buried in our history

Boer Boy offers the paradox that the conditions of the 30 000 Boer captives held in Indien, Ceylon, St Helena and Bermuda were markedly better than those of their wives and children in the concentration camps back home. Charles and his father, Philip, interned first in Ceylon and then later in St Helena, were even allowed out of the Solon camp.

The traffic on this mark of anti-imperial solidarity, the local people seem to have been fascinated by the prisoners “of whom they had heard and read so much, a people that had dared to fight mighty Britain and at times gained famous victories, despite being greatly outnumbered”. An imprisoned Boer clergyman, Reverend Viljoen, recorded “the many gestures of friendliness and sympathy” among the spectators who crowded the Bombay docks to see them disembark.

A persistent theme of Schoeman’s book is the bitterness of the Boer combatants towards fellow Afrikanners who sided with the British. De Wet, for example, records his disgust at the “sweepings” who fought against him at the siege of Brabant’s Horse, while hensoppers are accused of shopping fugitives — the Du Prez’s cage hide-out was betrayed by a certain Van Rooyen — and looting abandoned farmsteads.

Divisions between what Eugene Terre Blanche called “Boere” and “Cape Dutch” were to dog Afrikanerdom until the 1948 election and beyond, but that legacy of the Anglo-Boer War now seems to have run into the sand — with the tensions between Boer and Briton that dominated South African politics for half a century.

To that extent, Boer Boy has little contemporary resonance. But it does remind us that there is another struggle against national oppression buried in our history, with its own harvest of suffering and heroism.

The accident — the place where these converging interests collide — is the public review. This is where one of these drivers calls a halt and says: “Listen up, folks, this is the place where these entanglements will come unstuck, it’s real. It’s the way things go. Soon, the traffic of reception and contestation, learning from one’s mistakes. The reviewer feels impervious to much weeping and wailing and fistfights follow.

The accident — the scene of an accident. The various drivers, in their different powered vehicles, often have conflicting interests. So, austere public critics such as Dar- ryl Acrowe, navigating his uncompromisingly excellent book, might decry the “overspill” of naive creative energy creating messy oil sticks on the road, books that appear “too soon”, or that should never have seen the light of day, in his view, because they are not worthy of the moniker “literature.”

Writers, on the other hand, are a robust band of travellers — often in old, anti-establishment cars — who demand engagement from publish- ers. Writers claim that one must start somewhere. One must be allowed to learn to drive, by publishing, entering the traffic of reception and contestation, learning from one’s mistakes. Writers exist in a fragile ecology. Their vehicles are wobbly. They need sup- port. They often don’t have roadside assistance.

Publishers, in their variously equipped corporate buses (from mul- tinational to small-scale local), under- stand that they need to balance con- tending interests and accommodate heterogeneous stakeholders — the writers who send them piles of “slush” (the “slush pile” of manuscripts, from which they generally publish about 1%), their financial managers pointing to precarious bottom lines, the gate- way’s sense of “direction”, has not only calculated the traffic. Drivers will lick their wounds and say: “Listen up, folks, this is the place where these converging interests collide — is the public review. This is where one of these drivers calls a halt and says: “Listen up, folks, this is the way to go”