerous anti-apartheid groups that opposed oppressive racial legislation designed to enforce segregation and entrench privileges for white South Africans. Brutus was so busy speaking at rallies and leading defiance campaigns, especially on behalf of teachers and sportsmen, that he found little time for writing poetry during the 1950s. In the early 1960s, police began harassing Brutus with sterner measures, raiding his home, refusing to issue him a passport, and serving him with a banning order that prevented him from attending meetings and from traveling freely. Further restrictions stopped him from teaching and from publishing any of his writing. Indeed,

so comprehensive was the effort to censor him that by the end of 1962 it became unlawful for any writing or statement by him to appear in print in South Africa.

Ironically, these restrictions, which deprived him of employment and limited his ability to communicate or to interact face to face with others, gave him more time to write, and he began producing articles for liberal and radical publications such as *The New African*, *New Age*, and *Fighting Talk*, signing them with pseudonyms such as B.K., L.N. Terry, J.B. Booth, and John Player. In addition, he started submitting poems to journals in Uganda, Nigeria, France, and the UK. “Looking back,” he notes, “the banning order spurred me to greater creativity and to the decision to publish” (124).

Chapter Four (from 1962 to 1964) recounts what happened to Brutus after he chose to relocate without his family to Johannesburg in order to take up a teaching position he had been offered at the privately run Central Indian High School. He was also eager to seek the opportunity to study law at the University of the Witwatersrand on a scholarship he had obtained from Leeds University in the UK, which he was allowed to utilize in South Africa. However, the Department of Justice under Minister B.J. Vorster refused permission for him to teach at Central Indian High or anywhere else in Johannesburg and prohibited him from attending meetings on the Wits University campus. In 1963, his banning order was amended several times to add further restraints on his movements and activities. Authorities were aware that Brutus had reestablished contact with SASA and had even been elected honorary president of a newly formed South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee, SANROC, so they increased their surveillance of him. When Brutus boldly attended a SANROC meeting with a Swiss journalist sent to South Africa to report on racism in sport, he was immediately arrested and charged with contravening the terms of his banning order. He was released on bail while awaiting trial but was ordered to report to the police daily.

At this point, Brutus decided to attempt to flee South Africa. A friend drove him to Swaziland, where he took refuge for a few weeks with other banned South Africans living in exile. In mid-September, he attempted to cross into Mozambique and board a plane to Kenya, but he was detained at the border until police in South Africa, alerted to his presence there, turned up to arrest him and escort him back to Johannesburg. Upon his arrival in the city, Brutus sprinted away from his captors, but one of them shot him in the back and had him taken to a hospital for treatment of his wound. At the end of September he was transferred to the secure Fort prison, where he remained until his trial in early December. In January 1964, he started serving the first four months of his eighteen-month sentence at another prison before being moved to Robben Island to serve out the rest of his sentence.

This period of Brutus’s life in Johannesburg that began with his efforts to reengage in subversive actions while struggling to support himself in defiance of escalating banning orders and ended with his being shot, hospitalized, locked up, tried in court, and sentenced to months in prison, was certainly the most intense series of consecutive events he had ever experienced, and he

was lucky to have survived it. He had gone from a flurry of frantic political activity to what was almost a dead stop, from incessant motion to a long stretch of confinement and immobility.

To pass the time and relieve the boredom of such tedious idleness, Brutus turned to poetry, reworking poems he had written earlier and composing new ones based on what he had witnessed or experienced in prison. Some of these were included in his second collection, *Letters to Martha*. Others, written years later, turned up in subsequent volumes in which he remembered vivid moments from his past. August, with an excellent command of the full range of Brutus's poetry, is able to find precisely the right quote, old or new, to illustrate what the poet was thinking or feeling when describing a particular incident.

This is partly why August's biography of Brutus is so enjoyable to read. By allowing Brutus to speak for himself, he anchors the narrative in autobiography. And by quoting so many great lines from Brutus's oeuvre, he provides readers with a mini-anthology of some of his best poetry.

Chapter Five (from 1964 to 1965) is devoted almost entirely to Brutus's time at Robben Island. Brutus dreaded going there because he anticipated it would be a concentration camp where prisoners were cruelly abused by sadistic warders. This proved to be true, especially for political prisoners, for right from the start he was singled out for harsh treatment, being viciously beaten with batons and clubs while working at hard labor hauling large stones, a brutality that left him bruised and bloody. He spoke of having been "systematically and vilely persecuted" (170) as an educated prisoner, someone who had requested permission to read books.

Brutus sometimes suffered episodes of severe depression in this punitive environment as well. For a long time he was denied visitors, and for several months he was held in solitary confinement. Yet there were instances when the sight of stars at night or of the birds, trees, or ocean waves he glimpsed by day provided solace, peace, and comfort to him in his isolation. These cathartic moments were usually celebrated in poems he wrote then or at later stages in his life when he was remembering his life on Robben Island.

August comments perceptively on one positive consequence of Brutus's prolonged incarceration:

It was most likely during this period—as part of his attempt to keep himself constantly occupied—that he began to reflect intensively on the content and form of his own poetry, “going over the themes of my poetry with some bitterness in the empty hours there” (185). His decision to write more simply and accessibly was an important—even though not complete—break from the traditional English canon with which he grew up and which he previously emulated in his writing. His analysis of his poetry while in solitary confinement was therefore, by his own account, a turning point in his writing. (190)

Brutus's health improved significantly once he was released from solitary confinement and was permitted to rejoin other prisoners. They helped him recover his composure and keep his spirits up. He in turn, as an experienced

teacher, helped his fellow prisoners who were studying to improve their education.

During this interval, Brutus appeared to come to terms with his imprisonment. He still experienced occasional moments of intense suffering and grief, such as when his mother died and he was not permitted to attend her funeral. But he gradually became more interested in profound spiritual matters. At one point he had almost lost his fidelity to Catholic theology, but now he returned to the Church as a true believer, more secure in his acceptance of his religious faith. In this respect, Robben Island may have made him a better Christian.

Chapter Six covers the period from July 6, 1965, when Brutus was released from Robben Island and placed under house arrest in Port Elizabeth, to July 30, 1966, when he left South Africa for England. He remained under banning orders throughout this year; no one was allowed to visit him at home, he was prevented from communicating with any other banned people, and he was prohibited from attending meetings and from preparing, publishing, or disseminating any writings. He also was barred from entering any school, college, university, factory, or courthouse, and he could not visit any coloured, Indian, or Black residential areas. To make matters worse, security police frequently raided his house; looking for subversive materials, they opened and read his mail, and one of them occasionally parked outside his house in an effort to further intimidate him and discourage others from visiting him.

Brutus complied with these restrictions and disruptions, except when the authorities tried to interfere with a matter of special importance to him. He insisted on his right to go to church on Sundays, despite having been explicitly warned several times that this would violate his banning order. Yet he persisted in his defiance and he won; the police never dared to arrest him for attending church. Brutus afterward remarked sardonically, "The state decided, wisely perhaps, that they did not want to be involved in the unpleasant publicity which would follow if I was arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act for attending Sunday mass" (226).

Brutus was allowed to seek employment, but whenever he found a job, the special branch would swoop in and persuade his employer to fire him. But even in these straightened financial circumstances, he still continued writing political articles under pseudonyms for various national newspapers. This at least gave him something useful to do. In one of these contributions, he criticized Athol Fugard, the country's leading playwright, for having allowed one of his plays to be performed to whites-only audiences in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Writing in the *Evening Post* as Cicero, Brutus accused Fugard of having "become an ally of apartheid. It marks a further erosion of our defense of human decency" (218).

But the most important work he did at this time was to produce more poetry, none of which appeared in print until well after he had left South Africa and found publishing opportunities abroad. August devotes most of this chapter to a close reading of much of this verse, noting the

diversity of Brutus's responses to living locked up in a suffocating limbo. Some of these poems are about feeling sad, lonely, and friendless. In others, he is angry and calls for a violent end to apartheid. At times he is contemplative and seeks a better understanding of his enemies and a willingness to forgive them. Then he is hopeful, acknowledging the possibility that the world was designed by a higher being with benevolent intentions. On another occasion, he takes vindictive pride in having expelled South Africa from the Olympics and other international sporting competitions, thereby depriving the former racist deprivors. He also writes nostalgically about a section of Port Elizabeth he lived in as a child, regretting how it had been destroyed by the forcible removal of its colored inhabitants. August follows along, guiding us to a better understanding of these swiftly changing moods by setting each in an appropriate context.

Brutus eventually concluded that he could no longer play a meaningful role in South Africa. "As someone who was under house arrest and banned from all organizations, there was not much left that I could do, except go to prison again" (234), so he applied for a passport. When his application was rejected, he decided that he had no choice but to seek approval to leave South Africa permanently on a one-way exit permit.

August ends his biography with seven pages of photographs and a brief epilogue summing up Brutus's achievement as a humanist with a distinctive approach to poetry and politics. But the story does not end there. August appends 76 pages of footnotes, many of which expand substantively on points raised in the narrative, enriching the factual value of the whole reading experience.

August states at the outset, "This biography is an attempt to acknowledge Brutus's literary and political work and, in a sense, reintroduce Brutus to South Africa" (20). He has done this so skillfully and in such nuanced detail that he may also succeed in reintroducing Brutus to some of his friends and followers outside South Africa who may wish to learn a good deal more about his life and poetry.

Bernth Lindfors
University of Texas at Austin
 Austin, Texas
bernthlindfors@yahoo.com

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