

WHITE ZULU

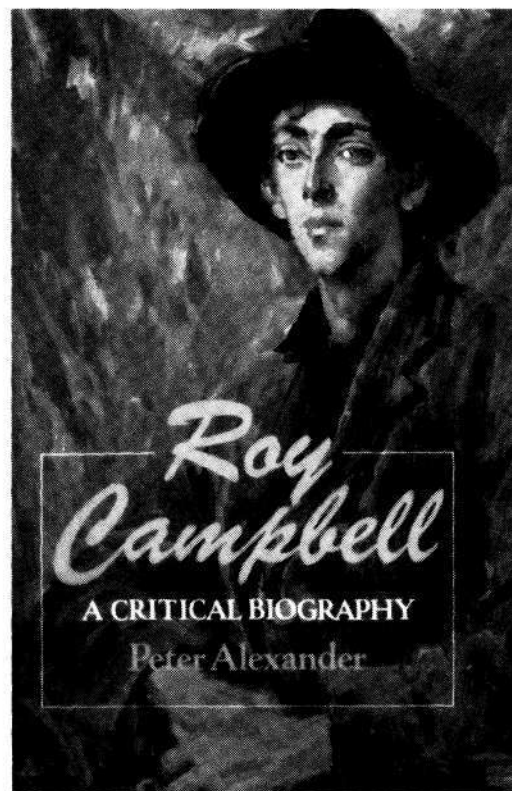
WHITE ZULU

A review of *Roy Campbell: a Critical Biography* by Peter Alexander, published by David Philip, Cape Town, 1982; R18,75 (excl.)

by A.E. Voss

Roy Campbell died in a road accident in Portugal in 1957. At that time I was a student at Rhodes University and Professor Guy Butler was in the midst of a course of lectures on, as I remember it, *Nostromo*. On the news of Campbell's death, the Conrad classes were suspended, to be replaced by a series of three lectures on the work of the South African poet. My memory retains two aspects of my then impression of Campbell: the expressionist vividness of his best work, an intensification of the colours of late nineteenth century and Edwardian verse; and the code of the horseman, one with nature, but above the herd, self-reliant, dextrous, graceful. Professor Butler is quoted in Peter Alexander's new biography of Campbell; when they met in London in January, 1955, the elder poet struck him 'as a sick, defeated and frightened man, frightened by his own drinking habit and by the horror of life.' (p. 235)

Campbell's personality, in Dr Alexander's careful portrait, was built on such oppositions as these; a colonial upbringing versus a largely metropolitan career; the revolt against parental tradition versus an uneasy commitment to its values, at least in the abstract; Bohemian youth versus Catholic maturity. The paradox hovers in the tension between the swiping satire of *The Georgiad* (1931) and the fine translations of *The Poem of St. John of the Cross* (1951). It informs Campbell's social and sexual personality. On the one hand the macho bullfighting image and on the other the submissive spouse. The contradiction is perfectly expressed in two of the pictures that illustrate this book. The dust-jacket carries Augustus John's portrait in oils of Campbell (c. 1920). This is the image of the darling of Bohemia; beneath the black hat the face expresses both defiance and seduction, the eyes half-closing, the lips about to pout. Inside there is the famous photograph of the *Voorslag* trio on the beach at Sezela. Between William Plomer, who looks as though he's knitting, and Laurens van der Post, who looks as though he's holding his trousers up, stands Campbell, bearded, and with his hat in his hand, looking like 'n arm-blanke wat werk soek'. Dr Alexander's publishers in fact use these two pictures on p. 2 of their latest catalogue.



Dr Alexander's is a sympathetic account of a fascinating life. Although offered as 'a critical biography' there is more biography than criticism in it; the portrait and the life are built up on a mass of carefully ordered and vividly rendered details. Dr Alexander is particularly good on Campbell's early years in Oxford and London; on the life in Southern France after his marriage; and on Campbell's experience in World War II and afterwards. Those last years were comfortable but sad; when Campbell had at last earned a substantial reputation as a poet, he was in a sense in no condition to enjoy it. Dr Alexander's account of Campbell's two trips to America makes harrowing reading, as does that of the poet's return to Natal to receive an honorary doctorate: 'The doctoring' Campbell wrote to Mary 'was like a bullfight with the gold scarlet gowns.' (p. 232)

The edition of Campbell's *Collected Poems* to which Dr Alexander's book has sent me back (Bodley Head, 3 vols., 1959) claims, among other things, on the dust-jackets that Campbell was 'a soldier in both world wars'. This kind of legend, largely put about by Campbell himself, should now no longer be tenable. Dr Alexander's sifting of the evidence has isolated the thread and the themes of Campbell's life.

One important aspect of Campbell's life and personality which his own bluster seems to have done much to conceal was his gift for friendship and his loyalty to the friends he made, from T.S. Eliot and Richard Aldington to Aimé Tschiffely and a taxi-driver in Lexington, Kentucky. He was generous with his own time and effort to younger poets and deserved, in a sense, a happier life. Despite Mary's affairs with Vita Sackville-West (who comes out of it all pretty badly in this account) and others, and Campbell's gestures of defiance, he was blessed in his marriage and in his wife, although his children's lives have been marked by unhappiness.

Not that Campbell was without fortune. He was born privileged and continued to enjoy either a parental allowance or an inheritance all his life. Much of the domestic drama of Campbell's life was bound up with whether or not the 'money from South Africa' would arrive each month.

Campbell's relationship with South Africa is one of the fascinating, but, I believe, unanswered questions raised by this book. Dr Alexander's account of the *Voorslag* years, for example, suggests that Campbell made a genuine attempt to engage himself with his native land. The point of some of his best-known poems ('The Serf', 'The Zulu Girl') is not the extent, but the limits of the poet's engagement. They are poems of observation rather than commitment. Perhaps Campbell's whole life is a story of a quest for identity within community. The poetry which isolates him from some others is his only means to genuine identity. For this and other reasons, it is perhaps not surprising that Campbell took to drink. Not often did his own life give him such moments of balance between prospect and retrospect as he expressed in 'Autumn' (1929), where he writes of the olive trees:

Soon on our hearth's reviving pyre
 Their rotted stems will crumble up;
 And like a ruby, panting fire,
 The grape will redden on your fingers
 Through the lit crystal of the cup.

Campbell called Toledo 'this heavenly place which means more than all the world to me' (p. 240) and, all in all, South Africa meant little, consciously or explicitly, to the poet, although historically he was bound to it. Nonetheless it is a pity that Dr Alexander's image of South Africa is stereotypical rather than critical. He can be vivid: of Durban, in 1906, he writes

The town asserted itself against the bush by a law requiring the Zulus to wear trousers once they passed the city limits, and against the sea by William Campbell's breakwater. (p. 5)

The weakness of the formulation conceals the equation,

bush = Zulus. It seems that Dr Alexander accepts the stereotypes about which he should be critical. Thus he writes of 1906:

the Zulus had risen in rebellion all over Natal, and were slaughtering whites. (p. 5)

This is simply not true and is even half-contradicted later in the book:

Campbell, of course, vividly recalled the days of the Zulu Rebellion when the threat of large-scale black violence was very real. (p. 65)

This rather simple history is reflected in some of Dr Alexander's criticism. For example, his comment on 'The Serf' misses the force of 'ploughs' in the last line of the poem and uses the term 'nature' very loosely:

... the ploughman, because of his closeness to nature, will endure, while the very artificiality of the 'palaces, and thrones, and towers' will bring them down. (p. 65)

Dr Alexander's comment on 'A Song for the People' (p. 57) suggests that neither he nor Campbell can clearly identify or identify with 'the people'.

In terms of literary history, Campbell was a late Romantic. The paradoxical rejection of the community which sustained him materially in effect sustained him as a poet.

Campbell is enjoying something of a vogue at the moment. Marcia Levenson has recently edited a selection of poems (Donker, 1981). Dr Alexander himself has done the same (OUP, 1982). A *Collected Works* is promised (Donker). As may have been the case for a long time, certainly as Campbell himself realised, what South African literature needs most is South African criticism.

Dr Alexander's book is handsomely produced, which we have come to expect from David Philip.



From the left: William Plomer, Roy Campbell, and Laurens van der Post on the beach at Sezela, August 1926