

# buried in our history

*Boer Boy* offers the paradox that the conditions of the 30 000 Boer captives held in India, 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 at Ambala in the Punjab and then at Solon at the foot of the Himalayas, were adequately fed — meat, potatoes and rice, but no fruit or vegetables — made pocket money from the sale of curios, enabling them to pay Indian domestic servants and were even allowed out of the Solon camp.

Perhaps in a 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 Afrikaners 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 Preez’s cave 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.



A theme throughout *Boer Boy* is the bitterness Boer combatants felt towards fellow Afrikaners who sided with the British.  
Photo: Heritagehistory.com

# Why rage is inevitable

Publishing is like a busy highway on which there are so many different types of drivers and crashes are common

Leon de Kock

One of the things I’m teaching at Stellenbosch University is a new honours course that I call contemporary literary practice. A subset of this course is something we have dubbed the “literary sociology of reviewing and publishing” under South African conditions.

Teaching always compels one to think harder about things one might otherwise take for granted and so I found myself suggesting to my students that reviewing and publishing should be seen as “events” and that if a useful analogy for publishing might be traffic on a busy highway, the event of a review could be regarded as the scene of an accident.

Further, that as impartial literary sociologists, we should take a “helicopter view” — gain as much distance as we can from the highway and the accident so we can map the scene and identify role players, modes of operation and the various elements in the spectacle before us.

“Events” are defined by their complexity, their inherently multivalent nature. They are paradoxical and often contain contradictory, asymmetrical and unpredictable elements. They will not yield to partisan analyses or singly stranded narratives of explication.

The traffic on this highway, call it Saplic (South African publishing and literary culture), consists of publishers, writers, academic critics, public readers, non-aligned (and often “anti-academia”) commentators, freelance critics, books editors, publicists, bookshops. They all converge on Saplic, struggling to carve out space for themselves. They rub up against one another. Road rage is frequent.

The various drivers, in their differ-

ently powered vehicles, often have conflicting interests.

So, austere public critics such as Darryl Accone, navigating his uncompromisingly excellent Rover, might decry the “overspill” of naive creative energy creating messy oil slicks 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 publishers. 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 support. They often don’t have roadside assistance.

Publishers, in their variously equipped corporate buses (from multinational to small-scale local), understand that they need to balance contending 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-keeping academic and public critics and their own sense of idealism about nurturing talent.

Reviewers at large come in different vehicles: some, such as Accone, burn up the dross in *Fahrenheit 451* cabsters, whereas the others vary from the genteel “snob” poverty of academic sedans (formalist Merces, censorious worker VWs, sniffy Alfa Romeos, aficionado Isuzus) to the genre sympathists — thriller MG converts, chicklit Mini Cooperists.

Inevitably, 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 way to go.” The others come slamming into the review vehicle, complaining bitterly that the reviewer has miscalculated the traffic.

Much weeping and wailing and fist-cuffs follow.

The writer wants to wring the reviewer’s neck. The reviewer’s intemperate reaction, and her misplaced sense of “direction”, has not only messed up the road, but also caused horrible damage to his precarious writing vehicle. The road of his career now feels like the scene of a wreck.

The reviewer feels impervious to such reactions. They are typical of gauche drivers with no accumulated expertise, no driving record to speak of. Otherwise they’re habitually reck-

less road users. And the publisher feels divided, struggling to disentangle the colliding claims of writers, critics, chief executives, reviewers and publicists, finding it hard to keep in view the mission to open the road for new drivers, but to keep it clear of smoking jalopies.

What do the observers in the helicopter see? Inevitably, it’s a mess. But it’s real. It’s the way things go. Soon, the entanglements will come unstuck, the drivers will lick their wounds and look for better insurance and the traffic will resume. The road — the scene of literary culture — is a place where differently weighted objects seek to coordinate their relative vectors and interests as best they can.

Like the drivers on so many other highways, they have largely given up on the idea of a meta-authority, a police force that runs like a grand narrative, spelling out the rights and wrongs, sorting out the riff-raff and validating properly licensed drivers.

One of the earlier institutions of control and clout, the metropolitan academic authority, has steadily been losing interest in this highway. The unmappable and increasingly chaotic traffic on the Saplic highway has become anathema for many academic commissars.

Their helicopters of scholarly surveillance and cartography, subverted by government funds for published research, now increasingly get waylaid by the zippy new transnational highways of public culture, oceanic studies,

critical theory, urban studies, necrology, you name it. These highways are faster, less congested and they lead to wonderful destinations such as São Paulo, Mumbai, Melbourne, New York.

And what they are increasingly leaving behind them in the local smog is this gritty highway of South African literary culture. It’s a bit like the N2 between Cape Town and Stellenbosch — relatively unmonitored, dangerous, poorly maintained, cutting through an urban landscape pock marked by neglect but also festooned with surfeit, in bewildering contention with each other.

The real “tragedy” is the steady abandonment of this public space, this large and open South African literary highway — one that we worked so hard to build by parties other than the immediate role players. The unexpected and sad part of this is the resulting sense of isolation and neglect, just when we thought we’d won the day. Tempers are fractious, claims extreme. No wonder the accident rate is high.

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