Representing dissension

riot rebellion and resistance

in the South African English novel
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English novel

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To my parents, who lit the flames of political debate, and to my children, who kept them burning.
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Parts of this project have appeared in print previously in slightly different form. Earlier versions of chapters 1 and 2 appeared as articles in the *Journal of Literary Studies* 10(3/4) and 14(3/4) respectively. The commentary on Van der Post’s *In a province* in chapter 5 is an altered version of an article in *Theoria* 80, while the discussions of Rooke’s *Ratoons* in chapter 7 and of Bloom’s *Transvaal episode* in chapter 8 derive from articles published in *English in Africa* 24(2) and 26(2) respectively. Full citations are given in the Bibliography.

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16 October 2000
INTRODUCTION

Aim

This study seeks to explore all South African fictional representations by white writers in English related to historically recorded acts of dissidence or agitation during the period c1906 to c1956. Like Anthony Chennells’s PhD dissertation ‘Settler myths and the Southern Rhodesian Novel’ (1982), it is the first study of its kind though it draws in manifold ways on previous research on South African fiction. Perhaps the enterprise will seem to run in the teeth of contemporary interest in the ordinary, for I am deliberately privileging the extraordinary in foregrounding riot, resistance and rebellion as crucial concerns. I do so, however, not because I regard ‘the historical event as having the right to dictate the fiction’, but because of a particular interest in the major situations of conflict which have occurred in South African history, and an accompanying fascination that has grown over the last decade in the way these have been represented. As I shall explain more fully below, my chief concern is not to determine how closely writers have kept to, or deviated from, historical records, but to explore their imaginative use of such knowledge.

I have no intention of trying to offer an alternative kind of companion to South African literature with a historical emphasis. My focus is only on events which fit the classification indicated by the title. I have chosen the period from c1906 to c1956 because fiction of the Anglo-Boer War period has already received a large amount of critical attention; so too has fiction corresponding to the heyday of apartheid. The period I have chosen is one which, except at its margins, has tended to be neglected because of a comparative dearth of what are regarded as literary masterpieces.

Further narrowing of what is in any case a vast field of enquiry has been achieved by focusing on white English writers only; my spadework should be helpful to later critics who wish to pursue a more comprehensive exploration of the topic in relation to all fictional representations of this kind. It is true that I seem to be perpetuating the tradition in which English South Africans are
ignorant of, or neglect, the Afrikaners' literary output; also of perhaps setting up a kind of literary critical apartheid by ignoring black writers. My plea is a simple pragmatic one: there are approximately 1 100 novels in English alone that needed to be considered as potentially relevant to the study!

Naturally I am also confronted with the problem of literary standards. I may well seem to be at the extreme end of the shift to give status to South African writing. I do not wish to argue, as did Herman Charles Bosman once, for example, that 'Scully is better than nine-tenths of the contemporary English authors whose works were prescribed for the Wits University courses in English' (Trek 1948, 12(9):24). R K Cope, writing for Trek in 1950, felt that: 'The English-speaking section of the South African population appears to-day well placed to produce literature of distinction and artistic merit' (14(3):8). My study will not offer any solid confirmation of his optimism by way of disclosing a host of neglected masterpieces! Nor, for that matter, will I be able to affirm that the majority of the writers whose work I have surveyed have fulfilled Cope's other wish: 'The patriotism of the English-writing South African must extend to all his fellow-countrymen, understanding them and perhaps loving them in the context of a rapidly changing society' (9). In no way have I sought to create some kind of Leavisian canon. While not shirking value judgements, my purpose has remained consistently an investigation of the ways in which writers of fiction (whether their novels be classified as having literary merit or otherwise) represent particular events or phases in South African history that may be described as sociopolitical dissidence and agitation. Invidious generalisations about the merits of fiction emanating from England, as against our own, do not find a place in this project, and I nurture the hope that this study, far from inviting new/young writers to feel inferior, will actually prompt even more to enter the field.

Two key aspects of my own worldview inevitably underlie the entire study. First, there is my concern to recuperate notions of an authentic liberalism in a society where this philosophy has been mocked and repudiated by both the left and the right. Important moves have already been made along these lines (notably by writers such as Charles Simkins)2 and I hope to contribute to a more enlightened understanding of what is uniquely valuable in the liberal credo. My particular choice of focus, apart from avid personal interest, arose also from a sense that the world of political and labour issues has for too long been regarded as not quite proper for literary criticism undertaken by liberal humanists. Marxist literary critics had no difficulty invading this territory because there were so few defenders. It has therefore come to seem appropriate for them to become engrossed with the literary handling
of strikes, trade unions, wage disputes, labour organisation, political action, mass movements. Secondly, there is the question of violence as a solution to human conflict situations. The twentieth century, era of the most widespread and horrific violence the world has ever known, ended with many significant moves to challenge this mode of response. I hope in this way to add some small additional prompting to that challenge. Here too, then, I am conscious of deliberately highlighting fictional modes which either offer a challenge to the norm of violence, or shortsightedly reinforce it.

Several reasonably compatible assumptions have sustained this enterprise, especially when confronted by the possibility that I was wasting time on inferior work or apparently peripheral writing. First, I accept the proposition derived from cultural materialism that each novel is a cultural production. Accordingly, I would argue that it is illuminating to see just how a fairly typical white consciousness of the time interpreted or reconstructed climactic events. However, having been for a long time much influenced by the English Romantic poets, I was also eager to give credit, where at all possible, to the liberating power of the imagination. An early reviewer of S G Millin’s *King of the bastards* discusses what s/he takes to be the: ‘dominant consideration for the writer of historical novels ... how shall he infuse into flesh and bone the living sap that will create the illusion of present reality? ... The historian will document the facts; the novelist’s task is to envision the human drama responsible for them’ (*Trek* 14(3):34). This kind of infusing and envisioning, it seems to me, might well enable the novelist to transcend her/his prejudices, at least in the process of composition. Here, too, I need to distinguish between representations of recorded events that have a close correspondence to historical accounts and representations that involve at least some degree of creative reworking of such accounts. All the novels I discuss involve the second type of representation, at least to some degree.

Confirmation of my belief in the liberating power of the imagination seemed early on to be provided by Frances Bancroft’s extraordinarily sympathetic treatment of the condemned black murderer in her novel, *Of like passions* (1907), despite her otherwise markedly racist standpoint. This belief, however, has been in continual friction with Eagleton’s questioning of Lukacs’s claim that ‘Balzac’s greatness lies in the fact that the “inexorable veracity” of his art drives him to transcend his reactionary ideology and perceive the real historical issues at stake’ (1976:69).
Theoretical basis: historical aspects and contextualisation

In general I must declare (and hope thereby that I will not appear to be merely adapting to a fashion) that my approach is eclectic, including narratology; feminism; deconstruction; poststructuralism; new historicism and cultural materialism (but perhaps unfortunately omitting a psychoanalytical perspective). How to define my approach to the historical aspect of this study, however, is the most vexed, but also the most pressing question of all. I need at this stage to emphasise that, whatever degree of creative reworking has been involved, the basis from which this study proceeds is the fictional representation of historical events. For this task I have adopted one of Michael Green’s descriptions of historical novels in *Novel histories*: ‘[T]hey enter into a contract with the reader that requires him or her to recognise sequences or events formalised outside the text in question as “history”’ (1997:34). In practice, since I have not undertaken any primary historical investigation myself, I need to rely for basic information on what has been presented by historians.

Although I feel that I have been much influenced by new historicism, in practice it is easy to lapse into regarding history as background which can be established securely and authoritatively. To offset this danger I have tried, in relation to each section of the material, to make use of a variety of sources, and in some cases (notably chapters 5 to 7) to develop an intimate sense of the actuality of the period by using historical material close in date to the period itself. In chapters 6 and 7 I have also used articles and news reports that appeared in the liberal journals, *The South African Opinion*, *Trek* and *The Forum*. I have tried to bear in mind, as far as possible, that all the historical texts are themselves representations. At the same time it was necessary to regard the contextual material as a reasonably stable and reliable framework (an agreed representation if you like) from which to compare the fictional material.

In the project as a whole, though, a somewhat uneasy path has to be steered through the discourse of the popular novel and the discourse of history (or the historical novel). J M Coetzee’s point that ‘history is a kind of discourse; that the novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different type of discourse’ (1988:4) is fundamental to my approach: accordingly, I do not consider the novels in my survey material to be subsumed under the category of history, and my treatment of them is not primarily intended to supplement or correct the evidence available to historians. As I have already indicated, none of the novels discussed includes documentary-type material except on a very limited
scale. Ultimately, then, I privilege fiction over history. On the other hand, should my analyses prove to be helpful to historians, I would of course be only too glad. Indeed, since there has been over the past few decades a major shift in historical focus towards concern with the 'ordinary life of the people', as outlined by Bozzoli and S Clingman in *Radical Review* 46(7), certain aspects of the novels I discuss may well offer fresh insights to historians.

At this point, however, I need to distinguish the nature of my enterprise from Green's. Following Fredric Jameson's lead, Green adopts the criterion of resistant form, or the noting of the past as a resistant presence, to gauge the value of re-created history in a novel. Authentic historical novels will then, in Jameson's formulation, be those in which history is enabled 'to come before us as a radically different life form which rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgement upon us' (Green 1997:31). The context of Jameson's dictum makes it clear, though, that he sees an urgent need for his contemporary era to be judged by superior forms of culture in the past; the present for him is chillingly insipid, artificial, and remote from material conditions: 'the societe de consommation with its television sets and superhighways, its Cold War, and its postmodernisms and poststructuralisms' (1988:150). I am not sure why Green and Jameson do not allow for the alternative of a reverse process by which the present might enter into judgement upon the past. But in any case what I require for this study is almost a reversal of the Jameson-Green model. The resistant presence which I have chosen to keep in mind is an ideal South Africa society in which the rights of all its people are not only constantly assured, but actively striven for in every aspect of communal life. This utopian vision allows for discrimination between the selected novels in terms of their relationship to white ideological conceptions, and the extent to which they subvert or at least challenge these. In each particular case I shall be concerned with the degree to which writers' re-creation of particular events/historical phases leads them to some awareness at least of the gap between the actual and the ideal society which I have outlined. This criterion thus offers me a means of distinguishing between the products of fictional creativity in the novels surveyed. On a scale of 1 to 10 only about one third of the novels would score above 5 in relation to providing some way of affirming the value of a democratic South Africa. In effect, while I allow for much free scope in writers' representations of historically recorded events, what I have been prepared to regard as genuinely creative and imaginative should be seen to engage in promoting, to some extent at least, the utopian ideal.
However, even when one decides that a novelist has little literary talent, or where the writer’s imagination seems hidebound by conventional bias and assumptions, one has the opportunity in such a study to feel close to the pulse of the time to the extent, perhaps, of being ready even to exclaim: ‘There but for the grace of God go I’. Here I hope to have kept steadily in mind the need for a ‘critique of autonomous subjectivity’, that is an ‘avowal of the subject’s situatedness in history’. In the distortions that enter into representations by less accomplished or biased novelists one therefore might find the possibility of greater understanding of (perhaps even sympathy for) the oppressor, the racist, the bigot. What Trevor Huddleston wrote in 1956 in *Naught for your comfort* needs always to be borne in mind as one aspect of white consciousness: ‘The truth is that the overwhelming majority of South Africans of the “white” group have no conception whatever of human relationships except that based on racial domination. The only Africans they know, they know as servants or as employees’ (1956:17). This more sympathetic viewpoint nonetheless jostles uncomfortably in my consciousness with a frequent suspicion that cunning rationalisations were all too often used to circumvent pro-founder, non-racist conceptions. Deconstruction is clearly an inevitable part of one’s critical activity in relation to most of the selected novels. It is not only intriguing but important to register the kind of avoidance or escape techniques used by particular writers in relation to the wider reality of South Africa and, moreover, to observe the loopholes, flaws or shifts in such techniques which subtly or unsubtly, as the case may be, betray their use.

In a more obvious way my concern differs from Green’s in that the time gap between the novels and the ‘sequences or events’ I have selected to focus on is small. But that is not a surprising coincidence: my enquiry sets out to engage with fiction written as close as possible in time to specific acts or periods of dissidence. Perhaps it is therefore safe to say that the issue of whether a work of fiction deserves to be classified as a ‘historical novel’ is not of special relevance to my project.

I need also to point out that my task is not as straightforward as that of Chennells, who set out in his doctoral thesis to discern how far fictional accounts ‘embodied a patterned perception of Rhodesia that was at variance with that provided by reputable historians’ (1982:xvii). This is partly because the historical material is so much more complicated, and partly because there is so much more fiction to come to terms with. Nevertheless Chennells’ discussion of the way this ‘patterned perception’ (or ‘myth’ – the term he finds most apt) operates, offers a useful line of enquiry for my purposes. I return to this concern at the end of the Introduction.
As I have said, this study does not seek to provide a comprehensive history of South Africa from a political point of view. The sections in each chapter offering a contextualised account of the selected event or period are strictly confined to what is most relevant for these events/periods. However, because the overall scheme follows a fairly close chronology, a reasonable degree of overall continuity is achieved by these contextualised sections. Furthermore, it will be found that in each chapter I have adopted a somewhat different mode of approach. As the time-span encompassed by each chapter varies a good deal, so too the contextualisations will be found to be sometimes longish, sometimes short. A single event such as the Boer Rebellion of 1913 and the implications for South Africa of a long period such as the duration of World War II clearly require very different degrees of attention. The scheme may thus seem uneven. Sometimes chronological aspects loom large because of day-to-day changes (as example in chapter 3 on the mine strikes); sometimes more thematic concerns loom larger as in chapter 6 on World War II. In the first two chapters I thought it wise not to burden the reader with too much initial contextualisation in order to ensure that the primary emphasis of the material, namely fictional representation, should not be obscured. To offset oversimplification in these two chapters, I have introduced further contextual detail where necessary in relation to particular novels. In later chapters, wherever possible, I have broken up the contextual material so that it accompanies a novel or group of novels. The particular mode adopted for each chapter will in any case be explained at the outset of each. In these contextualised sections I have not thought it necessary to keep drawing attention to the constructed, and therefore potentially unreliable nature of historical texts. This may create a problem for readers who unwisely skip this Introduction.

Selection

In Thomas Pavel’s seminal article, ‘Thematics and historical evidence’, he warns of the danger of a Midas touch by which he suggests the ‘mesmerizing, dangerous power [of literary critics] to make every text they lay their hands on channel the same message: the message they want to hear’ (1993:121). On a relatively superficial level I am satisfied that I have avoided this danger since I have selected for attention only those novels which explicitly involve events concerning sociopolitical agitation and dissidence. On a more complex level I can only hope that my endeavour also to note, as far as possible, the broad themes which engage each writer will have rescued me from the Midas pitfall.
My immediate resources when I began this project in 1993 were J P L Snyman’s invaluable works: *A bibliography of South African novels in English published from 1880 to 1930* (1951) and *The South African novel in English* (1952), together with D Ridley Beeton’s *A pilot bibliography of South African English literature* (1976). Snyman’s 1952 descriptive text was of course the more useful because it gives some idea of the actual contents of each novel—the title of a novel may indeed offer little, or distinctly misleading guidance as to its contents. I also checked my composite Snyman-Beeton list against Aviva Astinsky’s extension of Snyman’s work: *A bibliography of South African novels, 1930–1960* (University of Cape Town School of Librarianship, 1965), and made a number of additions. *The companion to South African English literature* provided useful information only about the better known authors and their work. For the many others within my scope it was clear that I would have to search far and wide. At that stage my initial selection of potentially relevant novels was greatly assisted by the timely National English Literary Museum (NELM) publication of *ABSALE (A bibliography of South African literature in English, 1993)*. Working within its fiction section, I found altogether about 1 100 novels written in English about South Africa in the selected period. My task was then to check all the works I was not previously aware of (a substantial number) for relevance to the project. Some novels were available in the stack rooms of local libraries (Don Africana and Killie Campbell in Durban; Natal Society Library in Pietermaritzburg) but the greater part of this survey operation was conducted at the South African Library in Cape Town and the Archives Section of the University of Cape Town African Studies Department in 1993 (supplemented by a visit to NELM in Grahamstown in 1998). What emerged was a four-page list of novels which I deemed likely to be essential for my purpose. As the Cape Town visit did not allow for complete reading, let alone analysis, of any of the relevant novels, it was necessary to arrange for microfiche copies. At the risk of appearing to solicit sympathy, I must point out, however, that to read entire novels in microfiche form is a tiring activity and has significantly increased the time needed for completion of the project. When all the necessary reading had been completed, finally only in 1998, I was then able to reduce the list of potentially relevant novels a good deal; this set of novels appears as appendix A. It includes a dozen or so novels that were finally excluded from close analytical attention for the reasons given in the preliminary footnote of the relevant chapter.

The second stage of the sifting process was to categorise novels from the list according to whether they involved agitation, protest or dissidence amongst whites or blacks; and according to fairly broad time periods such as
the twenties, the thirties, and so on. This meant also a close accompanying engagement with a range of relevant historical texts, an engagement which was naturally to become more intensive at each particular stage of the research. Only when I felt confident that I had a comprehensive sense of the set of novels relating to a particular event or period could I arrive at the categories that now appear as my chapter headings. In advance I decided that where only one novel seemed to have emerged in response to a particular event/phase, I would be justified in excluding that event from my survey – in fact, however, there were only three such cases. Charlotte Mansfield’s novel *The dupe* (1917) was the only one I found that is concerned with the Durban anti-German protests of 1915; hence, somewhat regretfully, I excluded it. The 1922 miners’ strike receives significant attention only in Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *The Jordans*; but because I was already able to give prominence to the 1913 and 1914 strikes, it seemed appropriate to include this novel in the same chapter. Oliver Walker’s novel, *Wanton city*, is the only one to deal with a black miners’ strike between 1946 and 1948, yet there were other reasons for giving it space in chapter 7. One further example of stretching my criteria for inclusion needs to be mentioned. Although I decided to confine my study to works written about the Union of South Africa, I have included a Rhodesian novel in chapter 7 because of its important parallels to South African fictional concerns of that period. As my concern has been to examine fictional representation by writers who were closely involved in major events of agitation or dissidence, I have excluded from the scope of this study novels such as *The fair house* by Jack Cope, which deals with the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906 but was published in 1952.

**Chapters**

After a good deal of arranging and re-arranging, eight divisions of my material seemed appropriate, and these form the separate chapters of the completed work. The nature of twentieth-century South African history has meant that a certain kind of apartheid has emerged even in my chapter divisions; thus, for example, I begin with black rebellion, and follow that with Boer rebellion. Any appearance of symmetry is, I must emphasise, coincidental. Where I have placed my finger heavily in the project’s scalepans, however, is in relation to the choice for the first and last chapters. Given the utopian vision which underlies my overall perspective, it seemed vital to give the major emphasis to
black dissidence (although authorial support for such dissidence is more likely than not to be absent).

The ordering of material within a chapter is not always a matter of straightforward chronology, especially when two or three novels were published in the same year. If novels relate to a particular event that is part of a larger framework within a chapter, they have been fitted into a separate subset chronology. Only in my treatment of the Boer Rebellion (chapter 2) have I used a thematic mode. In general this mode proved too strenuous because of the need to convey basic information about most of these unknown, out-of-print works. Furthermore, I have not tried to achieve uniformity of attention to the selected novels. Certain novels are privileged in terms of the attention they receive, not necessarily because I regard them as the finest (aesthetically). The usual reason is that such novels have a special extended interest in relation to the particular era/event. More extensive attention has also seemed to me appropriate, however, in relation to novels such as Paton’s Cry, the beloved country and Gordimer’s The lying days because of their prominence in South African literary criticism. It has been necessary to provide a certain amount of plot summary, especially for out-of-print novels, but analytical commentary is always the crucial focus of attention.

**Dangers and misconceptions**

I have already stressed that this study is not intended to be diagnostic or prescriptive. Its chosen field might appear to suggest a dismissive attitude towards novels which have no particular political concern. This is certainly not so. Nor would it be fair to credit me with the possible inference that writers should have dealt with sociopolitical events. Already in 1950 Lewis Sowden, in an article entitled ‘The South African writer abroad’, pointed out the danger for local writers of being influenced by overseas readers who want South Africa writers to focus on ‘black-and-white problems …’. Your job is to tell us about [overlordship, domination and oppression]’ (Trek 14(9):6). There may of course be an element of unfairness in my apparently pouncing critically on those that do choose a sociopolitical concern for their narrative. I can only plead an occupational hazard in this respect.

Gordimer distinguishes between the ‘necessary gesture’ and the ‘essential gesture’; the first being a commitment to a just social cause; the second involving those aesthetic and moral ‘values that are beyond history’ (1989:278). Several of the novelists whose work I explore cannot be considered to have
succeeded in making either gesture. Although I must finally acknowledge this double limitation, I have been careful not to impose these criteria too soon lest my primary interest in the creative aspects of representation be obscured. On the other hand, I have thought it important to recognise genuine courage and insight where they are to be found. After all, as early as 1943 R K Cope was concerned with the possibilities of an ‘infant literature of discontent in South Africa’ which would be an incentive ‘to the emancipated people struggling towards freedom’ (Trek 8(12):13). Whatever criticism I have levelled against South African writers is not meant to encourage large-scale generalisations such as the notion that our writers are somehow likely to be inferior to overseas writers. Here the comparative basis of my chapters will help rather to prompt careful discrimination between the degree of vision and insight of individual writers.

Publishers

Attempts to find out why certain publishers published certain novels, and which novels may have been rejected by overseas publishers, would have required a great deal more time for correspondence than was available to me, and would therefore have drastically delayed these research findings as a whole. What is clear enough is that most authors up to the time of World War II had their writings published overseas, while a number of them, such as Plomer, actually emigrated. An improvement occurred during the war because of paper shortage in Britain and because several publishing houses suffered bomb damage. E Rosenthal in a 1946 article, ‘South Africa’s book publishing boom’ (Trek 10(22):15, 23), refers not only to the growing number of South African publishers, but to British publishers actually undertaking production in South Africa. He makes special mention of Howard – Timmins: ‘the man who, above all others, is responsible for the development of British publishing in the Union’. Unie-Volkspers, Rosenthal reveals, is ‘now one of the biggest publishing undertakings in the Union, and almost equally productive in English and Afrikaans’ (15). Maskew Miller too has made ‘many excursions into the more general field [of publishing]’ (15). ‘Numbers of English books are appearing through Afrikaans firms [such as Nasionale Pers]’ (15). Mention is also made of Durban’s Knox Printing and Publishing Company, and Pietermaritzburg’s Shuter & Shooter (23). Of the 115 novels in what I have referred to as my preliminary ‘essential’ list of novels, there were only twelve published in South Africa; of the forty-four which proved
ultimately relevant to my concerns, as listed in appendix A, only five were published here. It is therefore fair to say that whatever bias, narrowness, or escapism is to be found in these forty-four in relation to South African situations cannot, by and large, be attributed to the prejudices or fears of local publishers.

Censorship and its effects

The consolidated list of banned publications, Government Notice 1510, published in the Government Gazette 5730, 17 August 1956 covers the period from 8 September 1939 to 3 February 1956, that is, roughly the last third of the period chosen for my study. None of the authors in my essential list appears in this notice. (Harold Bloom’s Transvaal episode, published in 1955, was banned only in 1961.) Nor have I discovered any book banned during this period which might have been relevant for my purposes but is still unobtainable. Christopher Merrett, whose book A culture of censorship: secrecy and intellectual repression in South Africa (1994) I have found invaluable, supplies useful information concerning the ‘relative freedom’ in relation to censorship during the first phase of Nationalist Government (that is up till 1959):

The richness of the anti-apartheid literature of the 1950s, especially expressed through periodical publications, is indicative of the relative freedom of this period. On the other hand, imported books and periodicals were strictly controlled under the Customs Act, which prohibited the importation of material that was obscene or indecent, or on any ground objectionable. Customs officials would seize books on the strength of their jackets or words in titles, while Board of Censors readers (or book tasters) would peruse them at 6s per 50 pages (1994:34).

A systematic check through the ‘Records of the Censors’ in the National Archives may have supplemented the official list referred to above but, as the contents of the books are not described any more than in J K J Jacobsen’s Index of objectionable literature, I would still have no idea whether or not a particular work of fiction might be relevant to my purpose. I had also anticipated the discovery of numerous unpublished manuscripts lurking in local libraries. However, apart from one in the Killie Campbell Library which turned out to lack sociopolitical relevance, no others came to light. Pressure of time then led me to decide to abandon any further research of this kind. In any case I had
more than enough novels and events to deal with. Maybe there is a task here awaiting someone with more resources and more time.

Biographical material

Here I have been in search of answers to questions such as those posed by Anthony Chennells in his dissertation:
- What were the backgrounds and social status of the various authors?
- What was their relationship to their publishers and public?
- Who read the novels? Why did they read them? 6

Although this task did not prove as disheartening and frustrating as the search for possibly banned or unpublished works, it has involved much strenuous ferreting. Some writers have fallen into complete or virtual obscurity. The particular cases are V Lovett Cameron (Reverse the shield, 1926); Kathleen Edge (Through the cloudy porch, 1912); Magda Joubert (Karooso, 1939); Leigh Thompson (The lion and the adder, 1918). In relation to all of these I began to enter into quite extensive correspondence, and to try to solicit information via letters to the editor of local newspapers. Eventually, in order not to delay the whole project, I abandoned the search for material on these writers. A separate appendix (B) gives details of what I have been able to trace. All authors not mentioned in the Companion to South African English literature are given special attention in this appendix, to the extent that information proved to be available. However, certain authors, already represented in the Companion, are also included in the appendix because I am able to provide additional information, relevant to my purposes. In each case a brief footnote entry will indicate whether it is useful to consult appendix B.

Critical material

As in the case of Chennells’ dissertation, few of the novels I deal with (apart from Turbo tt Wolfe, Cry, the beloved country and The lying days) have received much critical attention. A dismissively negative attitude seemed to prevail, one which became self-reinforcing; it seemed to be assumed that, by and large, the products of South African authors were beneath the notice of critics. ‘South Africa writers,’ asserted ‘N K’ in Trek, ‘are tied because it is impossible to write honest fiction about the fundamental problems in this country ... Literature must be one of the escapes from reality and so it must be largely imported and synthetic.’ Confident in his/her pessimistic outlook, N K doubts in fact ‘whether there will ever be any important
This view is echoed by A C Partridge's lament, four years later, that South African literature in English offers 'few notable milestones'*, Cry, the beloved country* being one of the few 'palpable signs of grace' (Standpunte 4(4):49). Derivativeness is its principal drawback, according to Partridge, while the political set-up 'creates a number of inhibitions and taboos' (40). Universities consequently are justified in making 'no serious attempt to teach South African English literature, while so little of real value exists' (51).

Signs of change in the South African critical world emerged slowly in the course of the fifties, mainly at some distance from the bastions safeguarding the pre-eminence of literature from England. The University of the Free State, in particular, seems to have realised the need for a more comprehensive kind of enquiry into the condition of South African literature, not simply making lofty canonical judgements but actually beginning to examine actual contemporary writing. Unsurprisingly, this pioneering work is seriously flawed. Admiraile as is the comprehensiveness of J P L Snyman's survey, either his approach is descriptive rather than evaluative, or his judgement, when given, proves to be limited and unreliable. Manfred Nathan's *South African literature* (1925) mentions several of the writers included in my study, but apart from a useful general comment on Bertram Mitford, and brief observations on the work of William Westrup and Stephen Black, he does not offer criticism of any of the novels in my group which were published before 1925. Two MA dissertations emanating from the University of the Free State, C W Mostert's 'The native in the South African novel in English' (1955) and J A F Van Zyl's 'The Afrikaner way of life as depicted in South African English fiction' (1958), have several points of contact with the novels I consider. However, Mostert's racist attitudes seriously cloud his judgement (Millin's *The coming of the lord*, for example, is commended for offering a 'true picture of natives as the average South African knows them' with their inclinations towards 'indolence, dishonesty and the shirking of responsibilities', p 121), while Van Zyl, like Snyman, often resorts to mere blandness (L Smit's *Sudden south-easter*, for example, is a 'very critical study of a contemporary Afrikaner ... against the background of South African politics', p 68).

Like Chennells, I found that the task of tracing reviews in local newspapers proved too daunting and vastly time-consuming in the absence of indexes for earlier decades. Systematic perusal of every review section in *Trek*, *The Forum*, and also *Ons Eie Boek* provided a disappointingly modest yield. (In the South African context *Ons Eie Boek* emerges, incidentally, as almost revolutionary in its readiness to provide in each issue a section with reviews of
works, including fiction, in English. No such reciprocation was offered by any English journal of the time.) In 1935 J Y T Greig expressed a lament over the lack of critical journals in English at that time (*The South African Opinion* 2(1):17). More critical appreciation of literature would, in his view, have produced more Roy Campbells. To some extent *Trek* later helped to fill this void, particularly in the sustained contributions of Dora Taylor, most notably in her series on South African writers, ‘They speak of Africa’ I to VI (6(24–26) and 7(1–3)). Even so, only very markedly outstanding work such as *Cry, the beloved country* tended to be afforded attention. Thus many opportunities were lost for constructive criticism, and for giving at least some credit to writers’ efforts. From a more positive point of view Oliver Walker in *Trek*, discussing the history of the periodical press in South Africa, regards those journals which did emerge, but which were mostly short-lived, as ‘milestones rather than tombstones in our young culture’s growth’ (8(5):12). *The South African Opinion*, for example, was forced to close, because it found it was meeting a public but not an advertiser’s need. In relation to the overall project I have found it disconcerting to move from a novel such as J C Watson’s *Shadow over the rand* (1955), on which I have not been able to find anything beyond a brief review, to one such as Gordimer’s *The lying days* (1953), which has received, and merited, a proliferation of critical interest. This problem may tend, in some chapters, to create the impression of rather capricious degrees of attention in relation to a sequence of novels.

**Conclusions**

The large scale of this project in terms of the number of texts and range of events or historical phases involved made it seem to me imperative to employ a fairly small, and thus manageable set of categories in attempting to reach helpful conclusions. The ones I chose are as follows:

- the presence of what A Chennells refers to as ‘myth’ or ‘patterned perceptions’ (although I did not expect to find only a single patterned perception in the wide range of material I investigated)
- a writer’s degree of support for violence, especially evidence of contradictory positions
- a writer’s degree of sympathy for acts of dissidence especially where this involves conflict with the writer’s general beliefs or ideological preconceptions
the positioning of leading non-dissident characters in relation to the opposing group (that is, the complexity of attitude and response allowed for in their portrayal)

- the question of agency (understood as a capacity for self-motivated, unconstrained action) in relation to legitimacy, with a particular concern to distinguish cases where these factors are in harmony from those where agency is granted to rebels, rioters, resisters and the like, but the legitimacy of their protest is denied; or, on the other hand, where agency is denied while legitimacy is recognised

- concern with the kind of utopian possibility outlined earlier under the heading ‘Theoretical basis’ (p 3) or, alternatively, with any sort of utopian conception. (This category will include concern with the extent to which an authentic form of liberalism emerges, and with how much transcending of prejudice through imagination occurs.)

At the end of each chapter brief comments are made in relation to these categories. The chapter entitled ‘Conclusions’ then provides a comparison of these individual findings. It needs to be noted at the outset, however, that the categories are not necessarily applied in this order; not all categories are specially illuminating in relation to particular novels; and often it is necessary to overlap categories. For these reasons I have not used headings in the concluding sections of chapters, or in the final presentation of conclusions.

Naturally I would hope that this research will be a useful contribution to that elusive but vital process of developing a national literary history. At least I shall have removed some of the gaps created by ignoring works that are no longer in print. Possibly it will also provide resources for historical studies and political studies. Some parts of the work may even be fruitful for researchers engaged in South African labour studies. The novels I have foregrounded may well provide new and significant material for research on diverse other topics within the field of South African fiction, not necessarily with a political orientation (possibilities that come readily to mind are, for example the portrayal of ‘coloureds’; cross-racial sex; Afrikaner adjustments to the reality of South African society; labour relations; manifestations of violence; gender issues).