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BOOK REVIEW

Christopher J. Lee, ed. *Alex La Guma: The Exile Years, 1966–1985*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2024. Distributed by Blue Weaver and Lynne Rienner Publishers. xiii + 529 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $45.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780796926678.

"Why the hell must people always be saying goodbye?" This poignant question, posed in the short story "Come Back to Tashkent," marks a rare moment of vulnerability (392) in Christopher J. Lee's substantial new collection *Alex La Guma: The Exile Years, 1966–1985.* For La Guma, one of the apartheid era's most prominent leftist writers and political organizers, the path of exile was a bleak one: giving up the comforts of community for a life on the road, and subordinating personal needs to political goals. However beautifully La Guma renders feelings of longing in "Come Back to Tashkent," austere, inflexible duty has the last word. La Guma's uncompromising understanding of the left-wing intellectual vocation quickly emerges as one of the dominant motifs in *The Exile Years.* Though he did not live to see apartheid end, La Guma chose exile for the sake of a nonracial South Africa, and in Lee's collection we encounter La Guma's reflections on that decision in multiple registers, for multiple audiences.

As the son of a midwife and a firebrand labor organizer in Cape Town's District Six, La Guma's interest in communist and Congress Alliance politics preceded his literary aspirations. It was not until after La Guma was acquitted as a Treason Trialist that his first two novels were published abroad—at the time, La Guma was completing a five-year sentence of house arrest on a separate charge. Upon his release in 1966, La Guma and his family left South Africa, and for the next two decades La Guma led a peripatetic existence at the intersection of literature and activism. In 1978, the La Gumas moved to Havana, Cuba, to organize a diplomatic mission there for the African National Congress (ANC), and the following year La Guma became the secretary-general of the Afro-Asian Writers Association. He died of a heart attack in 1985, five years before Nelson Mandela's release from prison.

Alex La Guma: The Exile Years draws on two texts previously edited by Christopher J. Lee: an annotated edition of *A Soviet Journey* (Lexington Books, 2017) and the anthology *Culture and Liberation: Exile Writings, 1966–1985* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). Lee describes the text as "an omnibus edition of these two books, designed for a South African audience" (viii), and at less than half the combined price of the two previous books and roughly 400 pages shorter, *The Exile Years* is an attractive and practical option for historians and literary scholars who are interested in La Guma, the global anti-apartheid movement, and communist solidarity.

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The collection contains a range of very interesting pieces—La Guma's essays on the legacies of Paul Robeson, Maxim Gorky, and Pablo Neruda are particular highlights, as are excerpts from *A Soviet Journey.* La Guma's biting critiques of Cecil Skotnes, Nadine Gordimer, and Alexander Solzhenitzyn are also compelling: reflecting his orthodox communist priorities, La Guma never missed a chance to attack the idea that "art is something that is above, separate, from people" (350), shaped by primordial cultural currents like Négritude that smack of "separate development" (363). Cultural essentialism cut no mustard with La Guma; he forcefully took Gordimer's book *The Black Interpreters* (1973) to task for mystifying the concerns of African writers as if they were unrelated to material and historical phenomena unfolding outside the continent. For La Guma, this was symptomatic of the disease of South African racialist thinking—a mentality that had effectively stifled art ("after so many years of ascendancy," he commented in another essay, paraphrasing a British newspaper, "the white community of South Africa has produced no musical composition of lasting value, not a single opera, not a painting of note" [246]). In La Guma's view, art and literature was indelibly linked to the mission of building solidarity across races, oceans, and continents through class consciousness—a paradoxical project, as we see in a story like "Come Back to Tashkent," at a time when his own life was increasingly defined by displacement and separation.

Nonspecialist readers will find some of the content in *The Exile Years* repetitive. The surfeit of La Guma's articles on the Colored struggle against apartheid and the official communiqués of the Afro-Asian Writers Association included in the volume read as dry and impersonal enunciations of official doctrine. Yet La Guma was far more than a shallow propagandist or a loyal cadre of communist internationalism. Juxtaposed with the more intimate and literary pieces in *The Exile Years*, one gets a strong sense of the contradictions at the heart of La Guma's life away from home. Like Harry, the melancholy protagonist of "Come Back to Tashkent," who yearns for a female companion whose work prevents her from seeing him off at the train station, La Guma the storyteller drank deeply from the well of life in all its wild, contradictory richness. If La Guma the activist sacrificed some of that richness in his political writing, it is because, like Harry, he saw his task as greater than literature or individual gratification. Instead, Alex La Guma dreamed of a world where, "given equality, the universal and inevitable cultural exchanges with mutual respect will lead eventually to the fusion of everything worthy in the cultures of all peoples" (262). It is a dream we would do well to remember today.

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