

THE SOL PLAATJE MEMORIAL LECTURE FOR 1987

At the University of Bophuthatswana

INTRODUCTION

I have the honour this evening to deliver the Sol Plaatje Memorial Lecture for 1987. To prepare myself for this task I have been re-reading his writings, and the various accounts of his life, and a wonderful life it was too. What makes his life seem all the more wonderful, and what makes his achievements seem all the more extraordinary, is the realisation that he did not enjoy the advantages that have been enjoyed or will be enjoyed by all of us here this evening, a university education. Nor indeed did he have a high-school education. It is recorded that he did not go beyond Standard III (some say Standard IV). His education he gave to himself.

At the age of 21, because of his proficiency in English and Dutch, and of course in his own home language Setswana he became the official interpreter at the Kimberley Magistrate's Court. He had already taken the Cape Civil Service examination, through the medium of Dutch, and had topped the list. He then entered a typewriting examination and again came top.

He increased the number of languages in which he was fluent, and towards the end of last century became the interpreter at the Magistrate's Court at Mafeking, today spelt Mafikeng. When the Anglo-Boer War broke out in 1899, Mafeking was besieged by the boers, and at that time came Plaatje's most famous book **The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje**.

THE LAND ACT

Plaatje took his first big step into public life when in 1912 he became the first General Corresponding Secretary of the new South African Native National Congress, formed under the presidency of the Reverend J.L. Dube. He was already known as the editor of the Setswana-English weekly, **Koranta ea Batswana**, and for his opposition to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. He feared the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, the decline of British influence, and the passing of racially discriminatory laws. His fears were soon justified. In 1913 the white Parliament passed the Natives Land Act, which prohibited both whites and blacks from buying land except in what were recognised as their "own" areas. The Act vitually made it impossible for a black man to become a farmer in the land of his birth. The Act of 1913 did not affect purchases of white farms by black buyers before that date. It was in 1936 that the United Party of Hertzog and Smuts legislated to remove the land rights of black buyers who had bought before 1913. The lands that they had acquired from white owners became known as the "black spots".

One of my friends in the Liberal Party was Selby Msimang, who had close connections with Sol Plaatje, for they were both foundation members of the South African Native National Congress, later to become the African National Congress, the ANC. Selby Msimang lived for more than

ninety years in our country, through the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the removal of the African voters of the Cape to a separate roll in 1936, and the long rule of the Nationalist Party from 1948 to his death in 1982, during which time Parliament passed the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act, the Separate Amenities Act, the Bantu Education Act, the Suppression of Communism Act and all the security legislation that followed it. Yet although he had lived through all this, he always maintained that the most cruel Act of them all was the Natives Land Act of 1913.

Sol Plaatje reacted equally strongly to the Act. He wrote: "Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave but a pariah in the land of his birth." He was one of a delegation of five which went to England in the hope of getting the British Government to veto the law, but the British were preoccupied with anxieties about the imminent First World War. In 1919 he was again the member of a delegation which vainly tried to get the peace conference at Versailles to discuss the Act.

LITERATURE

But Plaatje had another great love besides his love of politics, which is more accurately described as a love of justice. His other love was the word, language, literature. He translated four of Shakespeare's plays. In 1916, two of his works on the Tswana language were published. In 1930 his novel **Mhudi** was published. He was not very lucky with the publication of his work. His translations of Shakespeare were not published till after his death, as was also his famous diary. He was an honest and humble man, and spent some time entertaining lepers in settlements with the aid of an old projector and films.

I shared with Sol Plaatje a love of justice (I was certainly not a lover of politics) and a love of literature, so that in that regard at least I am qualified to give this memorial lecture. A further qualification is my esteem for Plaatje himself. My theme is going to be "Writing in South Africa Today," and it will deal with the difficulties of synthesising literature and politics.

The history of South Africa is for me primarily a history of conquest, and therefore of warfare. The early conquests were minor ones. The first great struggle was between the advancing trekkers and the resisting Xhosas; both of them were cattle owners, and both of them needed land. It was a struggle in which the British also became involved when they finally annexed the Cape in 1805. This struggle lasted for a hundred years, and the memories of it are still alive in that part of South Africa that we call the Eastern Province. These wars left a deep mark on the souls and minds of both white and black.

With the beginning of the Great Trek in the 1830's, chiefdom after chiefdom was conquered by the Boers. Twenty years earlier the great King Shaka created the

Zulu nation largely through the conquest of his neighboring tribes. The most notable refugee from Shaka was Mzilikazi, who in his turn conquered others, till he in turn was conquered by the Boers, and fled into what today is called Zimbabwe, where his descendants live in uneasy peace with Mr Mugabe and the Shona people. Shaka was assassinated in 1828 and his Zulu kingdom continued until 1879, when it was destroyed by the British. Zululand was divided into thirteen petty chiefdoms, ruled virtually by white magistrates. The British also conquered the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in the Anglo-Boer War. The greatest conquest of all, the only one not gained by violence, was on May 26th 1948, when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party conquered us all, and so began the Great Plan, sometimes grandly called Separate Development, usually called Apartheid. I once said, in an epigram of which I was quite proud, that Apartheid was the finest blend of idealism and cruelty ever devised by man. It certainly deceived many Christian Afrikaners, who were able not to see the cruelty by contemplating the idealism. It has taken the great Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, the largest of the Dutch Reformed Churches, until now in 1987, to admit their fault – or sin, if you like a stronger word – in proclaiming that Apartheid was the will of God. The Grand Plan is falling to pieces about our ears, and the Age of Conquest is coming to an end. When did it begin to come to an end? If one has to fix a date, then it would be the sixteenth day of June, 1976, the day that thirteen-year-old Hector Petersen was shot dead in Soweto. That was the day when the black man said to the white, “you can’t do this to us any more.” Or to put it more correctly, that was the day when the black man’s children said to the white man, “you can’t do this to us any more.”

I need not remind you that one of the results of the Grand Plan of Separate Development was the creation of the independent state of Bophuthatswana in which you all live. It is not for me to speak about the advantages and disadvantages of your independence. But what I can say is that I have no feeling of visiting a foreign country. As far as I am concerned, I am visiting a part of my own country, to give a memorial lecture in honour of a man who was a fellow-citizen of mine in the Union of South Africa. Do you know what my hope is? It is that one day we shall all be reunited in a federal republic of South Africa.

CONQUEST AND LITERATURE

However that is not my topic. My topic is to examine what effect these three centuries of conquest has had upon our literature, on our prose, our poetry, our drama. One can say at once that the effect has been profound. Some would say it has been catastrophic. Three centuries of conquest has also powerfully affected our religion, our politics, our education. They have powerfully affected our people, both the conquerors and the conquered. They have also powerfully affected a group of people who were never conquerors or conquered, and that is the group that we call the Cape Coloured People. As a general rule, the conqueror tends to look down on the conquered, and this attitude, which sometimes amounts to sheer contempt, has a degrading effect on them both.

I suppose that South Africa is the most complex society in the world. It certainly is the most fragmented society in the world. It has no common culture; it is a country of many cultures and many languages. It is not surprising that this diversity characterises its literature. One cannot expect

the writer who has suffered and is suffering under, for example, the Group Areas Act, to produce the same kind of story or poem or play as would be produced by the writer whose people enacted the Group Areas Act. I have always found very useful the definition of culture as one’s world of meanings, and the meanings of these two writers must be very different. In fact many black writers today challenge many of the old ideas as to what literature is, and as to what writers try to do. Some black writers contend that no white writer, and especially no story-writer, can possibly write about black people, or can possibly understand how black people live, or how they react to the way they have to live. I myself have been criticised on these very grounds, and I reply that these black critics are really saying that I have no right to write about my own country at all. There is no rational basis for these assertions. They are emotional, and often passionate. They are in fact the result of having lived under the conquerors for three centuries.

Some years ago I attended a festival at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. On one of the evenings of the festival a group of players from Soweto presented a play by an African dramatist. There were many African people in the audience, and they were interested – and perhaps excited – to know that also in the audience was one of the leading drama critics of England. After the play was over, a group of young black people gathered round the critic and demanded to know what he thought of the play. He said he thought that the play was a most interesting piece of dramatic experiment and it was clearly characterised by deep and intensely felt emotions. He praised the author and the actors, and then – reluctantly I thought – gave his opinion that it wasn’t really theatre. The reaction of his questioners was decidedly angry. One of them said – and I try to repeat what he said as well as I am able – one of them said, “you think that the only theatre is Shakespeare. Well Shakespeare is not our theatre. We have our own theatre, and you have seen it tonight, but you do not understand it. Well we understand it, and that is what we want to see.” They left the critic a bit crushed, but according to my standards of theatre he was right. For one thing the play was too long, and in the end lost the attention of what I suppose you could call the sophisticated members of the audience. It would have been of no use whatsoever to argue with the young questioners – you would have been arguing with passion, with feelings passionately held, and reason, or sophistication if you like, cannot argue with passion. One cannot argue with the passions of the conquered with their pains and their resentments. I end this story by recalling that Sol Plaatje was a lover of Shakespeare and wrote an article **In Homage to Shakespeare** which was published by the Oxford University Press in 1916.

This story concerns the writing of the dramatist, but it can also be told about the writing of the poet. Let me read to you a short poem by James Matthews, published in that excellent anthology **One Day in June**, edited by Sisa Ndaba, published by Ad. Donker in 1986. The poem is called **It Is Said**.

It is said
that poets write of beauty
of form, of flowers and of love
but the words I write
are of pain and of rage.

I am no minstrel
who sings of joy
mine a lament.

I wail of a land
hideous with open graves
waiting for the slaughtered ones.

Balladeers strum their lutes and sing tunes of happy times
I cannot join in their merriment
my heart drowned in bitterness
with the agony of what white man's law has done.

As I interpret this poem, Matthews is not dismissing or condemning the poetry of beauty, of form, of flowers and of love. He is simply saying that he cannot write such poetry in these times. He is inferring that it is not the kind of poetry that should be written in these times. Before I move on let me say that this short poem has a beauty of its own, although it is a beauty of pain and bitterness. I did not think the play in Grahamstown was good theatre, but I think that **It is Said** is good poetry.

I want to read to you now one of my favourite poems in English, because I want to use it to make a further point on the subject of literature and protest. It is not itself a poem of protest at all, but a gentle and witty way of poking fun at what Robbie Burns called the "unco guid", that is, the people who were too good. The poem is by Yeats, and it is called **The Fiddler of Dooney**.

When I play on my fiddle in Dooney,
Folk dance like a wave of the sea;
My cousin is priest in Kilvarnet,
My brother in Mocharabuiee.

I passed my brother and cousin:
They read in their books of prayer;
I read in my book of songs
I bought at the Sligo fair.

When we come to the end of time
To Peter sitting in state,
He will smile at the three old spirits.
But call me first through the gate;

For the good are always the merry,
Save by an evil chance,
And the merry love the fiddle
And the merry love to dance.

And when the folk there spy me,
They will all come up to me,
With "Here is the fiddler of Dooney!"
And dance like a wave of the sea

Yeats must have felt very pleased when he had written **The Fiddler of Dooney**; and he probably felt grateful too, that he had been given the gift of making such music. But that is not the point I wish to make. The point I want to make is that such a poem simply could not be written in South Africa today. It has no pain in it, it has no bitterness in it, it has no racial undertones or overtones, though Yeats could write poetry with all these characteristics. **The Fiddler of Dooney** is a song, and a merry song too, but as James Matthews wrote: "I cannot join in their merriment." No one can write a merry song in South Africa today.

I take advantage of my favoured position as your lecturer to quote some lines of my own:

Simple I was, I wished to write but words
And melodies that had no meanings but their music
And songs that had no meaning but their song.
But the deep notes and the undertones
Kept sounding themselves, kept insistently
Intruding themselves, like a prisoned tide,
That under the shining and sunlit sea
In caverns and corridors goes underground thundering.

Today we have no melodies that have no meanings but their music, and we have no songs that have no meanings but their song. Our songs, indeed all our writing, our prose, poetry, and drama are full of meanings. But the duty of the writer is to make sure that the meanings do not kill the writing. This is I think the greatest challenge that confronts our writers today. Can they write about the meanings of their society, and produce something that can be called literature, or can they only produce polemics? I have nothing against polemics, but their place is not in the novel or the poem or the play. Their place is in the lecture, the political speech, the party pamphlet. I may add that this challenge faces black writers more fiercely than white writers. The reason for that is that the meanings of black writers are more bitter, and the reason for that is that black writers belong to what for three centuries were conquered people. It is a challenge that was successfully met by Benjamin Moloise, who was executed on October 18th, 1985, having been found guilty of murdering a policeman. His few lines are called **Poem Written on Death Row**.

All the armies that ever marched,
All the parliaments that ever sat,
Have not affected the life
Of man on earth as that one
Solitary life.

I am proud to be what I am,
The storm of oppression will be followed
By the rain of my blood.
I am proud to give my life,
My one solitary life.

Sad indeed is the country that can produce a poem like that.

MHUDI

Sol Plaatje had to face the challenge to fuse protest and literature when he wrote his novel **MHUDI**, probably the first novel written in English by an African. It was published by the Lovedale Press in 1930, two years before Plaatje's death, but according to Professor Tim Couzens of the University of the Witwatersrand, it was written about 1917 and was completed by 1920, and its love story of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi is placed in historic times, the years of and after the Great Trek, and of the conflict between the Boers and the Barolong, and of the terror which Mzilikazi spread through the lands to the west of the Drakensberg.

Mhudi might be called a novel of protest, but perhaps the word **protest** is too strong. It certainly is a novel of strong political comment, and extremely critical of the blood-thirstiness of Mzilikazi, whose impis massacred women and children, and of the arrogance of the Boers, especially in regard to the black ownership of land, resulting many years later, in 1913 in fact, in the passing by the

white parliament of the Union of South Africa of the Natives Land Act. But the novel does not become a polemic. That was because Plaatje realised that the writer had a literary as well as a social duty. I note in passing that the style of the novel was criticised for its imitative and derivative nature, but I think that such a judgement is not worthy of great attention. If I could write in Tswana as well as Plaatje could write in English, I should be proud of myself indeed.

I quote from Tim Couzen's introduction to **Mhudi**, the following wise words of R.V. Selope-Thema, written in **Umteteli wa Bantu** in 1929:

The duty of Bantu writers and journalists, as that of writers and journalists of other races, is to call the attention of the leaders to the things that are detrimental to the interest and welfare of the people. A writer who does not criticise and correct the mistakes of his people does not fulfil the purpose for which God endowed him with the power of the pen.

A writer is a prophet, and his duty is not only to prophesy but also to rebuke, when necessary, the people for wrongdoing; to criticise, when occasion demands it, the conduct and methods of the leaders of his race, and to point out the way to salvation.

I would add only one thing to that. A writer may well be a prophet, and he may well have a duty to prophesy, even to rebuke, but his first duty is to be a writer. And I should like to quote the words of Karl Kraus, the Austrian poet and critic, who was noted for his ability to express truths and principles in a few trenchant words. I came across this aphorism quite by accident and I have remembered it ever since. This is what Kraus said about writing and writers:

There are two kinds of writers, those who are and those who aren't. With the first, content and form belong together like soul and body; with the second, they match each other like body and clothes.

That seems to suggest that although writing may concern itself with politics and protest, with evil and ugliness, it must transcend them all, and indeed endow them with a kind of beauty. Otherwise it is not writing.

It is now time to bring this lecture to an end, and I am going to presume on my status as your guest of honour to read to you a piece of South African writing of today, and it was written by myself. I am going to read to you the closing words of Chapter Thirty of the second volume of my autobiography. The first volume was called **Towards the Mountain** and the mountain was that of the prophet Isaiah: "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." The lives of all good men and women are a journey towards the holy mountain; they never reach it, they see it afar off, but it gives meaning to their lives. The second volume is called **Journey Continued**, and should be published in Cape Town early next year. I read to you its last two pages.

CONCLUSION

"I think that this is a good place at which to bring this second volume to an end. It marked the close of what I might call my public life. I decided that I would never again join a political party, but would, because I could not help it, become a political observer. When I wrote, "because I could not help it", I mean that it is an integral part of my life and character to observe the political events of my times,

and to be deeply concerned about them, and because I am a writer, to write about them.

However I intend to write an epilogue, which will deal with the extraordinary events of the 'seventies and the 'eighties, and which will discuss the future, in so far as it is discussable. I do not foresee doom for our country, the destruction of its economy, the triumph of revolutionaries, and the establishment of a new autocracy, which will call itself democratic and non-racial but will in fact be authoritarian (and harsh towards its former oppressors, of which I will be counted as one). Nor do I see the continuance of white supremacy, or of any statutory racial separation. I would like to see Afrikaner identity preserved, but it quite clearly cannot be done at the expense of other people, as has been the case for the last thirty-nine years, since indeed the year 1948 when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party came to power. I must not however anticipate the epilogue.

Although politics has played a major role in my eighty-four years, it has not dominated my life. Literature and the love of the word, and the love of writing the word, have been equally important. And the third dominating force has been my religion, my reverence for the Lord Jesus Christ whom I could have served much better (to use Tolstoy's words, I have not fulfilled a thousandth of his commandments, not because I didn't wish to, but because I was unable, but I am trying with all my heart), and my sense of wonder when I contemplate the Universe.

I must admit to one last dominant thought, and that is that my life is drawing to its end. Not long ago I read that Sir John Gielgud, who was then eighty-two, had said that he thought of dying every day of his life.

I would not use these words, but I certainly think of my age every day of my life. I find Tagore's words on death most beautiful.

On the day when death will knock at the door, what wilt thou offer to him?

Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life – I will never let him go with empty hands.

All the sweet vintage of all my autumn days and summer nights, all the earnings and gleanings of my busy life will I place before him at the close of my days when death will knock at my door.

And again:

I have got my leave. Bid me farewell, my brothers! I bow to you all and take my departure.

Here I give back the keys of my door – and I give up all claims to my house. I ask only for last kind words from you.

We were neighbours for long, but I have received more than I could give. Now the day has dawned and the lamp that lit my dark corner is out. A summons has come and I am ready for my journey.

I close with words from the South African Poet Roy Campbell. They are closing words for him too, and are to be found in the last paragraph of his autobiography, **Light On A Dark Horse**. He says that he was compelled to write the book.

So as to repay my debt both to Almighty God and to my parents, for letting me loose in such a world, to plunder its miraculous literatures, and languages, and wines; to savour its sights, forms, colours, perfumes, and sounds; to see so many superb cities, oceans, lakes, forests,

rivers, sierras, pampas, and plains, with their beasts, birds, trees, crops and flowers – and above all their men and women, who are by far the most interesting of all.

It is a debt that I also wish to repay.”□

Sydney Kentridge

LAW AND LAWYERS IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

The first Ernie Wentzel Memorial Lecture

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ERNIE WENTZEL, THE MAN

It is an honour, but also a great sadness, to be delivering the first Ernie Wentzel Memorial Lecture. The sadness is that Ernie Wentzel should have died so early, still in his prime as a man and an advocate. The sorrow caused by his death was not due only to the almost universal popularity in the legal profession which his wit and good humour won him. There was also the sense that we had lost that rare thing, a true leader of our profession. Ernie Wentzel had been Chairman of the Johannesburg Bar Council, and an outstandingly good one. But his leadership was more than formal. He held strong beliefs about the law and about the society in which he practised law. Ernie's beliefs were clear, consistent and uncompromising. A founder member of the Liberal Party, he was and remained a Liberal with a capital L. He detested racism, white or black, and he detested Fascism, whether of the right or of the left. Above all, he believed in individual rights and individual choices. Thus it was inevitable that he became a steadfast political opponent of the government and inevitable, too, that in his profession he should be a forceful defender of the victims of government policies.

The government did not like this; nor did the security police, many of whose members Ernie put through the shredder in the witness box. When, during the Emergency of 1960, the security police first enjoyed the heady power of detention without trial, Ernie was one of those whom they held. He was imprisoned for three months. After the Emergency, the hostility of the government to Ernie continued. His passport was withdrawn and not restored to him for many years.

The experience of detention without trial must have reinforced what in any event flowed from Ernie's own philosophy – an implacable opposition to autocratic government action of any sort. It may seem superfluous to stress Ernie Wentzel's opposition to detention without trial.

Who does not condemn it? But for Ernie it was not merely a matter of who was doing the detaining and who was being detained – he would condemn it whether done by governments of West or East, of left or right, whether by black governments or white governments. Some of his friends on the left found it difficult to accept this uncompromising stance. Ernie, I think, regretted this because he regretted any divisions among opponents of apartheid. He was a practical politician. But on certain basic principles he would not give way. Yet Ernie was never pompous – nobody was further from the “holier than thou” attitude than he was. To use an inadequate and no doubt old-fashioned phrase, what he had, and what he acted on, was common human decency.

Ernie Wentzel was born in Capt Town in 1933. He took his LL.B degree at U.C.T. in 1955 and joined the Johannesburg Bar in 1963. He took silk in 1978. His experience of the law in South Africa was therefore, like that of most of us here, entirely within the period of Nationalist rule. Before venturing to look at the future of the law and lawyers in this country, it would be as well to reflect a little on what has happened to law and the courts in the years since 1948. I propose to do this only in the broadest outline. I shall certainly not attempt a history of the racial laws and the security laws which have been thrust upon us in the era of apartheid. I shall take for granted your knowledge of that. I shall have nothing to say about changes in the common law, however important, during this period. I shall confine myself to that part of the law which can compendiously if not entirely accurately be called human rights law.

THE APPEAL COURT

At the beginning of that period, the Appellate Division was presided over by Watermeyer, C.J., and after him, by Centlivres, C.J.. Schreiner, J.A., Greenberg, J.A., and van den Heever, J.A., were members of the Court. One would have had to look far to find in the English-speaking world a