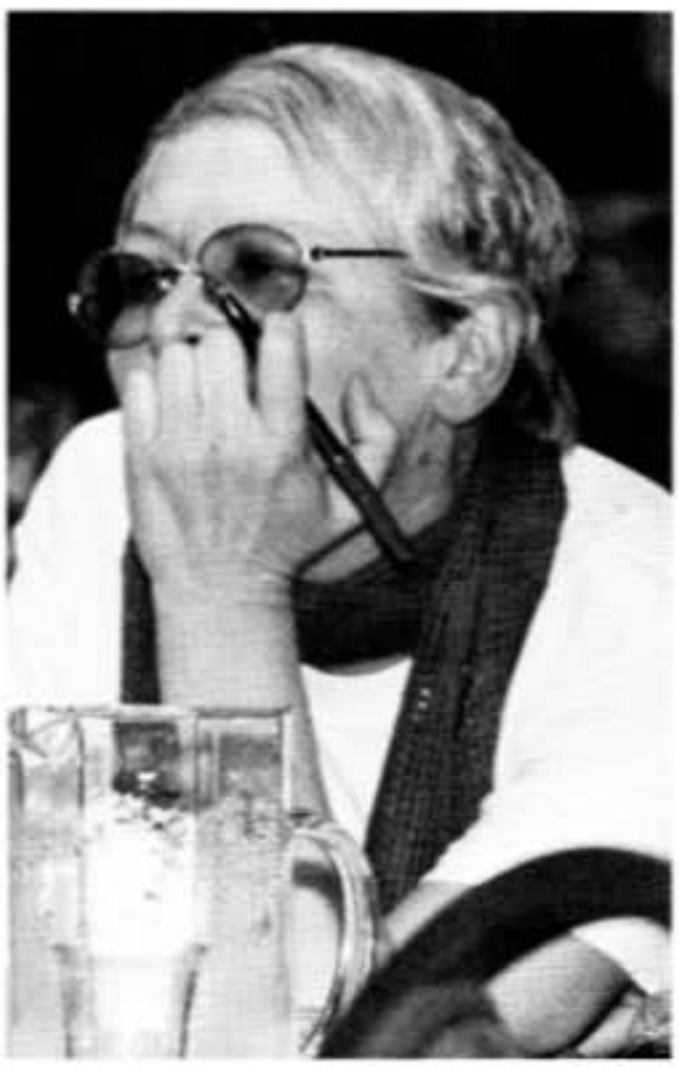
Ghostly dance of bloodless categories

South African literary criticism needs an injection of humour and fun – the natural enemies of nationalism and authoritarianism – says Tim Couzens, of the Institute for African Studies at Wits University. This is an edited version of his address at the writers' conference at Langebaan.

and Ernst Lindenberg.



Writer Jeanne Goosen.

Ndebele (University of Lesotho) for inviting him into a situation where he could not follow much of the discussion, which was conducted mainly in Afrikaans.

"The aim is to communicate – that is the fundamental objective," he said. "We should not adopt a smugness that will have the effect of closing down communication."

Then Karen Press of Buchu Books expressed dismay that a writers' conference was being dominated by critics. While the academics indulged in abstract topics, writers' concerns – that could potentially have a profound impact on the country – were treated as less important, she said, appealing also to writers to start supporting each other.

FINALLY Cape Town poet Gladys Thomas spoke of how she felt snubbed by other writers when she arrived for the conference. She had thought that the "new South Africa" implied changed attitudes but was disappointed when no one greeted her on arrival.

Ndebele said the experience of Thomas illustrated that South Africans would have to start at a grassroots level by acknowledging each other as human beings.

He said the central question was how to reverse the 40 years of isolation and lack of contact produced by the "madness" of apartheid.

Addressing the issue of the "representativeness" of South African literature, Ndebele said there did not appear to be a mainstream literature at present. He was also not sure that it would develop overnight – it would depend on literacy, awareness and availability.

He cautioned that writers should not submit to a "tyranny of representativeness" as the real need was for "a much deeper appreciation of the wealth of art before us".

Creative growth would flow from a preparedness to absorb this diversity of experience, said Ndebele. ❑

LOOKING back over the last 20 years I am saddened by what we have missed, the opportunities lost in research in South African literature. I shall dwell on the past in the hope that it will teach us something about the present and future. I shall deal with a few aspects of what I regret.

Last Post for the Lost Past

Fairly recently, I took a straw poll of students doing fairly advanced work in South African literature so that one can assume that they are amongst the better informed on such matters in our society. I asked them if they knew who Pixley Seme was, and whether they knew anything about him. Not one of them had ever heard of him.

Perhaps it is because the Dark Continent is so dark that we tend to lose things – little things – like our own history. Many people do complain that so much of our literary and other history has been kept from us. Why have we not been told? There are three sets of people to blame.

- The ruling class with its whole apparatus of repression, censorship and intimidation, especially in the field of broadcasting.
- The literary establishment who have, for a variety of reasons, failed to come to grips with and dissseminate this knowledge.
- The very people who complain that they are deprived of the knowledge. Through a combination of anti-intellectualism, complacency, stupidity and, quite often, straight laziness, they have not sought out the sources which are available to them. The charge of laziness applies equally to black and white South Africans.

To all intents and purposes Pixley Seme was the founder of the ANC. He was born, of fairly humble origins, it seems, in Zululand in 1881. He made his way to North America and, through a combination of missionary help and his own efforts, he was educated at a school in Northern Massachusetts and at Columbia University and Oxford University. He returned to South Africa in 1910 to practise law, and the following year began the moves which culminated in the formation of the ANC in Bloemfontein in January 1912.

Cultural and Intellectual History

THERE is another glaring gap in the present state of our literary criticism. This is the almost complete lack of knowledge of the cultural and intellectual history of Africa. Let me take one example – that of Pan-Africanism.

At the independence celebrations of Ghana in 1957 – an event crucial in itself for the culmination of the ideas of Pan-Africanism, as well as their spread – was the Jamaican historian C L James who had published in 1938 that great book The Black Jacobins. At the celebration James met "some Pan-African young men from South Africa". They told him that his book "had been of great service to them". When James asked how, they said that a copy of it was in the library of the "black university" (Fort Hare) in South Africa. They said they didn't know anything about it until a white professor there told them: "I suggest that you read 'The Black Jacobins' in the library: you may find it useful."

'The Black Jacobins' is about the great slave revolution in the Caribbean island of San

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Domingo in the 1790s and how the leader Toussaint L'Ouverture led his followers in a movement which culminated in full independence and the creation of the new state of Haiti.

At the time that James was writing in the 1930s he was, he tells us, working in close association with one of the most influential figures in Pan-Africanism, George Padmore. And James said of "The Black Jacobins": "As will be seen all over and particularly in the last three pages, the book was written not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind."

IT WAS in 1900, at the instigation of a West Indian barrister, Henry Sylvester Williams, that a Pan-African conference was held in London. It was here, according to W E B Du Bois, that the phrase "Pan Africa" was put in the dictionaries for the first time. Du Bois had a hand in launching a series of Pan-African Congresses in the decades that followed. The most important was the fifth, held in Manchester in 1945.

In pinning their faith to political action as the necessary measure for combating imperialism and accomplishing the social, economic and political emancipation of Africa, the congress participants forged the instruments for "positive action", which were mentioned as strikes and boycotts in order to press their claims on the colonial powers.

These ideas surely had an effect on Anton Lembede and the ANC Youth League, on those who drafted the ANC's 1949 "Programme of Action" which, in turn, led to the Defiance Campaign of 1952.

Not only has this got general relevance to South Africa literature, it has specific reference. Of the six people on the committee which included George Padmore, Kwane Nkrumah and Jome Kenyatta, was Peter Abrahams.

What saddens me, however, is that a key work like 'The Black Jacobins' which was being read in the Eastern Cape at least in the 1950s, is now virtually forgotten. And the currents and cross-currents of our past and its thought are submerged in a mass of ignorance and sloganeering.

Little s and big S

The recovery of history has as its purpose not just the creation of heroes.

If you read some recently discovered early letters of Pixley Seme, you will get a glimpse of the courageous struggle of a young man to further his own education. It is an admirable struggle culminating in great achievement, eventually in the founding of the oldest surviving political organisation in this country. And for this there should be great honour.

But we should also remember that Seme, through his autocratic and lethargic leadership, almost destroyed the ANC when he became its fifth president in 1930. Of even greater import we must remember that he was removed from the lawyers' register by the Incorporated Law Society of the Transvaal in 1932.

He had been hired by the black residents on the white-owned farm of Waverley in the Pretoria district to defend them while they were under threat of removal in terms of the 1923 Urban Areas Act. Seme lost the case, failed to lodge an appeal with the Supreme Court in time, and was accused by his previous clients of misusing the money paid to him. When the Supreme Court heard his case Seme did not appear and provided no defence.

If there are warning signs in our own past, there are similar warnings if we follow our Pan-Africanist studies. We should be able to see the excesses and stupidities of rampant nationalism. I fear we shall not. Already some of the first signs are creeping into the letters column of the newspapers. When the need is felt to claim that an African was the first dentist, or mathematician, or whatever, any student of African history will know the theme, recognise the signs, hear the ironic echoes. This is at the level of popular belief, but it was not, in the days just before and after

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independence, confined to the ordinary people.

I have just finished a book on the rise of the nationalist movements in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. There are mocking elements of deja vu in that period of the early 1960s. It is to be hoped that we shall not repeat history as farce.

We should be reading the texts of the rest of Africa, but critically, as well as for inspiration. It might help to avoid the worst excesses of rampant nationalism.

The function of the biographer and the literary critic is to search, research, and keep researching. Their duty is to admire and applaud the struggles (with a little s) of people (with a little p). They should take fright when these are idealised into people with a big P and struggle with a big S. It is our job to stick with the little esses.

The Case of Sherlock Holmes

ONE OF the things that saddens me most is the opportunity we have missed to record fairly systematically the literature of a revolution. It was fairly obvious, at least from the early 1970s, that a revolution was under way.

Who set out to record the literature of that revolution, as it happened, on the hoof? With a few notable exceptions, such as Kelwyn Sole, nobody. Where are the pamphlets, where are the interviews, where are transcripts of the wall slogans, where are records of the meetings etc? Nowhere. True, we can piece together bits and pieces through newspapers, court records, novels, Staffrider etc. But we have lost forever much of the contemporaneity of the action. We have lost the chance to study fully the literature of the country's revolution.

There are many reasons why we missed it but I would like to put part of the blame on Louis Althusser. The blight of Althusserianism, with its science of the text and its rigid authoritarianism, was imported into the country in the late 1970s, and students were sucked into its religious reading groups to the exclusion of all else.

The gauleiters of the academy forgot the lesson of the great thinker Sherlock Holmes: "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data."

The Life of the Author

Modern literary theory and criticism has contributed much to the discipline. In our present position its most important function is a healthy scepticism, especially in the areas of discourse and power.

But I do not find it fully satisfying. I have searched through it for human beings in amongst the wealth of jargon. It seems to have its blind spots. There are great dollops of the world and experience it chooses to ignore.

I suppose I am unredeemably old-fashioned but I do believe that there is a real world out there, however hard it is to apprehend. Namaqualand and Bushmanland always remind me how real it is.

We can declare the death of the author, but in so doing we write out of existence the ungraspable phantom of life. We can content ourselves with what one social scientist has called "the ghostly dance of bloodless categories", but in so doing we cut ourselves off from being, from the organic life of our country.

WHAT I am suggesting is quite simple, really. It is to encourage people to be more adventurous in their literary criticism. Or, as Trader Horn says: "If you want facts you must travel for 'em".

Not all answers lie in the realm of discourse alone. To understand a writer like W C Scully who was in Bushmanland and Namaqualand in the 1890s you have to accumulate all the evidence you can. To understand the writing you must try to understand the history, the area, the people – by talking to them etc.

Words on the page are no substitute for feet in the sand. Or as Keats wrote to his friend John Reynolds: "We read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author."

There are dangers in the way literary criticism is likely to go. The in-phrases are Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. We are in the process of being assailed by the propagandists of Afrocentrism. As African nationalism increases so this can only increase. We are, in the near future, in danger of studying only South African literature and in so doing, we will become as Saddam Hussein or P W Botha, people who seldom venture beyond their immediate horizons.

On the other hand, Western literary criticism is nearing saturation point. Some critics look only to America and Europe, others look only to Africa.

The kind of literary criticism I favour tries to use evidence of every available kind. It is open to the adventurous and the curious. I could be cynical and say I am glad that so many critics are currently obsessed with pure theory since it gives the few of us who plough our own furrows an emptier field. But it does sadden me, too. Because those people are missing something by not hunting in the archives, scouring the newspapers, travelling the roads, shaking hands and talking eyeball to eyeball with real people. Because, believe it or not, this kind of research is, above all, fun. And there is not enough fun in our literary criticism. And I do not apologise for advocating humour and fun, because humour and fun are, by their very nature, anti-authoritarian and the natural enemies of nationalism. ❑