

KALEIDOSCOPE

29th Parallel
 by David Robbins
 (Shuter and Shooter R27,50)

Entirely by coincidence I received **The 29th Parallel** on the day I completed Shiva Naipaul's **North of South**. My first attempt at **The 29th Parallel** was thus overshadowed by Naipaul's masterpiece. As a result I abandoned the book shortly after Robbins's departure from Ja Nee, Etienne le Roux's farm. Nonetheless this incomplete reading provided the incentive for a journey through Qwa Qwa into the southern Free State and rekindled an interest in the work of Le Roux. My second reading was more successful.

The 29th Parallel documents a journey across South Africa undertaken by David Robbins and a friend, presumably photographer Wyndham Hartley. Robbins explains this project as follows:

"My reasons had not been profound. To follow the 29th is to cross south Africa at its widest point. 'All you're going to see is platteland,' my friend had said. That was my other reason. 'I want to understand the country,' I had said, 'and I think the platteland is the place to make the attempt. Maybe things are simpler there. The cities are too cluttered.'"

This formulation, which is repeated on the back cover, is problematic. Robbins regards his reasons as unprofound. That is to say that they contain little insight. One of these reasons, however, is the daunting task of understanding South African society. Furthermore, on the basis of an unsubstantiated prejudice against urban areas Robbins feels that this is best done by traversing the platteland. By refusing to confront the cluttered cities, however, he places an adequate consideration of the economy beyond his scope with the result that he confines himself to the realm of the ideological justifications of apartheid

and the unpleasant consequences of this ideology which one encounters along the 29th parallel. This is an inadequate perspective from which to understand South Africa and is comparable to an attempt to understand a cell by means of a dissection that deliberately avoids the nucleus. In the absence of a methodology the unity of the work is provided by a line on the map: Robbins has strung a washing line across South Africa on which an assortment of other people's ideas and items of historical interest are suspended.

This is not to claim that the book is without value. As a document of a journey across South Africa it contains much that is of interest. One sees both similarities and differences in the manner in which South Africans have responded to varying environmental and social conditions. Furthermore Robbins holds discussions with several people thereby establishing a kaleidoscope of perspectives on South Africa. Nonetheless, even when considered as a travelogue **The 29th Parallel** is not entirely successful. This is partly due to Robbins constantly reiterating his intention to probe beneath the surface, to discover the underlying realities of South Africa; partly due to his occasional insensitivity in discussions and partly due to his style. Robbins, it seems, has little confidence in his writing for virtually every metaphor is either explained or strained to the point where it resembles a butterfly with its wings pulled off. One pictures him as a sincere man wilting under the relentless African sun. Indeed **The 29th Parallel** is best read neither as a political text nor as a travelogue but as the account of a man in search of a sense of belonging. □

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