

'A vast, deep, lonely feeling':

Helen Keller in South Africa, 1951

by Stephen Coan

In 1951 Helen Keller travelled from the United States to South Africa on a fundraising trip 'on behalf of its blind and its deaf.' The trip included visits to Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Keller would later record that her tour of South Africa left her with impressions 'unique among my travel experiences'.¹ As we shall see, this observation, from one of the most famous women in the world, was not necessarily intended as a compliment.

'[T]he story of Helen Keller is known to millions of people,' writes Alan Paton:

I was a boy at school when I first read and learned about her. It was a miraculous story of a child who seemed to have been shut off by a hard fate from all life and joy, to whom a strange door was suddenly opened, and who found herself able to open to others in one great creative step after another. It was the story of an eager willing child, and an imaginative and devoted teacher, and it never failed to excite and inspire.²

Helen Keller was born in the in the southern state of Alabama in the United States in 1880. As a toddler she lost her sight and hearing. At the age of seven she met her first teacher, and thereafter her constant companion, Anne Sullivan, who enabled Keller to break out of her dark and silent world. Sullivan taught Keller how to speak, read braille and finger language, and write. Thus enabled, Keller attended Harvard University and became the first deaf-blind person in the USA to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. According to the American Foundation for the Blind, Keller went on to become

a luminary who continues to transcend her historical era. Because she was a woman outspoken in her principles, she inspired changes in public attitudes about the capabilities of people with visual impairments. As she pushed for revolutionary changes in the law, people with disabilities could transition into mainstream education and employment. Helen Keller inspired future generations of people with disabilities to live life to the fullest.³

Keller, who died in 1968, wrote many books, including an autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (1903), adapted in 1959 by William Gibson into an award-winning play,



'A proud, blind Zulu brings his son for Helen Keller to feel, at the Institute for Bantu Blind, Westville, near Durban'. This is the original caption from Arthur William Blaxall, Helen Keller under the Southern Cross. The visit took place on 18 April 1951 and the child is Vuyisile Sokela. His father was an instructor at the institute, but his first name is unknown. (Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives)

The Miracle Worker, subsequently turned into the 1962 film of the same title starring Patty Duke as Keller and Anne Bancroft as Sullivan. Sullivan remained Keller's companion until her health failed and her place was taken by Polly Thomson as companion and secretary. Keller and Thomson would subsequently travel widely raising funds for the blind and deaf.

Keller was invited to South Africa by Arthur William Blaxall, representing the South African National

Council for the Blind and the South African National Council for the Deaf who jointly sponsored Keller and Thomson's visit.⁴ At the time Blaxall was chairperson of both councils, and he assumed responsibility for organising the itinerary for Keller's visit having met her in 1931 at the World Conference on Work for the Blind in New York.

According to Kim E. Nielsen, one of Keller's biographers, Keller's 'preparations were intense for she was acutely aware of the intensifying racial apartheid of South Africa.'⁵ She read Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* and Mohandas Gandhi's *Autobiography*.⁶ She sought expert information on the subcontinent's flora and fauna. 'Most striking for her was a multifaceted evening in Harlem, New York' where Reverend Dr Adam Clayton Powell Senior, minister at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, 'one of the largest and most dynamic congregations in Harlem', invited her to attend 'the coloured debutantes' cotillion.' There she had a lengthy discussion with the guest of honour Ralph Bunche, 'a leading U.S. expert on African and colonial affairs, and a fierce advocate of decolonization.' A few months before, Bunche had become the first person of African descent to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Bunche described to her South Africa's 'racial divisions and the miserable conditions of black workers'.⁷

While Keller wanted to confront 'the racism of South African society' she 'felt she had to be very careful'.⁸ Prior to leaving the USA in February 1951 she sent a copy of the speech she would give at various venues to her host, Arthur Blaxall, whom she considered an advocate of racial equality. She sought his 'skill and tact as well as enthusiasm to obtain the right help for the coloured blind, who, owing to their handicap are more subject to the arbitrary will of white society than their seeing fellows.'⁹ Blaxall gave his approval to the speech.

Blaxall endeavoured 'not to overload the programme' in South Africa but the 'structure of social life in South Africa is such that in one town two, and in places even three, similar institutions exist to meet the needs of various racial groups. This of necessity meant a duplication of visits because to have visited one, and omitted another, would have meant eternal maledictions on the head of the poor organiser!' Despite this several 'multi-racial meetings were held with great success'.¹⁰

Blaxall subsequently wrote a record of Keller's visit entitled 'Completion of a mission' and this was paired with Keller's own account, 'An unforgettable tour', and published under the title *Helen Keller under the*

Southern Cross, a small hardcover volume of less than 100 pages with 22 full-page photographs, several addenda and a foreword by Alan Paton.

Keller intended to raise both funds and awareness for the deaf and blind of all races in South Africa, but was well aware that a country three years into apartheid posed challenges for her. 'All my life I had acted upon the conviction that humanity must be one ... but how could I count with certainty on gratifying results in a country like South Africa, divided against itself?'¹¹ She was clearly apprehensive about what might lie ahead: '[A] spur to my courage was reading Gandhi's autobiography and *Gandhi at Work* ... both in braille. Gandhi knew well the problems of South Africa and the sturdy philosophy and the fraternal love that infuses these extraordinarily inspiring books braced me for the peculiar difficulties I was to encounter.'¹² Keller together with her friend and companion Polly Thomson, arrived in Cape Town aboard the *Pretoria Castle* on 15 March 1951. They were accompanied by Alfred Allen, assistant director of the American Foundation of the Blind who sponsored his trip.

In Cape Town Keller gave speeches and visited several institutions working with the deaf and blind. A teacher who refused to attend a meeting between Keller and some schoolchildren when he found it was a case of whites first and blacks second subsequently wrote her a letter saying that he believed this had been done without consulting her (it had). Keller responded: 'how all my instincts cried against discrimination, and how fervently I prayed for a time when the various races of Africa would take an equal share in the welfare and happiness of the handicapped.' During her journey Keller was ever alert to the separation of the races: 'I observed that segregation was practised everywhere in schools and colleges. The one noble exception I came across was the admission of White and non-White to the University of the Witwatersrand, but I have since heard the same pertains at Cape Town University.'¹³

From Cape Town she sailed to Port Elizabeth and then, via Grahamstown, to the Lovedale Missionary Institute, near Alice, arriving, after an exhausting eighteen-hour journey on dirt roads, to spend two days there. When talking to the principal, Robert H.W. Shepherd, reference was made to the 'clicks in the Xhosa language. Miss Keller immediately said: "They are now in braille". A wish was expressed that she might have the opportunity of examining their voice production.' That evening the assistance of a graduate teacher, B.B. Mdledle, made 'possible the experiment. Miss Keller

through her fingers, and under the direction of Miss Thomson, examined the position and movement of the vocal organs. It was an astonishing experience to find within ten minutes this woman, who has never heard herself or others speak, distinctly utter each of the clicks.¹⁴ In East London, the 'most exciting event' for Keller was the opening of a community centre at Duncan Village, where the 'Bantu National Anthem [Nkosi Sikelela Afrika] was wonderfully sung and the song "God bless this house" by the adult African choir.'¹⁵

From East London she flew by plane to Durban. Shortly after her arrival on 13 April she was interviewed at her hotel by a reporter from the *Natal Mercury* who described how Keller answered questions: 'Miss Thomson conveyed the words to Miss Keller either by holding her hand and going through a sign language almost as rapid as ordinary speech; or by holding Miss Keller's hand to her own mouth so that Miss Keller could "read" the words as they were mouthed.'¹⁶ Keller told the *Mercury* that her 'impression [of South Africa] is very different from any impressions I have had of the many countries I have visited. It is mainly an impression of a vast, deep, lonely feeling in my heart that South Africa is enfolding me.'¹⁷

Speaking at the Durban city hall Keller told the 'story of her victory over blindness and deafness and speechlessness' which so enthralled the audience of 2 000 that at the end of the meeting 'hundreds thronged the foyer to shake her hand and some later "gate-crashed" the Mayor's private reception to be introduced.' Fourteen-year-old Dawn Mansell was so inspired by Keller's appeal for help for those like her that she demanded her mother take her home urgently and collect her 'expensive "walkie-talkie" doll'. Returning to the city hall she 'presented her precious toy to Miss Keller in the hope that "it could be sold and the money used for the blind and deaf"'. Keller said it was "'the most touching gift I've ever had. The doll came right from the little girl's heart.'¹⁸

On Wednesday evening 18 April Keller was hosted by the Natal Indian Blind Society at a packed meeting at Gandhi Hall where she spoke of her reverence for Rabindranath Tagore: 'I met him seven times and I used to call him "Dear Master". I loved his kind touch and his handsome flowing beard. I found peace in his presence.'¹⁹ Asked what her conception of life was, Keller replied: 'Life is like Truth flashing through the mind, it is a bright and amazing thing.' She went on to say that philosophy was her favourite subject and that it had helped her 'to conquer circumstances and to



Reverend Arthur William Blaxall

build a beautiful satisfying world. I found life at college very hard, but it showed me how I could conquer one obstacle, and then another.' She also spoke of her 'great admiration for Gandhiji and all he stands for and somehow I feel his presence, though unseen, as I speak to you.'²⁰

At the time of Keller's visit Manilal Gandhi, the second son of Mohandas Gandhi, whom he had left in charge of the Phoenix Settlement, was coming towards the end of a fourteen-day fast at his home in Phoenix to protest against recently introduced apartheid laws and due to weakness was unable to attend the meeting. Keller sent him a message: 'I send to him good wishes, whose father's teachings I have held affectionately in my heart. I pray that the good cause for which he now suffers may ultimately triumph.'²¹ Manilal's daughter Sita was in the audience and came 'up to the platform and promised to take the message to her father. Spontaneously the two embraced, the seventy-year-old deaf-blind American lady and the twenty-year-old granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi.' For Blaxall it was 'one of the most moving moments of the whole tour revealing the absolute unity of man in the struggle for the freedom of the spirit.'²²

Motoring through the Valley of a Thousand Hills on the way to Pietermaritzburg Keller asked Blaxall 'many questions, some of which were virtually unanswerable, such as, "Even if social custom demands racial separation (remember, her home was in Alabama), why is it not possible to have co-operation in organization, one management which would mean such saving of time,

money and energy?"²³ On 19 April Keller spoke at the city hall in Pietermaritzburg where, on her arrival, she was given a posy of flowers. According to the *Natal Witness*

the blooms were specially selected so that Miss Keller could appreciate them to the full. When Miss Keller spoke she continually buried her nose in the flowers: 'A bird of paradise', and then 'a gardenia' as she recognised each flower from its scent. 'When I first entered Maritzburg, the one thing of which I was most aware was its fragrance, but I had no idea how rich and varied it was,' she said.²⁴

The following day Keller was entertained at a garden party at Parkside hosted by Administrator of Natal Dennis Shepstone and in the afternoon she visited Inkosi Bhekizizwe Zondi at Sweetwaters, the grandfather of the current inkosi, Nsikayezwe Zondi. A permit for 'entry on to land in Scheduled Native Areas', in this case Zwartkop Location, had been issued by the chief native commissioner on 12 March and was valid for two days, 19 or 20 April.²⁵

Keller's visit to what was then Natal only gets two paragraphs in the account of her visit to the subcontinent. She wrote her account after returning to the USA and sent it to Blaxall. He thanked her, and when acknowledging her permission to shorten it if it was too long, assured her 'that it is not too long, in fact it is so readable it could have been longer, but I know how difficult it must have been for you to do it, and am most grateful.' He went on to make some suggestions 'for your consideration'. In one of them, concerning the visits to Durban and Pietermaritzburg, he pointed out that the cities 'stood for the whole province, and as the reference is very brief I fear there may be some ill feeling. I wonder if you would agree to a couple of lines referring to the charming garden party given by the Administrator and Mrs Shepstone, people who stand for a great deal in South African history.'²⁶ Keller responded with the 'characteristic reply from ancient days: "What I have written, I have written".'²⁷ But she did add 'affectionate Christmas Greetings' to Blaxall and his wife Florence and wished him a 'happy outcome of your book and the continued growth of your work in the exodus of the deaf and the blind from Egyptian darkness to inner light.'²⁸

Blaxall would go on to found the Arthur Blaxall School for the Deaf and Blind in Royston Road, Pietermaritzburg, in 1954. In 1951 he made good Keller's omission regarding Natal by giving details of that part of the tour in his own account recalling a question she

was asked in Pietermaritzburg, 'one of the most difficult of the many questions she was asked at her public meetings. Question: "Does Dr Helen Keller feel she has really achieved anything in her life?" Keller admitted she couldn't say what she had achieved: "I believe that all through these dark and silent years God has been using my life for a purpose I do not know, but one day I shall understand, and then I will be satisfied."²⁹

From Pietermaritzburg Keller was driven to Johannesburg: 'It was the city I had imagined in reading *Cry, the Beloved Country* – young, hard-driving, unattractive, built, as it were, on gold.' However, Keller sensed 'something mightier than greed or lust of power – a spirit that will ultimately transform it into a city of beauty, harmony and justice for its people of all races and faiths.'

Paton, the author of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, would subsequently read Keller's account of her visit in manuscript and provide the foreword to Blaxall's book. 'I have written several forewords', Paton wrote to Blaxall, 'and often they are stiff, and I feel that I have forced into them. As soon as I had read your letter with enclosures, I knew I would write freely and easily.'³⁰

During Keller's visit to Alexandra township outside Johannesburg she was presented with a Zulu shield by the Service Committee of Alexandra Township and the citation says Keller was given the shield, along with two assegais and a staff, 'as a token of our deep gratitude for your expressed interest in the Non-European peoples of this country who live in silence and in darkness. In our tribal custom a shield, two assegais and a staff are the equipment of a brave warrior and that is how we think of you.'³¹

Keller went on to visit Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Pretoria and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and managed to have a short holiday in the Kruger National Park. She briefly returned to Johannesburg where, on 18 May, the University of the Witwatersrand awarded her an honorary doctorate. 'It made me especially proud to receive this beautiful gesture because Witwatersrand has a splendid record of admitting students to its halls of learning, regardless of race and colour or nationality.'³² The following day Keller opened the St John Eye Hospital at Baragwanath built by the St John Ophthalmic Foundation, 'the first ophthalmic hospital south of Cairo', later donated to Baragwanath Hospital. Keller said that though it had often 'been my privilege to speak for restoration of sight never had I had that feeling of awe that I experienced that Saturday.' Looking at the doctors and nurses 'gathered around the still incomplete

building, I felt that they had taken a magnificent step to break through the appalling belt of darkness stretching through Africa' where many thousands 'must go blind before ophthalmic assistance can reach them' and she 'implored the public to assist the doctors and surgeons' by funding hospitals and mobile clinics and 'the training of more nurses to carry the gospel of eye care ever further into the heart of the Continent'.³³ Today a

faded brass plaque as you enter the hospital reads: 'In commemoration of the visit to South Africa by Helen Keller L.H.D. LL.D. whose radiant personality and personal triumph over the double disability of blindness and deafness has inspired millions of people in many lands to battle for sight.' This is followed by a quotation from Helen Keller: 'God's first command was: Let there be light so that men should not stumble'.³⁴

Shortly afterwards Keller and Thomson flew to Cape Town, where on 22 May she sailed for the USA aboard the *African Endeavour*. During her visit to South Africa Keller had visited 28 schools and addressed 48 meetings and receptions attended by an estimated 50 000 people. 'In an address of welcome at an African meeting ... they gave her the name Nomvuselelo (Zulu) and Matsosetso (Sotho), meaning "You have aroused the consciences of many"'.³⁵

Back in the USA, reflecting on her South African visit at her home in Westport, Connecticut, Keller was unsure whether she had sufficiently aroused the conscience of anyone, she told her friend Takeo Iwahashi, founder of the Nippon Lighthouse Welfare Centre for the Blind in Japan, and translator of *The Story of My Life* into Japanese. She said that she had 'worked with all my strength' pleading for more schools and facilities for 'the coloured and the native handicapped', but that apartheid compromised the welfare of the majority of South Africa's deaf and blind. 'We held three or four meetings almost every day, which was part of the racial problem. The whites, the coloured people, the Indians and the natives refuse to assemble in the same places'.³⁶

She was more outspoken with her close friend the American sculptor Jo Davidson, telling him the ever-present 'bitter racialism' clashed with the magnificent scenery and that it took 'all the courage and fortitude Polly and I could command' to plead for the education and employment of the indigenous blind and deaf people. Her frustration was such that she had dreams of 'bang[ing] my head against an impenetrable wall trying to find a breakthrough.' Nielsen writes that Keller said her "'mutinous lips" – the result of her repugnance for South Africa's racial divisions – often made convincing those with money in South African society to improve

the conditions for *all* of South Africa's blind people difficult'.³⁷

She was equally candid in her contribution to *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*:

Every fibre within me revolts against circumstances that threaten the minds of handicapped human beings and narrows their chances of well-being. Again and again, I have witnessed the failure of society to redeem the blind and the deaf simply because of racial prejudice – an offence against humanitarianism which life never forgives. Uncompromisingly, I am at war with any system, social, political or educational, that shackles or defies or distorts the handicapped ... The touchstone of any regime is the men and women it shapes. If any procedure stultifies them, it is bad; if it injures their character, it is rotten; if it harms their souls, it is criminal.³⁸

- This is an expanded and revised version of an article published in the *Witness* on 7 May 2010.

NOTES

- 1 Arthur William Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross* (Cape Town: Juta, 1952): 32.
- 2 Alan Paton in Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: foreword.
- 3 <https://www.afb.org/about-afb/history/helen-keller/biography-and-chronology> (accessed 24 July 2024).
- 4 Arthur William Blaxall was born in 1891 in Britain. A clergyman, he came to South Africa in 1923 to work with the deaf and in the 1930s headed the Athlone School for coloured blind children near Stellenbosch. In 1939 he opened the first workshop for blind Africans in South Africa, Ezenzeleni in Roodepoort, where he served as superintendent until 1950. He became a pacifist, chairman of the South African branch of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and secretary of the South African Christian Council. Over the years he developed 'an ever deepening sense of solidarity,' in his own words, with the African, coloured, and Indian struggle against apartheid. Trusted as a friend, he received money in the early 1960s from exiled ANC and PAC leaders and passed it on to former political prisoners and their families who were in need. This led to his arrest in April 1963 and conviction under the Suppression of Communism Act. Already in his 70s and the subject of wide publicity, he spent a night and a day in prison before being paroled, and the rest of his sentence was suspended. He left soon afterwards for Britain, where he died in 1970. His autobiography, *Suspended Sentence*, was published in 1965 (www.sahistory.org.za/people/arthur-william-blaxall, accessed 3 May 2010).
- 5 Kim E. Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 103.
- 6 According to the Reverend G. Owen Lloyd it was reading Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* that 'persuaded her to accept the invitation to travel to South Africa, although she is 70 years of age, to do something for the blind, deaf and dumb people of this country' (*Health Magazine: Quarterly Journal of the South African Health Society* (Lovedale Press) May 1951: 1).
- 7 Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*: 103.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.* Quotation from Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1980).

- 10 Arthur Blaxall, 'Helen Keller in South Africa', typescript (Wits Historical Papers Archive. Helen Keller Collection, ZA HPRA A61).
- 11 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 34.
- 12 *ibid*: 32–33.
- 13 *ibid*: 39, 36.
- 14 Robert H.W. Shepherd 'Helen Keller at Lovedale: a personal impression' *South African Outlook* 1 May 1951: 73. Shepherd was the last ordained principal of Lovedale. Missionary control of the college ended in 1955, passing to the State through the Bantu Education Act (1952). Lovedale Press, in Alice, continues to publish religious and educational material in several languages.
- 15 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 44.
- 16 *Natal Mercury*, undated cutting.
- 17 *ibid*.
- 18 *ibid*.
- 19 *Indian Opinion*, 20 April 1951: 1. *Indian Opinion* was founded by Mohandas Gandhi in 1903.
- 20 *ibid*.
- 21 *ibid*.
- 22 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 16.
- 23 *ibid*.
- 24 *Natal Witness*, 20 April 1951: 1.
- 25 While in Pietermaritzburg Keller also met Albert Mason, who had been blinded during World War 1 and was Old Bill, or head, of the Allan Wilson shellhole.
- 26 Arthur Blaxall to Helen Keller, 30 November 1951 (Wits Historical Papers Archive. Helen Keller Collection, A61).
- 27 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 4.
- 28 Keller to Blaxall, 12 December 1951 (Wits Historical Papers Archive. Helen Keller Collection, ZA HPRA A61).
- 29 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 17.
- 30 Paton to Blaxall, undated (Wits Historical Papers Archive. Helen Keller Collection, ZA HPRA A61).
- 31 Author's collection. Keller was also presented with a Zulu shield when attending a dancing display at the Lever Brothers factory gardens on 15 April. Both shields are now held by the Helen Keller Collection at the American Foundation for the Blind in New York.
- 32 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 49.
- 33 *ibid*.
- 34 Heather Dugmore, 'Prof Grant McLaren knight of sight', 11 October 2016, <https://heatherdugmore.co.za/prof-grant-mclaren-knight-of-sight/> (accessed 31 July 2024).
- 35 *ibid*: 51.
- 36 Keller to Takeo Iwahashi, quoted in Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*: 104.
- 37 Keller to Jo Davidson, quoted in Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*: 103–104.
- 38 Blaxall, *Helen Keller under the Southern Cross*: 36.