

Rick Turner: 30 years on

# May the force be with

January 8 marks the 30th anniversary of the death of Rick Turner. His daughter **Jann Turner** talks about his life and the lessons we could still learn from him today

**C**ape Town. Christmas 1977. I was 13 years old. That seems like a very long time ago now, in a galaxy far, far away. We were living in a period of civil war. Rebel armies, gathered in hidden bases, were plotting strikes against the evil apartheid empire. Security police storm troopers hunted down rebels and imprisoned or killed them. And the empire's sinister agents continued to enforce the banning order that kept my father imprisoned in our home for five years.

I saw *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* for the first time that Christmas and the mythical tale of good and evil resonated in ways I'm sure George Lucas could not have imagined. Otherwise it was a quiet Christmas in Cape Town with my mum. On Boxing Day my sister and I flew unaccompanied to Durban to spend the rest of the holidays with our father.

He was unable to visit us in the Cape because the absurdly titled "minister of justice" confined dad's movements to the magisterial district of Durban, forbade him from teaching, publishing or even being in a room with more than one person at a time.

We knew the minister's agents were watching us because they made their presence felt with the slashes they left in dad's car tyres, the fire bomb they threw into our house one night and the truck-load of cement they dumped on our lawn for a laugh. We saw them following us when we drove around the game reserve, we heard them listening in on our phone conversations and we met them when they raided our house in the middle of the night. I knew they would be there over the holidays because they'd been there, on the shadowy edges of our lives, ever since I could remember.

It rained heavily over New Year. On the day the news of Donald Woods's escape broke we went for a walk along the flooded banks of the Umgeni River. It was raining in the early hours of the morning of January 8 when someone armed with a 9mm pistol walked up our driveway and shot my dad through the window of my sister's and my room. The bullet hit him at point-blank range. He lost consciousness almost immediately and died 20 minutes later in a pool of his own blood. The empire triumphed again.

Nevertheless I knew, as we buried my father with voices raised in song and fists raised in defiance, that somewhere out there was a force called justice that would ultimately eradicate the evil that had shrouded my family and my country in darkness.

I knew this because in the days after dad's death Kim and I were taken to see *Star Wars* a second and then a third time by concerned friends, who tried to keep our minds off our grief and the horror of what happened. My 13-year-old self hooked into the logic and the language of the film as a way of making sense of what happened to my father and of what was happening to me.

Perhaps it's not so odd then that it's scenes from *Star Wars* that have flashed through my mind during criti-



**Rick Turner speaking at Natal University in about 1970 (above left). Jann Turner (aged almost three) with her mother and father in a photo booth in Paris in 1967 (above right). Rick Turner's funeral bier is carried to Brook Street Cemetery where he was buried**



**Opposite page: (from left to right) Rick Turner's first wife Barbara Follett, daughter Kim Turner (aged nine), in the background Micheal Nupen, Turner's second wife Foszia Turner and daughter Jann Turner (aged 13) at his funeral in January 1978**



cal moments in our history. In 1994, as I stood among ululating, toyi-toying South Africans in the ballroom of the embassy in Trafalgar Square, watching the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela, I recall thinking of the scene at the end of episode IV when Han Solo and Luke Skywalker received medals from Princess Leia in a ceremony of huge gravity and celebration. I am sad for my father and for my country that he never lived to see that day and to enjoy life and work in the new South Africa that I am privileged to call home.

January 8 next year will mark the 30th anniversary of his death but, despite so much change in the intervening decades, I believe his voice and his presence would make an important contribution right now. I doubt that he would have been at Polokwane as an ANC delegate, but he certainly would have attended the conference as an observer and analyst, very probably doing exactly what he did in the Seventies — standing on the outside of the institutions of power, analysing and questioning in that calm, lucid, humorous and, above all, rational way that was his.

I would love to talk to him right now about the leadership contest and its implications. I would love to have his thoughts and his counsel, because I'm not sure the result of the ANC election will make a difference to my feeling that some of our Jedi Knight leaders have gone over to the Dark Side, that power has corrupted ideals and that

vision has been replaced by an obsession with careers. He would at least have offered me a more complex, and perhaps hopeful, explanation.

But he might well have asked, as I do — where is the contest of ideas? Where are the visions for our society and its future? Where are the manifestos of strategy and policy? All we hear and read is that both leaders are loyal members of the ANC and that they will uphold the policies of the ANC. But are we merely to expect more of the same from the ANC in terms of social and economic policy for our country? If neither candidate, nor indeed the party, is offering a vision of a better and more just society, then does the vote really matter? Have we all been caught on the hook of a huge red herring? And is the casualty not then the stuff that really matters?

We'll only ever be allowed to speculate on my father's views; nevertheless we can still learn from the example of his life and the record of his work. I believe that now, perhaps more than ever, those lessons need to be remembered and applied.

If you google his name you'll find

Rick Turner took seriously the injunction that it is the task of the intellectual not merely to understand the world, but to change it

descriptions along the lines of this one penned by Gail Gerhardt: "Turner, Richard (1941-1978), Visionary academic who inspired a generation of young activists and helped galvanise the labour movement's resurgence before his assassination in 1978."

My father was born in Cape Town in 1941, the son of working-class English parents who came to Africa for a better life. He grew up on a fruit farm near Stellenbosch and attended St George's in Cape Town as a boarder. His father died when he was 12, so it's probably the influence of his mother, Jane, that formed the confident, widely read and thoughtful young man who registered at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1960 for a BA in engineering. Against Jane's wishes he switched to philosophy in his second year and graduated with honours in 1963. It was in the early Sixties that the chances of meaningful peaceful change ended with the arrest and imprisonment of the ANC and PAC leadership. Opposition to apartheid went underground and the National Party state became a monolith.

Alan Brooks, one of my father's closest friends at UCT, chose to get involved by joining the mostly white African Resistance Movement. Brooks was arrested and badly tortured and, on his release, left for England. In 1974 dad commented: "The ARM episode, in which disillusioned students tried sabotage, shattered their own and others' lives and did great damage to the cause

they were fighting for [and] made me acutely aware of the dangers of students turning to violence."

It was central to his world view that intellectual activity was crucial to the development of a strategy for change and the creation of a new society. Tony Morphet describes this facet of his character well. "He was entirely opposed, as every detail of his life makes clear, to the concept and practice of a small vanguardist group. He was constitutionally incapable of following an orthodox Leninist or Stalinist line."

Morphet also writes: "He never, at any time, entertained the dream of a short-term conflict leading to massive change. His concern was with the value-creating processes through which such a struggle would develop. It is worth noting the distinction he consistently drew between the struggle in Mozambique and that in Zimbabwe.

"As the Portuguese dictatorship collapsed and the Frelimo leadership began to assume control Turner taught himself Portuguese to follow as closely as possible the developments in Mozambique. He was especially interested in the ways in which the consciously controlled process of the struggle waged by Frelimo had developed and concretised the ends they sought to achieve.

"By contrast he was gloomy about the prospects for the resolution of the conflict in Zimbabwe. Violence, uncontrolled by any sense of ends, had already become the deciding factor and he foresaw that the vaguely defined and sloganised socialist programme of the Patriotic Front would simply be swallowed up in an unending succession of bloody conflicts. In the absence of any coherent grasp of ends and means, violence was likely to become endemic."

This thinking was shaped in the crucible of Paris and the emergence of the new left in the mid-1960s where he registered at the Sorbonne to study for a doctorate on *Quelques Implications de la Phénoménologie Existentielle* [Several Implications of the Phenomenology of Existentialism]. He wrote his thesis on the political implications of existentialism and Sartre in particular. What developed was a radical take on thinking and teaching.

In an article penned in 1968 he

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wrote: "Philosophy or the philosophic attitude is the questioning of assumptions, the attempt to discover and examine the assumptions on which any particular argument in any particular sphere is based." What he brought back from France was the idea that since we have created society as we find it, we can also change it.

The act of thinking in a utopian manner, that of envisioning a new society, is an important one, because that vision can form the blueprint of change and, therefore, of the new society. As Eddie Webster has said, Rick Turner took seriously the injunction that it is the task of the intellectual not merely to understand the world, but also to change it.

This was dangerous thinking in apartheid South Africa.

He'd married my mother, Barbara, on the eve of his departure for France and I was born there in November 1964. On our return to South Africa in 1967, dad took up a series of teaching positions before settling into a permanent post in the philosophy department at the then-University of Natal in 1970. By that time I had a sister, Kim, and my parents' marriage was disintegrating. Kim and I remained in the Cape with our mother, while dad settled in Durban.

Once there he quickly came into contact with the leaders of the emerging Black Consciousness movement through which he met and developed a personal relationship with Steve Biko, then a medical student at the university. My father's response to Black Consciousness and to Biko's injunction to him to work on conscientising whites was an important one because it galvanised white students to work in the one remaining legal area of political organisation and opposition, the labour movement. "In an important sense," my father wrote, "both whites and blacks are oppressed, though in different ways, by a social system which perpetuates itself by creating white lords and black slaves and no full human beings."

It was through Biko that my father met the woman who would become his second wife; Foszia, who was a student on what was then Natal University's black campus. Their living together contravened the Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Act and the Group Areas Act. Barred from a civil marriage my dad converted to Islam to marry Foszia in a religious ceremony that was conducted by an imam in the garden of Fatima and Ismail Meer's house.

Tony Morphet writes of this marriage that it "aptly

symbolises the barriers which Turner was prepared to break through in his quest for a life that unified consciousness, values and actions. The liberal ethos out of which he had grown consistently stopped short of such an authentication of chosen values, withdrawing rather into uneasy compromises which insulated values from actions."

As a teacher he was exciting and intellectually invigorating. His classes were always packed and the informal seminars and lectures that he organised with Michael Nupen and others were hugely popular with students of all disciplines on campus.

"Education is not," he wrote, "about  
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## 'This white person thinks I can't do the job'

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One of the unmistakable effects of the Mbeki years on the ANC is that there are fewer members of the "white left" active in the party, or in senior government and political positions.

There is an intense bitterness about this among many people who gave their lives to the struggle, and then to public service, and who feel shut out of an increasingly racialised power-elite and official ideology.

Did Mbeki institute a "purge" of the white left, and, if so, was it because of an over-sensitivity to being patronised? Was it, rather, the inevitable consequence of affirmative action, and the right-sizing that comes with representivity? Or was it, perhaps, a symptom of the ideological shift in the Mbekiled ANC, away from positions that were the preserve of the white left? Was Derek Hanekom dropped from Thabo Mbeki's first Cabinet in 1999 because he was white, or because he espoused an approach to rural poverty-alleviation at odds with the Mbeki mantra of creating a new black middle class?

One of Mbeki's inner circle told me, a few years ago, what he thought the problem with the white left and its "house organ", the *Mail & Guardian*, was. Middle-class whites and Indians, he told me, used to have inordinate influence in the struggle, "because we needed their resources" — their cars, their houses, their libraries. Now, however, there was a black middle class that provided these resources itself: "And so they [the white left] have lost their influence. That's why they are angry."

I was struck by the way my interlocutor used "us" and "them"; it signalled, to me, a racialisation of struggle completely at odds with the ANC's own "non-racial" ideology. Certainly, Thabo Mbeki was correct to insist that there could be "no reconciliation without transformation", and that blacks and whites alike had to look the country's racist past squarely in the eye. Certainly, too, there is more than enough racism about in this country for Mbeki — or any black person — to find grounds for grievous offence.

But could there have been another way of communicating such concerns? One of the most profound — and winning — insights of the ANC's liberation struggle was its unique understanding of the place of non-indigenous South Africans on African soil. Not just for moral reasons, but for practical ones too, it is an understanding that has to be maintained, balanced against the legitimate need to reckon with the way racism and inequality still stand in the way of social progress.

Mbeki shares this insight, as is evident by the work he did while in exile and, more recently, by his extraordinary 1996 "I am an African" speech. But the way he puts it into practice has often been coloured by his personal experience of how race works, particularly within the struggle, and by his perception of a dynamic of paternalism that compromises self-determination.

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# May the force be with us

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learning a group of key facts in some special order. What has to be learned is a particular way of thinking, the ability to analyse, to think critically and to think creatively."

Eddie Webster said of him: "Turner provided a generation disillusioned by the repression of the Sixties ... with a vision — a moral vision — of what a new South Africa could become and a strategy of how we could reach it." Halton Cheadle, a student of my fathers, says his skill lay in his ability to communicate the most complex and nuanced of ideas without crudifying them.

Cheadle was one of the students who, with guidance and assistance from my father and Harriet Bolton among others, helped to get white students involved in the organisation of black workers, spurring the formation of the Nusas wages commissions. With Cheadle my father was a moving force behind the Institute for Industrial Education and the *South African Labour Bulletin* during and after the Durban strikes of 1973.

In 1973 he committed some of his teaching and ideas to a book. *The Eye of the Needle: A Guide to Participatory Democracy in South Africa* was first published by Ravan Press as part of the South African Council of Churches Spro-cas report. Alan Paton described the book as "an essay on our condition, as searching as any that has ever been written. Turner writes without vituperation of censoriousness, but rather with a quiet moral authority." In a letter to a newspaper replying to a critic my dad wrote of the book: "Whatever it's faults [it is] cheap, short, non-academic and free from philosophical name-dropping."

The impact of *The Eye* was far reaching, particularly among white South Africans looking for alternatives to underground activism and the liberalism then on offer. And the political activity around my father did not fail to come to the attention of the security police. Morphet writes that the state's security apparatus saw him



From left: Jann Turner, first wife Barbara and Kim Turner at the grave side at Brook Street Cemetery

as "a revolutionary and as a man with a charismatic capacity to mobilise others". While he was far from a party man he "had the potential to draw together a new formation of opposition groups — a formation that might include the whole spectrum of opposition from exiled organisation to the 'homeland' leadership and rank and file to Black Consciousness and white activists and even to some elements of the Progressive Federal Party".

And so the state banned him in March 1973, with seven national Nusas leaders and eight Saso/BC leaders, including Biko. He continued to advise unions and student leaders informally, but the banning order effectively silenced him. A brief respite from his non-person status occurred when he testified as a defence witness during the 1975/76 trial of the "Saso nine". To its eternal credit the University of Natal refused to recognise his banning order and continued to pay him a salary, which allowed him to pursue his philosophical studies. In 1976 the government denied him permission to take up an illustrious Humboldt fellowship in Germany. He was killed two months before his banning order was due to expire.

As Tony Morphet writes, so beautifully and succinctly, of the death of his

friend: "What is lost to South Africa, but in the same moment affirmed, is the meaning of a life lived in freedom. Turner revealed to a society caught in the defeating logic of oppression the shape and substance of life conceived in freedom and lived out through the enactment of rational choices."

And that is why I say it is in his work and in the example of the conduct of his life that we can still learn from him. I can hear him today, still questioning. While we have political freedom, do we use it effectively? Do we have a contest of ideas in Parliament and the country at large, or — he would have asked — does the ANC function with a lock on power and an uncritical constituency? Why is there no political sanction for incompetence and corruption?

I believe he would have been deeply alarmed, as I am, that the moral compass of our politics appears to have gone haywire under the magnetic pull of greed for money and power.

The state's security apparatus saw him as "a revolutionary and as a man with a charismatic capacity to mobilise others"

It would have troubled him profoundly that corruption in the police and low-level white collar and public service crime runs as rampant as high-level corruption and cronyism on government tenders. The extent and violence of crime in the country would have appalled him. And I think that he'd have been particularly upset by the state of our education system.

He would have been quick to ring alarm bells last month when, on the day after some of the worst education statistics in living memory were published, our education minister's only comment was on the conduct of the leadership race in the ANC.

For me the sharpest instance of this moral confusion was the flying of our flag at half-mast on the day PW Botha died. Even schools accorded him that recognition. If we had any sense of right and wrong, we would have left his death to be marked by obituary writers and columnists instead of according such honour to a man who presided over one of the most vicious, racist states of the 20th century and whose legacy for most South Africans was violence and poverty.

But, while we have our problems and our foibles, as all country's do, I think there would have been a great deal in South Africa today of which my father would have been extremely proud. He certainly would not have thrown up his hands at the complexity of it all and retreated to the turrets of a foreign university. He was above all a South African and an activist academic and there is no doubt in my mind that the force of his intellect would have been brought to bear on work here at home.

Reason and imagination. Critical and visionary thinking. Those are the forces he would have deployed. Powerful forces that need to be nurtured and safeguarded. Forces that are eroding and will fade if we let them. It would be the most fitting memorial to him if we were to resuscitate those forces in our daily conversation and activity and in the wider politics of our country.

May the Force be with you and with all of us over the holidays and into the coming year.