

# Colin, the constant Gardner

by Nalini Naidoo

**T**he *Constant Gardner* is a memoir written by Mary Gardner about her husband Colin (1934–2013), enhanced by contributions from activists and academics.<sup>1</sup> Colin was an anti-apartheid campaigner, a renowned academic, a professor of English at the University of Natal (UN, later UKZN, Pietermaritzburg) who played a leading role in the transformation of our universities. His own journey took him from the Liberal Party to the Detainees Support Committee (Descom) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) during the height of the violence in KwaZulu-Natal. In 1990 he became a member of the ANC when it was unbanned; and by 1996 he was an ANC councillor on the Msunduzi Transitional Council, and then elected speaker by his fellow councillors.

## Genesis of the book

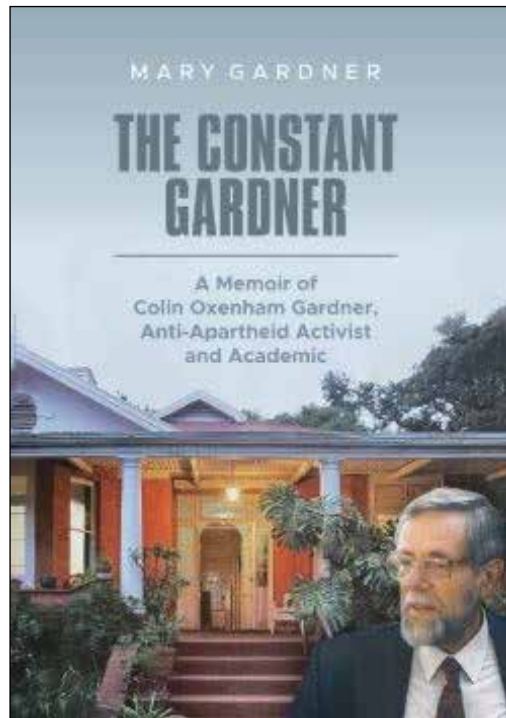
When Colin died, his friends felt a book should be written about his life and work. A committee was set up and the idea was to co-ordinate the contributions of various people, with Mary writing the introduction. The committee, which included the late Peter Croeser, a trustee of the Natal Society Foundation, met for a couple of years and got nowhere. The two concrete contributions received were from Bill Guest and Christopher Merrett. Peter was working on ways to get the project restarted when he died in 2016. Mary, who was working on the family's history, offered to write a memoir. So, lesson number one as expressed by Christopher is that committees don't write books.

The second lesson is the need to preserve our libraries and archival sources. When Mary was midway through the book the Covid-19 pandemic struck and while she could not physically go to libraries and archives she also struggled to get staff to assist in the

painstaking searches to find information for her. The *Witness* newspaper library, which once had a rich archive containing the many opinion pieces that Colin had written over a span of more than forty years, had shut down. Mary's requests for these pieces and photographs drew a complete blank. When Media24 bought out the *Witness*, the library was turned into a storeroom. The one resource that remained accessible and helpful was the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives (APC) at UKZN. Long may it last.

The third lesson is about perseverance and here I take my hat off to Mary. Covid-19 aside, in the middle of her writing she was informed that after a six-year wait, a place she had booked at the Woodgrove Retirement Home had become available and if she didn't take it, she would have to go back on the waiting list. At the same

time her house was sold and the new family needed to move in. As a result of lockdown, her three daughters living overseas could not come to help her pack and move. If you ever visited the Gardner home at 24 Yalta Road, you would know that it was filled with family heirlooms and bookshelves jam-packed with books. I still marvel at the way Mary, with the help of her son Richard, managed to accomplish the move. Of course there were mishaps such as stuff being left behind. One was a box of photographs that had been carefully selected to go into the book. Mary also injured her hand, which meant one-handed typing for a while. Then, she fell ill and had to go for treatment over a couple of months, making her feel even worse. Despite all this, the book was completed just a month or so before her 90th birthday and we were able to give her a set of hard copies as her present.



### Who was Colin the constant Gardner?

This book is a memoir. We see Colin through Mary's recollections as opposed to a biography written by a third person that delves more deeply and probes various aspects of a person's life. Perhaps there is still space for a full biography and I know of a doctoral student who, through the APC, expressed interest in such a project.

Colin Oxenham Gardner was born in London in June 1934 and he experienced a wartime childhood. By the time he was 13, his family had emigrated to South Africa when his father, William, was appointed senior lecturer in English at Natal University College; later UN. Colin attended Maritzburg College where he was dux. His one gripe was that the school did not offer football, but a schoolmaster who coached a local soccer team, Savages, involved him in that club over weekends. But as Mary writes, 'the word got around that "Gardner plays soccer" and this was considered to be really a most disreputable activity at the time.'

He went on to play football for South African Universities and in 1953 in the successful Maritzburg United team that won the Natal League for the first time in 28 years. There was a photograph of Colin at this match, mid-air as he headed the ball, published in the *Natal Witness*. This was one of the photographs Mary failed to get. And I must mention that he was a diehard Arsenal fan (this is not in the memoir).

As a student at UN, Colin's involvement in social justice started when he became a member of the Student Christian Movement. After he graduated, he went to Oxford University and while there learned that he had been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship. He returned to South Africa in 1957 and lectured at Unisa in Pretoria. He and Mary married in 1958 and he returned to his alma mater in 1959.

Colin also joined the Liberal Party in 1957, at the age of 23. 'Like so many other people,' he wrote, 'I was bowled over by *Cry, the Beloved Country* when I first read it, as a schoolboy. I think I later joined the Liberal Party in response quite as much to the main thrust of Paton's novel as to the slightly dry abstract principles of the party. And it was through the Liberal Party, in the early 1960s, that I got to know him.' Colin was acting national chairperson in 1968, when the Liberal Party took the decision to disband because it could no longer legally be a non-racial organisation.

In the meantime, he continued with his academic progress back at UN. He was appointed professor of English and later served as head of department and dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1975 to 1979. He was also

a longstanding member of the council of the English Academy of Southern Africa and was one of its vice-presidents. He was dedicated to his teaching and writing reviews, conference papers, journal articles and poetry; and for years he was a regular newspaper columnist. By this stage he and Mary had a busy household of five children, three daughters and two sons and they were also taking care of his mother Winnie and sister Susan, the latter physically and mentally challenged.

Mary's memoir delves into the personal. She lays out the breathtaking scale of Colin's involvement in university life, the Pietermaritzburg community and his anti-apartheid activities. How he did it all is baffling. There is a point in the book where Colin criticises Mary for not doing enough for the struggle and she very deftly puts him in his place by reminding him he could carry out all his activities because she took care of most of the household. It was not that Colin was uninvolved at home. He was a regular washer of dishes and always at hand to transport the children and their friends wherever they needed to go. The memoir reveals the challenges activist families faced trying to balance family lives with their concerns for society at large. The Gardners had their fair share of woes, but they never entertained thoughts of abandoning the broader struggle.

In fact, what comes across in the memoir is Colin's persistent concern about whether he was doing enough for the fight against apartheid and how he could do more. He wondered why he had never been detained in the first State of Emergency in 1960, when many of his fellow Liberal Party members were held, some less active than him; and then again in other waves of detention, for instance in 1986. The Gardners did experience harassment from the security branch, with heavy-breathing midnight phone calls, false information spread about them and other police dirty tricks.

There is no doubt about Colin's absolute commitment to the struggle, hence the title of the book, *The Constant Gardner*. As Yunus Carrim says in his contribution, 'The point is that he was always there, always available, ever reliable.' During the height of the violence, and often at short notice, Colin was called upon to speak at funerals of victims of violence across the province. (If a count were ever done, he would hold some sort of record for delivering the most funeral orations.) He addressed gatherings and was the public face of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Long-term detainees and political prisoners like Ben Dikobe Martins remember him for being the only support and link to the outside world as part of the Detainees Parents

Support Committee and he never forgot his obligation to them.

Colin was constant in his non-racialism and, I am certain, the best-known progressive white person in communities across Pietermaritzburg. He was involved in both primary and high schools, adjudicating speech and debating contests, and was often called to be guest speaker at community functions. For years he was involved in preparing matric pupils of all races for their literature paper. During the violence the Gardner home in Yalta Road became a refuge for victims and the family had a steady stream of refugees; for example, Dr Joe Phaala, Cassius Lubisi and Thami Mseleku. Visiting black lecturers who could not stay at local hotels were always welcome at the Gardner home.

Colin was constant in his kindness and compassion. Babu Baijoo recalls that in the first transitional council, many councillors from outlying areas like Vulindlela, Claridge and Bishopstowe could not drive and Colin was always available to offer them lifts wherever they wanted to go. John Deane, his best friend whom he had first met at Maritzburg College, wrote in a *Natalia* obituary that the kindness and gentleness of Colin's nature were as evident in his public life as in his family relationships and personal friendships.<sup>2</sup> Deane said that many will remember mostly his quiet seriousness; but equally, many knew and enjoyed his wit and humour. According to Deane, when Colin's health was deteriorating, he faced death with equanimity, as shown by some lines he wrote; and they are not without their own touch of humour:

I must try to get my life's dilemmas  
into a richer, wider view.  
An old man dying. There's nothing tragic.  
It's what old men are meant to do.

Paton, if he were looking down from the proverbial heaven, would have enjoyed this poem. In a lecture on Paton in 1988, Colin alluded to Paton's concern about his serious nature. To quote him: 'In fact, I hear Alan calling from above: "Professor Gardner! Must you always be so damned serious?"' In that same lecture he recalled that in 1972 several members of the board of the liberal magazine *Reality*, including him, felt that in order to keep in the mainstream of current opposi-



*Mafika Gwala, Ben Martins, Colin and Nkhataza Meyezo, African Arts Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 1982*

tion thinking, its sub-title should be changed from 'A Journal of Liberal Opinion' to 'A Journal of Liberal and Radical Opinion'. Colin went on to say, 'Alan who was the chairman of the editorial board, was not very happy with this proposal; but our view prevailed. He remained humorously a bit sceptical, and was from that moment convinced, I think, that Gardner and a few others had dangerously left-wing tendencies.'

In the following issue of *Reality*, however, there appeared a little poem, signed A.P., which went like this:

Sometimes I was a glad lib  
Sometimes I was a sad lib  
No more I'll be a bad lib  
For now, I am a rad lib

The bond of friendship was strengthened over the years by annual Berg trips in December. Mary writes about Colin joining his Liberal Party friends Alan Paton, Peter Brown, Pat McKenzie, Sam Chetty, John Mitchell, Anton Davies and John Morrison for the trip on which they talked and joked and walked and swam. When Paton died, Colin wrote the following poem, entitled *Alan*:

So, Alan, you have gone  
Over the jagged mountain range  
Into the dark cool valley beyond.  
You take with you  
Our affections, our memories  
And your indomitable power of the word.

He went on to keep the memory of Paton alive, playing a role in the establishment of the APC. He continued to write papers on Paton's work and was often invited to talk on the author. In 1995, he was the guest speaker at the premiere of the film *Cry, the Beloved Country*

starring James Earl Jones and Richard Harris. He was also asked by the Oprah Winfrey Book Club to write about *Cry, the Beloved Country*, to give background and critical analysis and to set questions and points of discussion. He was told that the Oprah Winfrey Company was compiling a website on Paton, South Africa and South African literature. Mary proudly pointed out that he was praised by the editor as she had not had to make a single correction to the text.

On the first Berg trip after Paton's death, Colin wrote: 'Six are very different from seven – and always the brooding sense of Alan's absence, but we agreed over drinks, in front of the great blaze of the fire, that Alan

had made a good end – peaceful, public, revered, noble, famous and wholly acceptable.'

I believe the same could be said about Colin, the constant Gardner.

- Adapted from a talk given at the Alan Paton Literary Festival on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 15 October 2024.

#### NOTES

- 1 Mary Gardner, *The Constant Gardner: A Memoir of Colin Oxenham Gardner, Anti-Apartheid Activist and Academic* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation Trust, 2023).
- 2 John Deane, 'Colin Oxenham Gardner (1934–2013)' *Natalia* 43 (2013): 157–159.