

## Van Rensburg, Patrick (1931– ),

South African educator and social activist, was born in Durban, Natal, South Africa, on 3 December 1931. His mother was Cecile Marie-Louise van Rensburg *née* Lagesse, the daughter of an Afrikaner mother and a French planter; his father was Peter Maxwell, an English-speaking South African whose family forbade him to marry Cecile.

The boy Patrick spent much of his childhood in Pietermaritzburg in the care of his grandmother, Susanna Marie Lagesse *née* Louwrens. Her family had been forced into a British concentration camp following the Boer War, a story that she often told. A Catholic by marriage, she raised Patrick in the Catholic Church as well. Communication at home was conducted in a mixture of English, French, Afrikaans, and Zulu. Although poverty prevented him from attending college, he threw himself into correspondence courses and earned a BA from the University of South Africa (UNISA). As he frequently remarked later, his youthful experiences closely reflected the deep divisions in South Africa as a whole.

At the age of twenty-one, van Rensburg joined the Department of External Affairs; in February 1956 he was appointed vice-consul to the then-Belgian Congo. Fellow diplomats introduced him to Western humanism and antiracial ideals, even as his own government enacted apartheid. He resigned his post fifteen months later. Upon reflection, van Rensburg entered politics and began to organize for the nonracial Liberal Party, displaying leadership beyond his years. In 1959 he traveled to Britain and unexpectedly helped launch the Boycott Movement against his own country's racial policies. The South African establishment condemned him fiercely. When he returned to South Africa in March 1960—one week after the Sharpeville shootings—his passport was confiscated. Within weeks he was forced to flee to Swaziland, Bechuanaland, and finally London. Here he received a British passport and met his fiancée, Elizabeth Griffin (1938– ). Early in 1962 he published *Guilty Land: The History of Apartheid*, which made a strong impression on Western audiences.

Immediately afterward, van Rensburg and Griffin left for Bechuanaland and settled in the tribal capital of Serowe, home to Seretse Khama. On 29 June they married. In February 1963 they founded Swaneng Hill Secondary School, which soon became widely known for its policies of non-racialism, self-help, community service, voluntary student labor, and a progressive curriculum that included practical subjects and development studies. It became an educational model in the region for some two decades. In 1965 van Rensburg pioneered a distinctive form of vocational training: on-the-job education with active production. These units he called brigades, and they soon included building, farming, textile work, tanning, mechanics, and more. He solicited overseas aid and overseas volunteers to launch and run them, adding to their novelty and effectiveness. Other villages and towns soon followed this example, creating locally controlled brigade centers throughout newly independent Botswana.

Van Rensburg recognized the positive implications for economic development. He founded a self-help cooperative, Boiteko, and encouraged others. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, he launched two further secondary schools, both associated with brigades. He became disillusioned, however, with mainstream education and later chose to promote less expensive, self-help-based forms of education. Crucially, he forged professional and personal alliances with international aid donors (especially in Scandinavia), with other pioneers of education-for-development, and with broad movements for social change. A prolific writer, he chronicled his evolving thinking in several influential volumes: *Education and Development in an Emerging Country* (1967), *Report from Swaneng Hill: Education and Employment in an African Country* (1974), and *The Serowe Brigades: Alternative Education in Botswana* (1978). In addition, during these years the van Rensburgs had two sons, Thomas Masego (1963– ) and Mothusi Joe (1966– ), and in 1973 the family became citizens of Botswana. In 1980, with backing from the Swedish government, van Rensburg launched the Foundation for Education with Production (FEP) to spread his vision internationally. Several FEP projects appeared in newly independent Zimbabwe. The Foundation published a respected educational journal from 1982 to 1996.

Van Rensburg built a minor weekly paper, *Mmegi* (The Reporter), into Botswana's most important independent media house. To his later regret, he joined a Marxist political party, the Botswana National Front (BNF), and in the mid-1990s sat on its executive committee. With his second companion, Rosemary Forbes (1950– ), he fathered a daughter, Joanna Boitumelo Forbes (1986– ). Notable publications from the post-Swaneng period include *Looking Forward from Serowe*, a special supplement to the journal *Education with Production* (1984), *Making Education Work: The What, Why and How of Education with Production* (2001), and “No Longer a Guilty Land”, a newspaper column published in *Mmegi* newspaper, 29 April 2005.

After the capitulation of apartheid, van Rensburg quietly returned to South Africa in 1990 and initiated some modest urban and rural projects. More importantly, as a key resource person for the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Sweden, he helped organize many international seminars. His thinking reflected both the Foundation's advocacy of a “third way” of development and his own commitment to socialism from the ground up. He read eclectically, from Mao Tse-tung to Paulo Freire. He consistently rejected globalization theory—especially its reliance on foreign investment—in favor of domestic capital accumulation and local control. Ultimately, however, the post-independence elites of Southern Africa opted for mainstream development, leading to sharp personal disappointment.



Van Rensburg moved back to Botswana, pursued a low-key life in Gaborone, and contributed to *Mmegi*. Although his class struggle-based view of social change had estranged him from centrist institutions, it gave him an iconic position among a younger generation of progressives. In 1981 Patrick van Rensburg received the prestigious Right Livelihood Award from the Right Livelihood Award Foundation in Stockholm. His most important legacy remains Botswana's strong network of self-reliant community trusts, decisively set in motion by his work from the mid-1960s onwards.

[See also Khama, Seretse.]

### **bibliography**

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