

Literature of the Eastern Cape from Schreiner to Fugard

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C RITICAL INTEREST IN LITERATURE from Southern Africa has quickened markedly in the past three or four years. Throughout the preceding two decades of relative indifference there were, of course, notable exceptions: the general public, as well as critics and reviewers, has maintained its interest in the prose writings by Nadine Gordimer that have appeared with consistent regularity and admirably high professional standards; the more erratic but, artistically, no less fascinating plays of Athol Fugard that were staged during this period seldom if ever failed, it seemed, to provoke remarkable acting performances and considerable attention in the English-speaking world, outside as well as inside the Republic of South Africa; more recently, the last two novels by J. M. Coetzee have occasioned a large measure of critical acclaim that recently culminated in the award of the prestigious Booker Prize for his fourth and most recent work, *The Life and Times of Michael K*.

Seldom, if ever, in discussion of South Africa and its arts, does one hear the Eastern Cape Province mentioned. This may not at first appear very surprising: though it is recognized as a distinct region in its own right, it is almost wholly overshadowed by its western counterpart, the Cape of Good Hope ("fairest of all Capes"), with its mountains, vineyards, beaches, and superb seventeenth-century Dutch homesteads. The Eastern Cape has several scenic delights, like the Hogsback mountains, but they are invariably out of the way and virtually unknown outside the region. Instead, it is known, if at all, for being an impoverished

and predominantly rural area, with vast tracts of wild and mostly arid land such as the desolate expanse known as the Karoo, first given imaginative realization to the world at large in *The Story of an African Farm*, first published in England in 1883. (Almost fifty years later, Athol Fugard was born in Middleburg, a small village in the semi-desert of the Karoo.) Properly speaking, the Eastern Cape has but one intellectual and educational centre, in the small but attractive town of Grahamstown, known chiefly for its Anglican cathedral and for Rhodes University. The Eastern Cape has two ports on the Indian Ocean, East London and Port Elizabeth, the latter remarkable only in that, in the entire region, it is the only city of any appreciable size and — in violence and industrial squalor — distinctive urban character. It is not surprising that Port Elizabeth (where Fugard has lived most of his adult life) and, especially, its black townships like New Brighton and Korsten have inspired the playwright's most dynamic work. One of his best books was entitled by him "Port Elizabeth Plays." Chris Wortham has observed that Fugard writes with "greatest assurance and authority when creating scenes from the lives of Cape coloured people and poor whites in the Eastern Cape" and, whereas Johannesburg (in several of his lesser plays and in the novel *Tsotsi*) he has known as a visitor in adulthood, he has experienced Port Elizabeth with his whole being. A list of his Eastern Cape plays — starting with the seminal *The Blood Knot* and going on to include *Boesman and Lena*, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, *A Lesson from Aloes*, and "Master Harold" . . . and the Boys — is, alone, sufficient testimony to the creative stimulation of this neighbourhood for him.

Rhodes University remains a small and largely residential academic community with a distinct collegiate character all its own. The poet and critic Guy Butler has been head of the English Department there for many years, during which time he has done much for the artistic life of the region. He was largely responsible for the creation of the Drama Department at Rhodes and the building of its fine theatre, for which he has written several poetic plays; the Institute for the Study of South African English, based at Rhodes, was a project very close to his heart and his own

particular research interests; the growth of the Grahamstown Museum, which is now the repository of several important South African literary archives, and the building of the Settlers Monument, a more dubious work of filial honour to the English Settlers of 1820, are other matters in which he has taken a leading role. A fine poet and author of six published plays as well as six volumes of verse, he has been a considerable force in obtaining academic recognition in his own country for the study of its language and literature in English, as he has also been an advocate of African and Afrikaner cultural values throughout his life.

1983, centenary year of the original publication of Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm*, also witnessed the celebration of Guy Butler's thirty-first and final year as Professor of English at Rhodes, as well as his sixty-fifth birthday. The two events were happily coincident in time and place: Cradock, where Butler grew up, was the home of Schreiner for several years and her final resting place is close by there; her imaginative writings have meant much to Butler throughout his working life, though one cannot say that they have directly influenced either his poetry or poetic plays. When Guy Butler's colleagues decided to commemorate his retirement, therefore, it was not difficult for a subject to be found for a *festschrift* collection: edited by two colleagues from the English Department, Malvern van Wyk Smith (author of an interesting book on the poetry of the Anglo-Boer War) and the poet Don Maclennan, the gathering of critical essays was appropriately entitled *Olive Schreiner and After: Essays on Southern African Literature*.¹ The book's nineteen articles, by writers, critics, and scholars from England, Canada, Australia, and the United States as well as from within South Africa, include contributions from Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer; two poems in honour of Guy Butler, by Douglas Livingstone and David Wright, and a short dedication written by Athol Fugard complete a volume which finely attests to the high standing of Butler among his peers for his many services to Rhodes University, the Eastern Cape, and (in the words of the editors) for his "strong presence in South African literature as writer, encourager, teacher and scholar."

II

Born in 1855 of stern missionary parents, Olive Schreiner had become a freethinker by the age of ten. Far from any educational centre, she educated herself by reading Herbert Spencer, Darwin, and Gibbon. After working as a governess in various Boer homes in the Cape (she retained great admiration and affection for the Afrikaner people throughout her life and courageously supported their cause during the Anglo-Boer War), she had by the age of twenty-six so devotedly followed the literary "vocation" that now seems inseparable from the position of governess in the English imagination that she had already completed two novels, the most famous one of which was published soon after her arrival in England in the early 1880's. There, her lively personality and striking appearance gave her immediate entry into the most sophisticated and *avant-garde* of literary and political circles: admired by Oscar Wilde, G. Bernard Shaw, and Gladstone, she became a confidante of Eleanor Marx and embarked upon an extraordinary and lengthy relationship with Havelock Ellis. Her book, *Woman and Labour*, published in 1911, is generally acknowledged as having been extremely influential; indeed, for Vera Brittain and many of the early twentieth-century feminists it became the "Bible of the women's suffrage movement." A fierce anti-imperialist and passionate feminist, she was, from the end of the Boer War at the turn of the century to her death in 1920, an outspoken advocate for the rights of the black peoples of Southern Africa (that is, Rhodesia — now Zimbabwe — as well as South Africa) and, fearfully, only too prescient in her recurrent warnings of future racial hatred and bloodshed.

The rightful place of *The Story of an African Farm* at the moral as well as aesthetic centre of Schreiner's creativity remains unaltered at the conclusion to the collective revaluation undertaken in *Olive Schreiner and After*, though the novel's position is by no means undisturbed in the process; the eleven essays on her life and work in this *festschrift*, however, do allow us to see a greater depth and variety to that novel and to her achievement as a whole. To start with, there are three interestingly different essays that concentrate primarily on biographical material and

on the relationship between Olive Schreiner's life and writings, an element that has preoccupied commentators from the time that the novelist's husband, Samuel Cron Cronwright (who hyphenated his name to Cronwright-Schreiner upon their marriage) published *The Life of Olive Schreiner* but four years after her death.

In "Biographical Accounts of Olive Schreiner" Patricia Morris makes a critical survey of such material up to 1980. She purposely confines her critique to Cronwright's biography (1924), the three other biographical studies that followed it (by Gould in 1949, Hobman in 1955, and Meintjes ten years later), and two short centenary accounts by Harmel and Friedmann (both in 1955), leaving the most recent biography (by Ruth First and Ann Scott in 1980) to be covered, critically, in a separate review-article by the distinguished novelist Nadine Gordimer.² Patricia Morris's article offers such an eminently commonsensical scrutiny of Schreiner biography up to the account by First and Scott that the absence of a more positive conclusion is the more surprising. The piece contains a vigorous exposure of various crass Freudian readings of Schreiner and her writings; its pertinence reaches well beyond Schreiner criticism to embrace much so-called biographical commentary. Arguing, for instance, that Marion Friedmann's predominantly Freudian study ignores the novelist's "cultural and political relationship with society," Morris goes on to say:

If Friedmann's analyses bear consideration, why, unlike Cronwright's, are they so offensive? It is because in their clinical reductiveness they violate Olive Schreiner's ordinary human complexity. Friedmann uses psychoanalytical techniques as one would use a recipe book with no index. She sleuths, detects, and rustles up an Olive Schreiner just like mother made it. She invites us to forget that the meaningfulness of psychoanalytic explanations arises within the context of the exploration and discovery of one's own self. In such trials and re-trials the most simplistic-sounding statements, when they speak to a newly exposed, defenceless self, can touch understanding with the force of a revelation. Repeated to a stranger, the statements are empty. (p. 10)

After several pages of well judged and at times scathing observation, however, it is disappointing to find that the final summation

is no more pointed than the verdict: "There are as many Olive Schreiners as there are her biographers. The definitive biography exists only in each reader's reading."

Nadine Gordimer's essay covers a great deal of ground, revealing in four pages what most academic critics take twice as long to say. This is not only a review of the biography by First and Scott; complementing and expanding upon the line taken by Morris, it is also a searching scrutiny of Schreiner as a woman, a sexual being (during which she examines the "neuroticism of this amazing woman, in whose tortured, heightened sense of being all the inherent contradictions of her sex and time existed"), and a propagandist as well as an artist. Defending her long-established stand that Schreiner "dissipated her imaginative creativity, whatever else she may have achieved, in writing tracts and pamphlets rather than fiction," Gordimer acknowledges (with First and Scott) that "almost alone she perceived the race conflicts during South Africa's industrial revolution in terms of a world-wide struggle between capital and labour," but she cannot overlook the fact that Schreiner "wrote *about* these insights instead of transforming them through living beings into an expression of the lives they shaped and distorted." She is also harshly critical of the fact that, for the earlier writer, "feminism remained her strongest motivation," because

feminism, then as now in South Africa, is regarded by people whose thinking on race, class and colour she anticipated, as a question that had and has no importance in the actual problem of the country, which is to free the black majority from white minority rule. The biographers point out that (when living again in South Africa) she resigned from the Women's Enfranchisement League when its definition of the franchise qualification was changed to exclude black women from the plea for women's votes. But in the South African context where she always felt herself to belong, and to which she always returned, the feminist issue withers in comparison with the issue of the voteless, powerless state of South African blacks, irrespective of their sex.

(p. 17)

This forceful and provocative article demands attention alongside three other pieces in this book — by Bishop, Davenport, and Lerner — on various aspects of Schreiner's feminist radicalism.

In "Forms of Dependence and Control in Olive Schreiner's Fiction," Cherry Clayton juxtaposes her subject's life and the use made of it in her art in the course of a wide-ranging yet precise analysis. This, in certain particulars, is a piece that goes more deeply into Schreiner's themes and the texture of her writings than any of the other contributions to the book; here we see, in the best sense of the phrase, literary criticism at full stretch. Unfortunately, at other times the interpretation of the significance of things in Schreiner's work seems curiously over-stretched, even strained. The critic appears to be trying to cover too much ground on these occasions, though when she examines aspects relating to the biographical form peculiar to the novel (that is, "the invented lives of the main protagonists") and the novelist's control of "the narrative situation," her highly intelligent analyses afford considerable and original insight into Schreiner's vision and technique. We see, concretely, how "history, religion, geography, myth and fiction are intertwined in a complex way," how "history repeats itself, and the human imagination repeatedly reaches out to represent and transform its flux."

Christopher Heywood has in the past done some excellent editorial and critical work on Southern African literature. It is the more disappointing, therefore, to find his essay on "Olive Schreiner and Literary Tradition" is, mostly, pretentious literary name-dropping with little critical insight or sensibility in evidence. Ridley Beeton's analysis, "Olive Schreiner's Fiction Revisited," fortunately gives the lie to its after-dinner-speech title. It proceeds by means of a comparison of *The Story of an African Farm* with Schreiner's other two major fictional statements, *From Man to Man* and *Undine*: the ultimate aesthetic unsatisfactoriness of the two latter works is illuminated at the same time that the greater symbolic resonance and enduring power of *The Story of an African Farm* is demonstrated in the process.

The novelist Alan Paton, in the manner of a duteous *festschrift* contributor, provides a rather vapid note on Schreiner's didactic novel *Peter Halket of Mashonaland*; characteristic of such offerings, it is brief — and, primarily, a retelling of Schreiner's anti-imperialist (and specifically anti-Cecil Rhodes) allegory. In the final analysis, though that parable by Schreiner is a failure, it is a

courageous and spirited protest at racial injustice and murder that are cast in the guise of law and order; realized in the form of a novel uneasily mingling realism and parabolic vision, the work's still strikingly relevant theme and its artistic confusion alike occasion what at first sight might appear to be the disproportionate attention that *Trooper Peter Halket* receives in this collection. By the time one has arrived at the third piece to give some attention to the novel, however, the allocation of space appears eminently justifiable.

In "Literature and Politics: Two Zimbabwean Novels" Arthur Ravenscroft makes out as good a case as anyone could conceivably do, I think, for seeing the artistry within the didacticism of *Trooper Peter Halket*; often, only too well aware of the propaganda content of such writings, critics fail to see any aesthetic qualities in them. Ravenscroft challenges this situation in the context of Schreiner's novel and, to reinforce his own contentious argument, juxtaposes with it a more recent novel from Zimbabwe that traverses somewhat similar ideological as well as geographical terrain — Samkange's *On Trial for My Country*; the juxtaposition is in itself critically revealing of the intentions and artistry of both books and the larger argument — which would undoubtedly be supported by Chinua Achebe and other advocates for seeing the African novelist as teacher as well as entertainer — gains persuasive coherence from it. Ravenscroft's essay, moreover, is valuable in the information it provides about both books (contemporary critiques, in the late 1890's and in the 1960's, show that both works did have considerable satirical force at the time each was published) and for its revelation of the penetrating interrelatedness of politics and fiction on these two strikingly parallel examples of "Zimbabwean" literature. Ravenscroft's conclusions are worthy of extended consideration in the larger arena of Commonwealth (and Third World) art and literature:

What one seems to be faced with in both novels (after all that I have argued, I would still call them novels) is the relationship between fiction and politics, or fiction and politics via history. I am sure it is a more intimate relationship than literary critics often believe it to be and that critics need to concern themselves more rigorously with these criteria than they have tended to do.

To argue that politics in the novel must always be unobtrusive, confined within the boundaries of a wholly autonomous art of fiction, is a Western liberal tenet, exceedingly comfortable to hold if one is not hungry or homeless. In the Third World it usually seems less tenable as a critical redoubt. On the other hand, to deny that the novel genre has any further contribution to offer to the everyday life of the Third World, is to be needlessly obsessed with its bourgeois origins and unappreciative of its infinite flexibility. (p. 57)

Laurence Lerner's questioning of the long-established feminist reputation of *The Story of an African Farm* leads to a genuinely illuminating reading of that novel, showing that some of the most often-quoted remarks about it by the novelist herself must be viewed sceptically if we are to obtain a complete and rounded perspective insofar as her creative imagination is concerned. Acknowledging that Schreiner had "the true makings of a novelist," the critic goes on to demonstrate that this sensibility was in occasional conflict with an optimistic vision that embraced feminism and her generally socialistic ideas for social improvement. Schreiner's first and most important novel is seen to be deeply pessimistic. There was an element in her nature which forced her to conceive the two most compelling imaginative characters in *The Story of an African Farm* as "sufferers and losers"; this was so much opposed to her otherwise forward-looking vision of life that it occasioned her, in self-defence, to distance herself from both figures. Beneath the genuinely revolutionary aspects of the novel lies the "pure Victorian orthodoxy" associated with a "belief in the moral value of suffering and the superiority of women because they suffer more" (Dan Jacobson's description of her occasional "mode of lacerated self-exaltation" comes to mind in this context).³ Lerner's analysis makes good use of Schreiner's later *Woman and Labour*, seen here as another view of women and of feminism and also as something of a challenge to the implications inherent within the earlier and better-known book. A suggestive parallel is also drawn between *The Bostonians* and *The Story of an African Farm*; though it will assuredly be resisted by Schreiner's feminist supporters, it may well repay further examination.

Lerner presents the posthumously published *From Man to Man* as, in some ways, a finer novel than *The Story of an African Farm*; within certain artistic limitations, defined by him, this is a thought-provoking comparison. *From Man to Man*, Lerner believes, is "a deeply serious attempt to convey the process by which a woman learns independence"; despite many faults, the work's characterization, especially that of the intense, strongly sexed but self-reliant Rebekah ("she is exactly the kind of woman the feminist novel needed") is shown to be well worthy of critical respect:

Olive Schreiner had not half the literary talent of Thackeray or Charlotte Brontë, but in Rebekah she addressed herself to a situation the novel had hitherto avoided, and the sketch of how Rebekah finally asserts herself (partly through firmness of character, partly through her possession of financial independence), and by doing so wins the respect of the husband she has come to despise without rejecting, is a variant on fictional plots to which I know no real parallel in the nineteenth century. (p. 79)

This persuasive account, taken in conjunction with Dan Jacobson's verdict that several chapters in *From Man to Man* "contain the best writing she ever did — the firmest, the most penetrating, the most original technically,"⁴ makes one regret that the novel remained unfinished at the time of Schreiner's death. Lerner's overall evaluation of Schreiner's achievements stops well short of adulation, however, and is an effective counterbalance to other viewpoints in this collection.

On Schreiner's feminism and her influence on this movement there are other viewpoints here to be taken into account. Rodney Davenport's wide-ranging survey of her political activism — indisputably the finest and most comprehensive account to date of her practical as well as theoretical involvement in the complicated pattern of South African politics from the early 1880's up to 1920 — inevitably gives considerable attention to her crusading activities on behalf of the women's movement. In certain respects he comes to somewhat similar conclusions as does Lerner, but his manner of doing so is a necessary corrective to the latter's less sympathetic and less historically understanding attitude. Quoting from an important early letter of hers to Havelock Ellis,

Davenport argues convincingly that she seems "to have been kept from total identification with the politics of the Left by an irrepressible concern for individuality." Davenport, an historian, gives full credence to the power of her moral passion, seeing her feminism within a larger concern for the weak and oppressed in every walk of life.

Alan Bishop teaches at McMaster University; he comes from Zimbabwe, originally, and was educated at Rhodes University before going on to Oxford and McMaster. His essay, entitled " 'With suffering and through time': Olive Schreiner, Vera Brittain and the Great War," explores what he calls "the brilliant dual achievement" of Schreiner as a moral leader in her political and social writings and as a fine imaginative writer. Operating, as it were, through the mind and emotions of Vera Brittain, one of her self-confessed disciples, Bishop attempts to build his case for Schreiner's moral leadership upon increased understanding of her pamphlet, *Woman and Labour*, a book which determined the very nature of Brittain's feminism. Certain contradictions in the latter's pacifism are traced back to the profound influence of *The Story of an African Farm*, which, during the Great War, enabled Miss Brittain to counter pain with suffering; those adolescent elements in the novel which (somewhat akin to similar experiences in *Wuthering Heights*, a novel often invoked by Schreiner's commentators) are imbued with "masochistic fantasy and fatalism" exerted a potent influence on the young Vera Brittain — and a not entirely good influence at that. Subsequently, assisted by a deep knowledge of *Woman and Labour*, she was equipped to see the earlier novel as (in her own words) "like *Woman and Labour* . . . a classic of feminism," but in certain significant regards she seems to have come to distrust the greater work. Bishop, the sensitive biographer of Miss Brittain as well as a Cary scholar, demonstrates contradictions and ironies as well as achievements in the work of two women notable for their compassionate humanity; both "with suffering and through time" became leaders of thought whose influence, "many would agree, has been profound and predominantly beneficent." In such an account one can once more see why Doris Lessing can have spoken of Olive Schreiner as "this wonderful woman."

In "The *Voorslag* Movement and Olive Schreiner," Geoffrey Haresnape records another significant influence exerted by the Karoo writer, this time on a group of writers associated with an important South African literary journal of the 1920's. At a time of philistine indifference to the arts and, especially, to indigenous writings in the country (Canadian artists and critics will understand only too well from their own somewhat similar but more recent experience), the "Voorslagers," who numbered Roy Campbell, William Plomer, and Laurens van der Post among their more prominent spokesmen, wanted to widen cultural horizons and to interpret the thoughts and emotions of native southern African people. Of these, the San, driven into the deserts of South West Africa and Botswana by white and black men alike were "a group whose African-ness and imaginative strength" were recognized by the Voorslagers. "With their rock art and folklore," continues Haresnape, "the San were natural artists and poets." Each issue of *Voorslag* bore on its cover an illustration inspired by examples of San rock art; it was Plomer who had fastened his imagination upon the San when seeking a symbol to epitomize their own literary movement. Many years later, reviewing the Voorslagers in retrospect, he expressed the hope that, "perhaps, like twentieth-century Bushmen [we] had left a few vivid paintings on the wall of that dark cave, the mind of the white South African." The image is also apposite for Schreiner, who, as the critic reminds us, included in *The Story of an African Farm* sensitive descriptions of long-vanished Bushmen paintings and, in *Thoughts on South Africa*, could be explicit about their larger symbolic implications for later generations of sensitive thinkers. Haresnape observes:

By portraying himself, Campbell and van der Post as three painters active in a rock shelter, Plomer made several key points in a single stroke: he indicated their prime function as artists; he stressed their wish to be independent of national cultural clichés; he showed their willingness to be identified with people who were commonly undervalued; and he underlined their commitment to Africa. (p. 115)

Most notably, Roy Campbell seems to have identified himself (then, in the late 1920's, in a vehemently satirical frame of

mind) with Schreiner, whose pre-eminence he acknowledged: "She makes all other South African writers seem a little tame, because she feels, gets angry, & throws her weight about. Olive Schreiner is not exactly a restrained writer, but her work lives . . . , her words burn and she thinks deeply." Calling her "a genius," he spoke at various times of her influence on his own writings and, in the opinion of Haresnape (himself a poet and a teacher at Rhodes University in the 1960's), Schreiner and *The Story of an African Farm* have had "a significant influence upon the metaphoric patterns which Campbell was weaving in the lyricism of his *Voorslag* period."

William Plomer seems in many ways to have been the spiritual leader of the *Voorslag* movement. His work has long been neglected, inside his native land as well as beyond it, and his first and still immensely important novel *Turbott Wolfe* is not only out-of-print but has never been given a paperback edition. It is a very great pity that no imaginative publisher has yet come forward to give this work the more universal readership it deserves today; appreciation as well as understanding of Southern African literature since Schreiner, in which there is increasing critical attention generally, is incomplete without a knowledge of it. Plomer in the 1920's was farming in the Stormberg area of the Eastern Cape. Interested in authors like William Blake and D. H. Lawrence, whose writings were revolutionary and visionary, he saw (in Haresnape's words) Schreiner as "representative of genius in isolation"; her influence, the critic continues, "may be discerned in the fundamental assumption of . . . *Turbott Wolfe* . . . that the perceptive and sensitive individual will of necessity be an isolated figure in the South African 'colonialist' milieu." Geoffrey Haresnape shows, in specific details of theme (among them the recurrent motif of a farm in a desolate landscape) and characterization, how the presence of *The Story of an African Farm* may be clearly discerned behind Plomer's "Portraits in the Nude," an important prose fiction which was serialized in the first three numbers of *Voorslag*. Observing that Schreiner and Plomer "share a desire to penetrate beneath the surface layers of custom and prejudice to arrive at some understanding of the inner dynamics of their respective societies," the critic makes effective use of

his brief space to do full justice to both writers, seen within the unfortunately short-lived Voorslag movement.

Laurens van der Post, admiring "the kind of literature which transcended narrow nationalistic and group preoccupations," was deeply influenced by William Plomer's ideas and, especially, by the example of *Turbott Wolfe* even more than by Schreiner's writings. His novel *In a Province*, following along the literary trail blazed by Schreiner and Plomer but exhibiting the young van der Post's own experiences and talent, is shown by Hare-snape to have "an established place among the forerunners of a long list of novels concerned to interpret the poetic significance of farm and rural life in the South African experience." More recent contributors to this line, some of them the subjects of scrutiny in the second part of the present *festschrift* collection, include, of course, Jack Cope, Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee. "At the head of this list," we are reminded, "secure in its historical position and in its own large measure of literary achievement, is *The Story of an African Farm*."

III

One hundred and fifteen of the two hundred and fifteen pages of text in this book are devoted to Olive Schreiner's life and writings; they will in future form a substantial portion of the still rather diminutive stock of essential Schreiner criticism, among which I would include "Olive Schreiner: Poet and Prophet" by Uys Krige (1968), Doris Lessing's afterword to *The Story of an African Farm* (1968), and Dan Jacobson's introduction to the Penguin edition of the same novel (1971).⁵ The other one hundred pages of *Olive Schreiner and After* comprises part two of the collection and is entitled "Aspects of South African Literature": though the eight essays in this section offer a fairly comprehensive survey of white authors writing in English, from the early 1820 English settlers up to contemporary writers such as Fugard, Gordimer, and Coetzee, the complete absence of English-language black writers is startling. Granted that the collection was never intended to be all-inclusive, it is a great pity that none of the finer non-white writers are discussed at all: the work of

Alex La Guma, Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele, and Peter Abrahams (whose superb but neglected autobiography *Tell Freedom* should be made freely available in paperback, preferably in the Heinemann African Writers Series) would seem to me to be a minimal list for inclusion. It is not as though the compilers wish to ignore the black dimension in the country's life and art: many of the Schreiner contributions are, naturally, concerned with racial issues and so, inevitably, are the majority of essays in the second part of the book. How could it be otherwise when so much of the country's literature in every genre is preoccupied by such turbulent experience? Most South African writers of fiction since Schreiner have been all but exclusively concerned with relations between the races — and what would remain in Fugard's drama were this element to be removed?

It is true that Lewis Nkosi, perhaps the best of the black South African critics, declared in 1967 (and repeated the assertion in 1983): "With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa."⁶ Even if this harsh judgement were to be true (and, in consort with J. M. Coetzee, I do not believe that it is), it would still be a matter worth further scrutiny — and what better forum could there be at present than this collection? After a lengthy period during which the large majority of serious writing in English by black writers was undoubtedly in prose, there now appears to be growing interest on their part in poetry and playwriting. Little of critical substance on this movement has appeared since Nadine Gordimer's essay on "The New Black Poets" was published in 1976; an up-to-date guide with some evaluation would have been welcome.⁷ It is true that, in this book, Rowland Smith opens his article on white English-language fiction of the 1970's and 1980's by a brief look at the "new form of urban, black protest" in verse that began in the late 1960's, speaking of the "burst of poetry" that resulted. Smith's viewpoint, understandable in the present context, is to note how the "increasingly confident voice of black consciousness" seen in this writing, together with the "apparent political stability under Vorster's

regime" during the early and middle 1970's "left white, English-speaking novelists without an obvious topic." The point is well taken within an analysis of changes in white South African prose writing but one would have liked him to have had the opportunity to look at the poetic burst and its aftermath as a phenomenon in its own right.

Another strange omission in the *festschrift*, to come closer to Guy Butler's home, is that of the prolific novelist André Brink, an Afrikaner who has lived and worked at Rhodes University since the early 1960's and writes in English as well as Afrikaans — indeed, he can with some justification nowadays be regarded as being more of an English-language author; with twelve novels published since 1959 (only the first three of which are not in print in English), he is, in the larger world outside the Eastern Cape, almost certainly the most widely read of all writers resident there. What is more, I know from various conversations and correspondence that Brink's later writings have had a considerable impact upon a number of Canadian writers; in particular, I would instance the highly favourable response of two authors from this part of Canada — namely, Rudy Wiebe and Aritha van Herk. From an historical point of view, moreover, it is regrettable that the book does not include an essay on Pauline Smith (1882-1957), the most significant South African writer of the era following Schreiner and before Gordimer, and, moreover, one like Schreiner in depicting the harsh life of farmers in the Karoo. Smith, a quiet-voiced and distinctive, if somewhat equivocal, literary figure, is worthy of attention in her own right and Geoffrey Haresnape, one of the earliest and most perceptive of her critics, would have been the man to write just such an assessment for a commemorative volume with considerable emphasis on the Eastern Cape dimension in South African literature.

"No one better interprets English South Africa than Guy Butler," Roy Macnab rightly asserted in the *Times Literary Supplement* recently,⁸ and it is possibly some such supposition that lies behind the choice of subject matter in the second part of this book. Once granted that the emphasis here largely falls upon the English South African experience and its literary interpretation, rather than upon writings in English by Afrikaners and Africans,

it is possible to see how full of good things the second half of the collection is.

Two contributions in it are concerned with nineteenth-century writings. John Povey, in "Landscape in Early South African Poetry," writes about the uniqueness of South African topography and "the shattering ferocity" of the veld's impact on the European mind. There was "neither geographic nor literary precedent for the veld which stretched interminably across the heartland of the country beyond the relatively European security of the Cape," we are reminded; not surprisingly, the "intense literary reaction to this territory is central to South African poetry in the nineteenth century." A. E. Voss, in "The Hero of *The Native Races*: The Making of a Myth," introduces readers to the ideas and writings of one such poet, George William Stow, whose views on the Bushmen (about whom he made a systematic study) are shown to be especially interesting. Voss brings his topic to life, concluding with conviction: "That Stow's 'Bushman' became a point of reference for South African writers as diverse, for example, as Van der Post (extravagantly) and La Guma is a matter of great interest" (p. 141).

Reference has already been made to Chris Wortham's study, "A Sense of Place: Home and Homelessness in the Plays of Athol Fugard," which covers much more ground than is suggested by such a title. The playwright's "overwhelming sense of place" is here the starting point for a knowledgeable examination of his use of intensified action and language. While we can observe how much he owes to Beckett at one moment and Brecht at another, the unmistakable individuality of his work is everywhere apparent. This is a workmanlike study of his four Eastern Cape plays up to *A Lesson From Aloes* of 1979. That work, together with *The Blood Knot*, *Hello and Goodbye*, and the masterly *Boesman and Lena*, is shown to be deeply rooted in the topographical and human features of life in the Eastern Cape, mostly in and around Port Elizabeth. Characteristic behavioural and linguistic patterns of the coloured people of this region are especially vital ingredients. Their "tradition of elaborate self-parody, at once mocking the whites by affecting exaggerated servility and mocking themselves in their degradation," is shown to be at the centre of the

drama in *The Blood Knot*, for example, where Fugard brings to life "the special qualities of the role-playing mechanism among Cape coloured people in confrontation with white society." The speech of the Port Elizabeth coloured community is "unique and unmistakable." Fugard has acknowledged that he first had to think out the language of *Boesman and Lena* in Afrikaans and then translate it into English. (One is reminded that André Brink worked in English when creating the leading white woman in his novel *An Instant in the Wind* and in Afrikaans when imagining the black slave that accompanies her on her journey in the wilderness.)⁹ The result in Fugard's drama was a blend, "almost a patois of its own," that could only belong to this area of the country. "Fragments of Xhosa, justified by Outa's presence, confirm the locality," continues Wortham, "and the juxtaposition of the three languages in the play is skilfully managed so that the language itself comments upon the racial, social and more generally political issues of the play" (p. 176). In such particulars, Wortham brings to life features in the playwright's work that would not be immediately apparent to readers or spectators outside Fugard's country.

Born and educated in South Africa, Rowland Smith has taught at Dalhousie University for many years; author of a fine book on Roy Campbell, his contribution to *Olive Schreiner and After* is entitled "The Seventies and After: The Inner View in White, English-language Fiction." This is a thoughtful consideration of "new problems" confronting South African novelists writing during this period; it also embodies well balanced evaluations of several of the more successful attempts that were made to combat the restrictions of scope that was their legacy from the somewhat heady days of the 1960's. In many ways this essay continues an earlier analysis undertaken in Smith's essay on the fiction of the 1960's in "The Johannesburg Genre";¹⁰ there, he had shown how the crises of white liberal conscience during the period had been the focus of a good deal of distinguished fiction. The "minutiae of white, middle-class life" had been incisively analysed by Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer, and Jillian Becker, for instance; the "liberal white trauma" during the sabotage trials of the 1960's

had been the subject of novels by Nadine Gordimer and C. J. Driver; while the "iniquities of the Immorality Act and the corrosion caused by segregated sex" had been dealt with even earlier by Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson, and Nadine Gordimer. The new "rawness of the seventies" (Smith's phrase is peculiarly apt) demanded a fresh response from the liberal white writers which some were unable or unwilling to realize in artistic terms.

Smith's analysis in *Olive Schreiner and After* proceeds by means of a well argued comparison, with the oracular manner adopted by authors such as Sheila Fugard and J. M. Coetzee in *The Castaways*, *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and (to a lesser extent) *Waiting for the Barbarians* being opposed to the more direct exploration of Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*, and *July's People*. Significant affinities are shown to exist in these novels by Sheila Fugard, wife of the playwright, and Coetzee: there is, for example, the recurrence of thematic symbols such as the "white settler-explorer as castaway on the dark continent," the need for the white man to "demonstrate his reality in the unreal otherness of the empty spaces," and the use of the gun by him to prove that he has "a relation to the indigenous people and animals whom he dominates." In technique and literary methods there are further similarities: the perspective seen from that of the deranged protagonist, the "ambiguous distinctions between what those protagonists perceive and what they imagine," the "farcical manner" in which some obsessions are revealed, and the "scattering of sententiae" are common ingredients. Smith acknowledges that there is considerable artistry in these writings — particularly in *Waiting for the Barbarians* — and that Coetzee, in particular, is a "master of the grim absurd" with a "fine sense of ironic precision." However, the oblique approach characteristic of both Fugard and Coetzee is found to be cloying, eventually, while the "diet of Sibylline utterances, however deftly presented, becomes over-portentious" (p. 201).

The critic's concrete and well reasoned comparison of these works with Gordimer's last three novels brings out the inherent artistic superiority of the latter. "Nadine Gordimer confronts the present directly and manages to say something fresh about her

world in each novel of the seventies," he argues, "even though the bleak nature of that world would appear to leave her little opportunity for originality after her unrelenting analyses of white urban life during the previous two decades." The freshness and originality of her most recent work is convincingly demonstrated: *July's People* is shown to be "far more relentless than *Waiting for the Barbarians*"; and, whereas Fugard and Coetzee are oblique "even when dealing with history," Nadine Gordimer faces the "situations . . . even when they involve future, imagined trauma." Smith's conclusion, that "the stunning power of her fiction . . . is a demonstration of the truism that fictional attempts to 'explain' life are less convincing than attempts to recreate it," is one that will surely bear further reiteration. For all the respect accorded Nadine Gordimer's fiction, it is my experience that many readers find her writing to be cold and estranging in style and tone. That response is certainly true for a number of North American graduates with whom I have discussed her work. They fail to see the subliminal tension that is apparent, it seems to me, in her best writings, where a strong emotional undercurrent runs beneath the apparently controlled, even non-committal surface, making (as in Swift's finest satires) its own implicit moral commentary.

In " 'A dome of many-coloured glass': The Lyric Poetry of Guy Butler," Muriel Bradbrook examines two literary virtues of his work that, in her judgement, are "rarely found in conjunction elsewhere": the first is an exact and sensitive attentiveness to whatever he is looking at; the other, counterbalancing this, is "serenity," a "power to inhibit personal emotions which might distort the fidelity of his art." With discerning exactness, she reveals the quiet power that Butler's poems obtain from such qualities. The sardonic humour as well as tenderness in his poetry is brought out with apt use of illustrations from early sketches as well as more recent lyrics. Professor Bradbrook argues that, if Butler's "tone and technique are compared with those of other traditions from English-speaking regions of the southern hemisphere, it will be felt that he combines the reticence, irony, and taut questioning characteristic of New Zealand with, later, the

singing rhythm of Australia." Though these larger claims remain unsubstantiated insofar as the Antipodean analogies are concerned, the particular strengths of Butler's verse are quietly illuminated.

One could have wished that Muriel Bradbrook had taken the opportunity to scrutinize the poet's prose writings as well as his verse. Guy Butler has not published as much criticism as his well deserved local reputation as a Shakespeare scholar would seem to demand. I heard him lecture brilliantly on Shakespeare's tragedies at Rhodes in the early 1960's but, according to the useful bibliography of Butler's published work that opens the present *festschrift*, he has published but three short pieces on the subject. (In a letter of 20 December 1983 to the present writer, however, he claimed to have completed the first draft of a book on *King Lear*, which is good news indeed.) On and off, over the past decade, Guy Butler has been writing his autobiography. Accurately described by Roy Macnab as "a pawkily charming evocation of the republic's English heartland, the Eastern Cape, between the wars,"¹¹ *Karoo Morning* was published in 1977; it covers the first seventeen years of his life up to 1935. The second volume, *Bursting World*, appeared in 1983; it continued his story from 1936 to 1945, during which time he served with the South African Division in the Italian campaign, registering his impressions of that country — and, especially, of his first seeing Florence — in a number of memorable lyrics in his first book, *Stranger to Europe*. His retirement, occasion for the present volume, should see the completion of the enterprise in one or, possibly, two further instalments. A brief critical look at the first two autobiographical volumes, in conjunction with his poetry, would have been welcome. *Olive Schreiner and After* as it stands, however, attests to the love and creative understanding that Guy Butler's name inspires in the South African literary and scholarly communities. Its range of distinguished contributors and of topics testifies alike to the breadth of his cultural interests as well as to the strength of a regional literary movement that, transcending its locality, is still in full creative stride a hundred years since *The Story of an African Farm* first appeared in print.

NOTES

- 1 *Olive Schreiner and After: Essays on Southern African Literature in Honour of Guy Butler*. Edited by Malvern van Wyk Smith and Don MacLennan (Cape Town, Johannesburg, London: David Philip Ltd., 1983), pp. xvii, 230. R 18 + GST.
- 2 The biographies are: Samuel Cron Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Life of Olive Schreiner* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1924); Vera Buchanan-Gould, *Not Without Honour: The Life and Writings of Olive Schreiner* (London: Hutchinson, 1949); Marion Friedmann, *Olive Schreiner: A Study in Latent Meanings* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1955); Michael Harmel, *Olive Schreiner 1855-1955* (Cape Town: Real Printing and Publishing, 1955); Daisy L. Hobman, *Olive Schreiner: Her Friends and Times* (London: Watts, 1955); Johannes Meintjes, *Olive Schreiner: Portrait of a South African Woman* (Johannesburg: Hugh Keartland, 1965); Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: A Biography* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980).
- 3 "Introduction" to *The Story of an African Farm* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 17.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 5 "Olive Schreiner: Poet and Prophet," introduction to *Olive Schreiner: A Selection*, ed. by Uys Krige (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1968). Doris Lessing, afterword to *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1968); reprinted in Lessing's *A Small Personal Voice* (New York: Knopf, 1974). For Dan Jacobson's introduction, see footnote 3 for details.
- 6 *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London & New York: Longman, 1983), p. 131.
- 7 Since writing this commentary I have come across a useful guide — but less valuable evaluative study — to these writings: see Ursula A. Barnett, *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black African Literature in English (1914-1980)* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983). Nadine Gordimer's essay on "Writers in South Africa: The New Black Poets" was originally read at a conference at Dalhousie University in 1973 and first published in *Exile and Tradition: Studies in African and Caribbean Literature*, ed. Rowland Smith (London: Longman & Dalhousie University Press, 1976).
- 8 *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 September 1983, p. 997.
- 9 André Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 114.
- 10 Published in 1976 in *Exile and Tradition* (details in note 7, above).
- 11 *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 September 1983, p. 997.