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# Of History and Memory: Re-Reading Selected Stories by Herman Charles Bosman on the Anglo-Boer War

## **Abstract**

Re-negotiating the past, a predominant concern of contemporary postcolonial literature and criticism, is also a relevant issue in South African literature today. For the most part, emphasis is placed on different interpretations of the past: personal experience and memories of historical events as opposed to available official documentation.<sup>1</sup> In the present context, the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) has raised a considerable amount of speculation and revisitation of documents, monuments, memoirs, and fictional accounts.

MARITA WENZEL

## Of History and Memory: Re-Reading Selected Stories by Herman Charles Bosman on the Anglo-Boer War

Re-negotiating the past, a predominant concern of contemporary post-colonial literature and criticism, is also a relevant issue in South African literature today. For the most part, emphasis is placed on different interpretations of the past: personal experience and memories of historical events as opposed to available official documentation.<sup>1</sup> In the present context, the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) has raised a considerable amount of speculation and revisitation of documents, monuments, memoirs, and fictional accounts.

The Anglo-Boer War represents an important example of conflicting reports in historical documentation: to the Boers it signified a bid for freedom from the yoke of British oppression; to the British it was a case of subjugating recalcitrant colonial subjects. How then to represent this conflict of ideas and interests? How to expose the power play behind the British hostilities and yet also to reveal the pathos of the Boer struggle together with their individual idiosyncrasies?

It is within the aftermath of the war, when feelings of resentment against the British still rankled, that Herman Charles Bosman situates his short stories. As a school teacher in an isolated Afrikaner community, about thirty years after hostilities had ceased,<sup>2</sup> Bosman had the opportunity to reconstruct episodes recounted to him from the Anglo-Boer War. He was in a favourable position to do so because he was, as Stephen Gray reminds us, 'an Afrikaner, thoroughly Anglicized, in one of the world's intellectual backwaters, addressing his fellow colonials'.<sup>3</sup> By straddling two cultures, he was able to understand the Afrikaner experience and yet to discern their conservatism and bias; to present both an exposé and an appreciation of Afrikaner character traits. Bosman's stories recreate the social context of the early twentieth century in South African history and effectively illustrate Chapman's argument that the 'story' is not only important 'to identity-making in the nation or the society, but to the interpretation of the culture'.<sup>4</sup>

In his stories about the Anglo-Boer War, Bosman constructs the necessary

distance to accommodate different perspectives primarily through his narrator, Oom Schalk Lourens. By creating a character who relates and interprets various accounts of personal war experience, Bosman anticipates the act of historical 'retelling' described by the poet Ingrid de Kok.<sup>5</sup> Yet Oom Schalk Lourens not only tells and participates in the stories, but, ironically and unconsciously, he also reveals his own bias and assumptions of superiority to both 'Kaffirs' and 'Rooinekke' (the derogatory terms used to describe the indigenous population and his enemies respectively). Oom Schalk's unreliability as narrator is still further compounded by his self-conscious mode of narration that openly admits to the manipulation of material and the convenient selectivity of memory, as he ironically points out in the exposition of his famous 'The Mafeking Road'.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the illusion of fiction which he continually works to displace, could, ironically, also be associated with Afrikaner ideology.<sup>7</sup>

Afrikaner ideology was shaped by the knowledge that, despite their defeat, the Boers had displayed an admirable amount of resilience and courage during the war. Allister Sparks astutely pinpoints the beginnings of an Afrikaner myth when he states that

An army of backward farmers had measured themselves against the regiments of the world's mightiest military power and emerged with the knowledge that they were as good and better. Out of the war came new heroes to worship, new martyrs to mourn, and new grievances to nurture.<sup>8</sup>

The Boers regarded their independence as paramount and associated it with their sense of identity. This perception, as well as their strong sense of religion, constituted some of the basic tenets of the Afrikaner's ideological make-up and collective identity. It has been a matter for deep historical regret that the Afrikaner's determination to survive and sense of nationalism was distorted by racism, and that it developed into, as Sparks formulates it: 'a massive preoccupation with the self, a national narcissism that has blinded it to the injustices inflicted on others'.<sup>9</sup> Bosman situates his stories within this context of burgeoning nationalism.

The individual characters populating Bosman's isolated farming community of the Groot Marico district all represent certain qualities particular to the Afrikaner. On the one hand, Bosman underlines their basic humanity and, on the other, exposes their flaws. The apparent simplicity and directness of the narrator's style is undermined by the complexity of the roles he assumes in the course of the narration, and compounded by the unconscious bias of his accounts. In this process he 'makes illusion subordinate to delusion', as Meihuizen astutely observes.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the reader finds her/himself on a quicksand of information that constantly changes and assumes different shapes. On close analysis, the reader perceives Oom Schalk to be the butt of Bosman's social critique which, however, also directly points at the reader's complicity in accepting his ideologically-determined bias. It is at this stage that the humour assumes a

distinct satirical quality that becomes evident in the 'twist in the tail' conclusion of his stories. In effect the reader assumes an active role and indirectly becomes the main object of the subtly directed satire, in a way reminiscent of Swift's manipulation of Gulliver.<sup>11</sup>

Bosman extends the ironic interplay between appearance and reality, which constitutes one of the main themes in his stories, even further when he engages in an exposition of the blurred boundaries between history, memory and fiction – something of an anticipation of postmodernist literature. The implication is that all these constructs must of necessity rely on selection and, consequently, must all leave out some part of the stories they tell. Historical distance could then provide a better perspective but it could also blur certain impressions, so that a deed of bravery could be perceived as cowardice, and vice versa. In the final analysis, the emphasis falls on the personal point of view which often comes into conflict with professed public or national ideas.

In his accounts of the Anglo-Boer War Bosman is thus effectively engaged in deconstructing the Afrikaner national myth. Heroic deeds and acts of cowardice and betrayal, patriotism and duty, assume different dimensions when viewed from a personal as opposed to a patriotic/national angle. For instance, the reader's judgement is sorely tried by the theme of betrayal in 'The Traitor's Wife'.<sup>12</sup> In this story we are confronted with different kinds of betrayal: Leendert Roux's betrayal of his commando and fellow burghers with his defection to the British, and his wife's betrayal when she steals through the night to reveal his whereabouts to the burghers.

Although Oom Schalk indicates these discrepancies in interpretation, he does not always seem to grasp the implications of his information. In 'The Affair at Ysterspruit', he tells the story of Johannes Engelbrecht who, regarded as a traitor, has been shot by his own people.<sup>13</sup> Yet Oom Schalk also mentions the boy's mother's version of the incident, which differs radically from the official one. She remembers him as a loving son who cared for animals and died fighting while still seated on his horse and not hiding in a trench. But the narrator, who claims to be 'a man of education and wide tolerance' uninfluenced by local gossip (p. 125), doubts the boy's mother when he sees the photograph, and notes that the boy is dressed in a National Scout uniform (a clear sign of betrayal in the Burghers' eyes). The fact that he suffered 'a considerable number of bullet wounds' (p. 121) also reveals interesting evidence about the brutality and ruthlessness of his killers. However Oom Schalk conveniently ignores this information because it would reflect negatively on the Burghers who shot him. Thus we see Bosman engaging in 'a very sophisticated form of self-conscious textual play' in which the narrator is 'undermining his position and affirming his faith in it at the same time'.<sup>14</sup>

Floris van Barneveld's story in 'The Mafeking Road' also addresses the question of personal betrayal versus patriotic affirmation. Just as the white ants have been devouring the illustrious family tree hanging on the wall in

his house, the reality of war and feelings of patriotism corrode his sense of values and cause him to kill his own son. It is assumed that he wanted to prevent his son from surrendering to the British, at least that is the conclusion drawn from his three-day absence from the commando after his son's hasty departure with the express intention to surrender. It would seem that Floris obeyed the dictates of patriotism instead of listening to his own heart. His fate represents not only 'the other side of the story' of a 'defeated country and of broken columns blundering through the dark' (p. 50), but also the anguish of a parent torn between conflicting loyalties. Ironically, Floris 'couldn't tell the story properly' (p. 48) because 'he always insisted on telling that part of the story that he should have left out' (p. 53). In a similar way, the witchdoctor in 'Yellow Moepels' also insists on telling things better forgotten, 'that don't matter' (p. 28) according to Oom Schalk, who doesn't like having his cowardly attitude during the war exposed by the crafty witchdoctor. Bosman would then seem to imply that the truth is much less palatable than fiction, and that memory, like fiction, becomes selective over time and becomes the material for legend. Although he exaggerates the selective quality of memory, the underlying message remains clear when Oom Schalk claims

It is strange that war should make a man forget ... what exactly he did for his country, and only allow him to remember, twenty years later, that it was he alone that did nearly all the fighting.<sup>15</sup>

'The Red Coat', which deals with an incident during the Battle of Bronkhorst Spruit, offers a striking illustration of the power of memory and its propensity to become legend.<sup>16</sup> The reader is presented with two different versions of the same incident. In the first version, Piet Niemand saves the wounded Andries Visagie, whose jacket is soaked with blood. In the second version, Andries Visagie finds Piet Niemand wearing a red coat. As the latter version implies betrayal and the former heroism, it is assumed that Piet Niemand's version is correct because it presents a much more convenient interpretation of the incident. Any evidence to the contrary, such as Andries's belated return of memory, or the young school teacher's questioning of the enemy's position behind the Boer lines, are explained as hallucinations due to fever and a young man's ignorance of 'real fighting' (p. 32). The implication is that people believe what they want to believe. By contrast, Bosman creates fiction to expose the trap that a blind belief in ideology creates.

Bosman's short stories cover a wide spectrum of social issues but could perhaps all be reduced to two main preoccupations: religion and patriotism. These two principles have traditionally ruled the lives of the Afrikaner people. Although not unadmirable in themselves, they have tended to become petrified in the Afrikaner community so that the self-belief they exact, tends to override differences in ideas and to exclude others. Bosman graphically illustrates how excessive forms of religion and patriotism can

stultify and distort people's perceptions.

In conclusion I would suggest that Bosman's prescience and modernity is marked by his attempt to deconstruct the perceived image of the Afrikaner, and unmask the underlying prejudices and misconceptions shaped by nationalist ideology. Through satire, he 'rework[s]', as Stephen Gray terms it, 'the fixed relations ... between class, race and gender as determinants of modern attitudes to the human predicament',<sup>17</sup> deploying fictional strategies to read between the lines of history.

## NOTES

1. See Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998). As revisitations of the Boer War, consider the novels: *Manly Pursuits*, by Ann Harries (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); *A Duty of Memory*, by W.P.B. Botha (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997); *Verliesfontein*, by Karel Schoeman (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1998); and *Op Soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, by Christoffel Coetzee (Cape Town: Queillerie, 1998).
2. Stephan Gray, 'Herman Charles Bosman's Use of Short Fictional Forms', *English in Africa*, 16, 1 (1989), p. 1. Gray notes that Bosman wrote the bulk of his short stories during the 1930s.
3. Herman Charles Bosman, *Makapan's Caves*, ed. Stephen Gray (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 11.
4. Michael Chapman, 'The Problem of Identity: South Africa, Storytelling, and Literary History', *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 29, 1 (Winter 1998), p. 87.
5. Ingrid de Kok, 'South African Literature in Transition. Standing in the Doorway: A Preface', *World Literature Today*, 70, 1 (Winter 1996), p. 5.
6. 'The Mafeking Road', in *Makapan's Caves*, p. 48.
7. See Nick Meihuizen, 'Bosman and Self-Conscious Fiction', *Literator*, 12, 1 (1991), p. 35; and David Medalie, 'The Mocking Fugitive: Humour as Anarchy in the Short Stories of Herman Charles Bosman', *New Contrast*, 22 (September 1994), p. 82.
8. Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Mandarin, 1991), pp. 126-7.
9. Sparks, p. 129.
10. Meihuizen, p. 35.
11. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1986).
12. Herman Charles Bosman, 'The Traitor's Wife', in *Unto Dust*, ed. Lionel Abrahams (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1974), pp. 86-91. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
13. 'The Affair at Ysterspruit', in *Unto Dust*, pp. 121-126.
14. Meihuizen, p. 39.
15. 'The Mafeking Road', in *Makapan's Caves*, p. 27.
16. 'The Red Coat', in *Makapan's Caves*, pp. 30-36.
17. Stephen Gray, 'An Author's Agenda: Re-Visioning Past and Present for a Future South Africa', in *On Shifting Sands: New Art and Literature from South Africa*, eds. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1992), p. 27.



Group of Boer soldiers, including five brothers, aged between fourteen and twenty-two, Marita Wenzel's grandfather, back at right

Back: unknown, unknown, Jan and Cornelius du Preez

Middle: Jan, Flip and Koos du Preez

Front: unknown, unknown