

LIONEL ABRAHAMS— critic, poet, author — accepts the Pringle award

Introduction: Thomas Pringle and the Pringle Award

by Marie Dyer.

Early in 1824 Thomas Pringle, emigrant Scottish poet and journalist, founded the first magazine to appear in the Cape Colony: **The South African Journal**, a monthly periodical issued alternately in English and Dutch. In the same year he was appointed co-editor with his friend, James Fairbairn, another Scottish emigrant, of a weekly newspaper, the **South African Commercial Advertiser**, owned by a third recent arrival in the colony, the printer George Greig.

The Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, was autocratic by temperament and despotic by political conviction. The editorial policy of the **Commercial Advertiser** was bold — in its first 17 numbers it published several political articles in support of constitutional freedoms and freedom of the press, as well as reports of libel actions involving colonial officials and even the Governor himself. In May 1824 the Governor, through an official called the Fiscal, demanded a proof copy of no. 18 for scrutiny before it was distributed. The copy was submitted; no changes were made; but the number when issued contained a postscript announcing that the paper was to be suspended. Fairbairn and Pringle had resigned as editors, refusing, in Pringle's words, to "compromise (their) birthright as British subjects by editing any publication under censorship". Greig announced his intention to publish the **Facts connected with the stoppage of the press and the censorship of the Fiscal**. The Fiscal entered the printing-house with a warrant to seal the presses before the pamphlet could be printed; but the type was already set up, and Greig and his staff worked all night printing individual copies by hand. The following morning the **Facts** were distributed free to the public, mainly by being thrown in bundles from the upper-storey windows of the printing-house. According to Pringle "the greatest consternation and excitement prevailed" and "a petition to the King-in-Council for a free press was signed by a large proportion of the English merchants."

A week later Pringle was summoned to the Fiscal's office and informed that several articles in the second number of his other periodical, the **South African Journal** had been offensive — particularly a critical account by Pringle himself of the condition of the 1820 settlers and the

conduct of the emigration scheme. The Fiscal demanded a guarantee that no future articles would be obnoxious. Pringle responded by announcing his intention to withdraw the journal from publication, explaining that he was incapable of determining whether any article was offensive or obnoxious, or not.

Somerset, whose dictatorial attitudes were under increasing pressure from the Government in England, attempted in a "stormy interview" to bully or cajole Pringle into continuing with the journal, asserting also that Pringle's attitudes and his signature of the petition were incompatible with his position as a Civil Servant (he was a sub-librarian in the Public Library). Pringle immediately resigned his post.

His income and prospects thus completely sacrificed, Pringle who was a cripple decided to return to England. He became the active and energetic secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society; and was still holding this post when the Abolition Bill was passed in 1833.

Somerset returned to England in 1826, and in the same year Greig and Fairbairn re-established the **Commercial Advertiser**. Their (less dramatic) efforts towards a free press continued until 1829, when the **Ordinance granting Freedom of the Press to the Cape Colony** was passed.

Unaware, perhaps, of the lasting significance of his political gestures, Pringle hoped to achieve some fame as a poet (and in fact Coleridge declared that his poem **Afar in the Desert** was "among the three most perfect lyric poems in our language".) But today his most highly valued literary work is probably his vivid and graphic autobiographical **Narrative of a Residence in South Africa**.

In commemoration of Pringle's achievements and his contributions to South African society, the English Academy presents an annual Pringle Award for creative writing published in South African periodicals and journals. In 1977 the award was shared by Lionel Abrahams and Sidney Siphos Sepamla, for their poems in **Contrast**, **New Classic**, and **Donga**. The speech made by Lionel Abrahams in acceptance of the award, follows.

Lionel Abrahams speaks:

I am more than honoured, more than grateful to have this Pringle Award. I am moved at receiving from a body like the English Academy a signal of encouragement and friendliness at a time when the signals from the country as a whole tend to fill one with confusion, disgust and dismay.

We seem to be in the heyday of a spirit of power-lust that makes a god of security, and sacrifices a thousand joys and freedoms and truths to that god – to say nothing of lives.

Censorship, which particularly concerns us here, is an expression of that same spirit – though I am convinced that censorship, as applied against South Africa's literary authors at the very least, has no genuine connection with security, or with moral standards.

It has to do with a natural enmity between the creative writer and that lust for power. The bully has constantly to prove his power by pushing people around, and the writer makes a convenient target. Moreover, the writer's creative truthfulness makes it impossible for him to fall in with the

fiction about security. He sees no point in giving up a joy here, a freedom there, a truth anywhere, in the futile hope that death can be bought off or bought over. He insists on knowing and living the whole of life to the limit of possibility.

Many of my friends have left South Africa. Others are talking of doing so. As for myself, I acknowledge that there is always the possibility of the unimaginable fright or hurt that could turn me inside-out and make me need to leave. But my intention is to stay. I feel that this is my place. My work relates to this place. I tell myself that even if privilege and comfort and prosperity and safety were taken away, I would still find my meaning in this place. To be forced to leave would be a moral disaster for me.

The award which the English Academy has bestowed on me is a sign of your recognition which will help me to hold on to my resolve to stay where my life has meaning. □

THE DARK WOOD

by Peter Wilhelm; Ravan Press 1977.

Reviewed by Jill Arnott

Dominating the plot of Peter Wilhelm's **The Dark Wood**, are the differing choices and destinies of two brothers; David and Jan van Vlaams: sons of a wealthy, conservative Johannesburg businessman who is deeply concerned with the protection and preservation of what he sees as an embattled Afrikaans tradition and heritage. It is in relation to their father's society, its values, policies, and customs, that the brothers must mould their lives; giving their loyalty to, or withholding it from, the system he represents. The nature of this society is such that acceptance or rejection of its primary values must to some extent dictate the shape of their respective futures, for it is a society dedicated to the protection of its own, and the elimination of those who threaten its structure and security.

To this extent, then, the concerns of the book are political, but only on a relatively superficial level. "The Exorcism", the Theodore Roethke poem from which Mr Wilhelm draws his title, is about identity and the nature of selfhood; and it is the individual personalities of Jan and David, their needs and weaknesses, rather than any external circumstances or events, which finally influence their separate decisions. David, the elder, despite the advantages of an overseas education, remains true to the tradition which has the most to offer him personally: the South African way of life as exemplified by the upper echelons of Afrikaans-speaking, Johannesburg-

northern-suburbs society. He does try to rationalise his need for a structured, stable, static environment into political terms: "We're a young country still . . . we can't afford liberalisation at this stage . . .", but these naive over-simplifications cannot deceive even himself. His real nature, his need to be both dominated and protected, is revealed by his grateful submission to his power-hungry stepmother. David is less a patriot than a man with a highly developed sense of self-preservation, and it is this instinct that dominates even his love-life. He chooses his woman, Marika Marais, not only because she is the daughter of a useful business contact, but also because she is traditional White-South-African womanhood incarnate: "a product of decency and sun, of Cape rectitude and racial purity". Mr Wilhelm's satire is here, as elsewhere, a little heavy-handed; but the point he makes, and the inescapable parallel with Hitler's ideal of Aryan maidenhood, is certainly relevant.

With David exposed as spineless, self-seeking, and wilfully blind, it might be expected that his sibling, Jan, representative of the liberal-thinking counter-culture, would emerge as a more attractive personality. But if anything Jan strikes the unbiased reader as even less sympathetic: his progressive ideals marred by personal bitterness and a childish desire to revenge himself on a society in which he has failed to realise himself. His desire for revolution is less a commitment to freedom than a morbid fascination with violence: "In his mind he had stripped the guests,