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Abstract
Many writers, some of whom have much more established literary reputations than Blackburn, have been attracted by the possibilities suggested by the situation in South Africa at the end of the last century for satire. However, without exception none of their works has endured or holds very much more than historical interest for readers today. All satire that is rooted in the particular and topical runs the risk of becoming obscure in time and overtaken by events that supplant the very issues it seeks to attack and ridicule; and herein lies much of the essential difference between Blackburn's work and that, say, of Munro, Chesterton and Belloc. Their satires are focused on particular topicalities; their interest goes little beyond attacking specific personalities and incidents of the day. Blackburn's satire, on the other hand, tries to encompass a much broader vision of human folly and hypocrisy as he attempts to come to grips with the nature of capitalist imperialism in conflict with and corrupting a rural and theocentric republic; he also focuses in a general sense on the chivalric tradition transplanted into the wilds of Africa. Thus, part of the intention of this paper is to show why Blackburn's novel deserves consideration on its own merits and is, moreover, worthy of being acknowledged as one of the important works in the development of South African literature.
Douglas Blackburn's
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Many writers, some of whom have much more established literary reputations than Blackburn, have been attracted by the possibilities suggested by the situation in South Africa at the end of the last century for satire.\(^1\) However, without exception none of their works has endured or holds very much more than historical interest for readers today. All satire that is rooted in the particular and topical runs the risk of becoming obscure in time and overtaken by events that supplant the very issues it seeks to attack and ridicule; and herein lies much of the essential difference between Blackburn's work and that, say, of Munro, Chesterton and Belloc. Their satires are focused on particular topicalities; their interest goes little beyond attacking specific personalities and incidents of the day. Blackburn's satire, on the other hand, tries to encompass a much broader vision of human folly and hypocrisy as he attempts to come to grips with the nature of capitalist imperialism in conflict with and corrupting a rural and theocentric republic; he also focuses in a general sense on the chivalric tradition transplanted into the wilds of Africa. Thus, part of the intention of this paper is to show why Blackburn's novel deserves consideration on its own merits and is, moreover, worthy of being acknowledged as one of the important works in the development of South African literature.

At least one contemporary critic\(^2\) and several of Blackburn's contemporary reviewers are in agreement that *A Burgher Quixote* is a significant literary achievement. *Blackwood's Magazine* described it as

a model of irony, simple and sustained. Nowhere is there any faltering, nor any forgetfulness of the method employed. And how great this achievement is will be understood if we consider the few ironists that our literature may boast. To the ironist one temptation is constant: he becomes so earnest in his desire to prove his point that he drops into argument, or even into morality. Of this cardinal sin Sarel Erasmus is always guiltless. He never knows, what is patent to the reader, that he is a sorry scamp. He preserves from beginning to end the beautiful appearance of sim-
plicity, which makes the most dastardly of his actions seem respectable. It is true that Mr Blackburn had already shown how great is his power of satire. But his *Burgher Quixote* will manifestly increase his reputation, and we recommend this masterpiece of irony to our readers, not merely because it will teach them a profound lesson of South Africa ... but because it is packed with amusement, and prompts a smile with every page.  

And *The Natal Witness* had the following opinion:

The author of *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp* has given us another work, which will be read with entertainment by all who appreciate the best of fiction with a firm basis in fact. Among the scores of novels written in the late war the *Burgher Quixote* will stand out foremost in its power of literary expression and striking humorous portraiture.

In addition an earlier review, that appeared in *The Spectator*, of Blackburn’s *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp* (1899), the first novel in the Sarel Erasmus trilogy, described Blackburn as ‘a true disciple of Swift’.  

The title of Blackburn’s novel invites a comparison with Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Although the heroes of both novels are from different eras and different social classes, they have more in common than is at first apparent. Blackburn’s Sarel Erasmus describes himself as ‘A Don Quixote, fighting on behalf of Great Britain against the folly and ignorance that have caused so much loss and suffering’. Like Cervantes’ hero, he is a pursuer of lost causes in a world he does not understand. Similarly, Sarel stands in many respects for an age that has passed. But, whereas Don Quixote’s monomania leads him into a twilight world of chivalric romance as he loses his grip on reality, Sarel struggles to adapt to the demands of the present. It is within the context of Sarel’s struggle, which in a sense stands as a paradigm of the Boers’ struggle to come to terms with the demands of the new century, that Blackburn is able to lay bare the inconsistencies, contradictions and inadequacies of both the old and new ways, using much the same techniques that Cervantes does. And it is here that the clue to much of the strength of *A Burgher Quixote* lies. Many of the follies and much of the hypocrisy that Blackburn ridicules are sufficiently generalised to enable his satire to transcend the moment and become universal in its application. Although the British and the Boers are the initial and most obvious butts of his ridicule, Blackburn’s criticism extends to exposing the false heroics of war, the dubious advantages of industrial capitalism, religious hypocrisy, the rationalised arguments people use to convince themselves of their own rectitude, indifference to suffering and, in the end, the romantic tradition of love.

Blackburn’s strength as a satirist lies in his ability to focus on the particular and the general at the same time, to be able to generalise the indi-
individual and topical sufficiently to give it a universal dimension. Thus, like *Don Quixote*, his novel avoids the pitfall of becoming too topical and therefore with the passage of time merely obscure. On the other hand, because *A Burgher Quixote* is founded in a particular era and set of circumstances, Blackburn is able to dramatise the general points he makes and give them a sense of immediacy. For example, the formal elements in his novel create a strong tension with the realistic description he gives of the world. That is, the formal pattern of the novel determines to a large extent the reader’s attitude to the narrator and he story he tells ‘boldly and honestly … [of the] truthful story of the struggles after righteousness of a once oprecht Burgher of the late South African Republic [himself] with a full account of the temptations that assailed him at the hands of the clever and educated wicked, [who] in the end brought about his fall’ (p. 1). Sarel begins and ends his ‘truthful story’ while sitting in jail, waiting to know what his fate will be. It is a story in which he has a large vested interest and which he little realises reveals more of the truth than he would care to admit. Although Sarel conforms more to the picaresque type of hero or traditional trickster than to the model provided by Don Quixote, he is, like his literary predecessor, paradoxically spiritually superior to those characters in the novel who have a firm grip on reality. For, although Sarel is a rogue with an eye to the main chance, he nonetheless retains his naïveté in the face of modernity. As a consequence he never fully understands what is happening to him, and, instead of adapting to the world, becomes more often than not its victim. The knaves in *A Burgher Quixote* like those in Cervantes’ novel are those who can handle reality most successfully. For all that, Blackburn’s satire is never vicious. He never allows his indignation against human folly or greed or cowardice to overwhelm his sense of humour. His artistic integrity is such, in this novel at least, that he never resorts to invective, preferring instead to use the elements of irony and fantasy to make his point.

The principle that informs Sarel’s character is an ironic one: if he condemns anything in other people he is likely to be found guilty of a similar offence fairly soon. For all his conniving and using his position as public prosecutor, smallpox tax-collector and market master for his own gain, Sarel remains a victim. He may be irredeemably corrupt, but his corruption remains on the level of that of the petty official. By comparison the world he inhabits is infinitely more corrupt, more self-seeking, more treacherous. His crimes are largely the result of self-deception.

He is persistently trapped by his own disclaimers to objectivity: ‘I am not given to boasting, and least of all of my forefathers’ (p. 5), he writes,
and then follow three pages of the deeds and achievements of his ancestors, which he recites with naive pride, oblivious of the irony that lies behind what he has to say. Unfortunately, space does not permit more than two paragraphs of Sarel's family history to illustrate this point:

When I look back on the work I have done, — being yet only twenty-eight years of age, — I can see that people who put importance on good breeding have much good cause, for all the Erasmuses, with a few exceptions, have been marked by great qualities above their fellows, and all of them have done something out of the common, even the bad ones being horribly and unusually clever in their wickedness. It would seem that the family was destined to be, even as the original Erasmus was, teachers and instructors of their fellow-men, for the stories told of my ancestors in Cape Colony are largely made up of records showing their superiority. It was an Erasmus who first made up for a bad grape harvest by putting Cape gooseberries with the wine, which has since been the universal habit. Another Erasmus discovered the Dassie serpent — that great snake with the head of a rabbit and body of a reptile, only seen about the season of Nachtmaal; though there be those that say my ancestor came upon a puff-adder that was just swallowing a rock-rabbit. But those that said this did not stand well in the kerk, and afterwards were proved to be infidels.

A third Erasmus discovered a way to make medicine for smallpox and scurvy out of a prickly pear of a particularly malignant and fast-growing kind, that was making the best-ground on his farm useless. There happened to be in Simon's Bay certain British ships visited badly with both these diseases. My ancestor offered to make large quantities of the medicine if the captains would let their sailors dig up all the prickly pear roots, which they did. But when some of those who took the medicine got worse, the captains said that it was a trick planned by Erasmus to get his farm cleared cheaply, and they tried to make the Governor of Cape Colony order that the work be paid for; but the ships being English, and the governor a Hollander who hated Englanders, he refused, and there was nearly war between the two countries. (pp. 5-6)

Sarel's inheritance is almost amoral. He passes no comment on the dubious conduct of his ancestors. Whether they make wine with gooseberries, or discover fabulous creatures such as the Dassie serpent, seen, one is allowed to presume, only after copious quantities of surreptitiously consumed Communion wine meant for Nachtmaal, or whether they trick the English into clearing their farms, it is all one to him. Blackburn builds into Sarel's character an element of innocence which disguises the satire that is implicit in much that he says, and therefore makes it that much more effective. Sarel's ancestors may not have been much better than petty crooks given to occasional bouts of the DTs, but they were still smart enough to get the English to clear their farms for them for nothing. Blackburn ensures that Sarel retains the reader's sympathy by showing him not only as the victim of external circumstance but also of his own
ineptitude. Sarel never gains from his roguery, nor does he whine or complain about how fate has treated him; he can muse philosophically that even jail has its advantages:

John Bunyan, Sir Walter Raleigh, and I are striking examples of the blessing that prison-life may become to those who know how to use and value it by thinking out, properly and fully, thoughts that have stayed but a short time in the heart during freedom; for when such finished thoughts are put upon paper, they become of value to our fellow-creatures. (p. 244)

Sarel’s choice of Bunyan and Raleigh with whom to bracket himself is not fortuitous. He wishes to be judged by association. There is a tradition of sympathy for the imprisoned underdog in Britain which his creator allows Sarel to exploit. Both Bunyan and Raleigh spent portions of their lives unjustly in jail, where they wrote their masterpieces; both were the victims of political forces beyond their control. Desirous to the last of seeming to be a virtuous man unjustly treated, Sarel cannot refrain from trying to turn the situation to his advantage and win the reader’s sympathy. The irony is compounded by the fact that, for all his unctuous and patronising tone, he has been duped and is in jail unjustly.

Another formal device that Blackburn uses that contributes significantly to the success of his novel is the first person narrator which gives the story a strong element that is perhaps best described as semidramatic. In other words, the success of the author’s narrative derives to a large degree from his mastery of the colloquial idiom; that is, the Taal transposed into English. Blackburn’s ear is faultless as he captures the flavour of the Taal, its vocabulary and syntax, in English. The result is an ideolect that savours not only of the Taal but expresses the literary pretentiousness of Sarel who can lay claim to having read at least Don Quixote, Pilgrim’s Progress and the writings of Sir Walter Raleigh and Shakespeare, from whom no doubt, as a second language speaker, he learnt most of his English. But there is another dimension to Sarel’s decision to tell his story in English not unrelated to the circumstances in which he finds himself at the beginning of his tale: he is anxious to impress his captors with his sincerity to become ‘a loyal British subject, and do all that lies [in him] to prevent Great Britain being again deceived by those who would perhaps form another corrupt Boer Government in some other part of South Africa’ (p. 16). Incidentally, he hopes this way to save his own skin and perchance to return to his ‘old profession of public prosecutor, but in a larger and better paying dorp’ (p. 16), that is, a dorp with a greater potential for the misappropriation of public funds.

Sarel’s explanations of his early achievements and conduct as a public
prosecutor before the war not only point to his own view of the world around him but also allow Blackburn to comment in passing on the corruption of Kruger’s pre-war civil service. The question that is left hanging is: what were the economic and social conditions that promoted such widespread corruption?

Of my six years’ experience as public prosecutor in the court of my father-in-law I will not occupy time in saying much, for if I once began to say all that I might, I should fill many chapters, as there is much in my career that needs explaining, especially to those who know not the ways of officials of the Transvaal. It is sufficient that I should say that being by nature honest and kind-hearted, I was never properly understood or appreciated. I confess that I now and then made mistakes, for having to learn my law as I went on from a landdrost who knew none himself, and having to fight clever advocates from Johannesburg who knew more law than all the landdrosts and public prosecutors of the land, it was not to be wondered at that my law was not always of the best quality. But it should not be forgotten that my salary was not large, and even then, I was much more successful in getting convictions than my father-in-law was in having them upheld on appeal.

As is usual with public prosecutors, my most successful and profitable work was in breaking down in my cases, which was done by purposely putting in a wrong date or name in the summons and not defending it when the lawyer for the defence objected; for I hold with the great English lawyers who say it is better that fifty guilty men escape than that one innocent man be convicted. Therefore I could never see wrong in taking a reward to see the weak and merciful side of any case for the prosecution. I am not wishful to take part in the great and long discussion on the morality of officials who take payment from the public, for I have long since agreed with that Transvaal judge and the late President Kruger, who declared that it is neither wrong nor is it bribery to give a reward to an official for paying special attention to your case, any more than it is unrighteous to give a policeman a few shillings for keeping an eye on your house while you and your family are at Nachtmaal. Such a reward is but an inducement to further vigilance; and I freely confess that I have often been able to see the weakness in my summons when I have been promised a reward if the accused should be acquitted. Otherwise I might have been careless and got a conviction that would have been upset on appeal, causing unnecessary expense, and making both my father-in-law and myself appear ridiculous — a thing no man who values his professional reputation can afford. (pp. 12-13)

When Sarel goes on to reveal how he and his father-in-law dealt with cases involving drunk miners, for example, Blackburn is able to touch on an issue that was the cause of much controversy and concern in the Transvaal at the time:

When prosecuting miners for drunkenness I always tried to find out how much money they had spent on drink in the dorp, which was often the whole of their monthly cheque; and in stating the case I would mention that the prisoners had spent so much, instead of doing as some did, go to Johannesburg and squander their money there, only coming back to finish their drunkenness in the dorp on credit.
father-in-law always favourably considered such cases and made the fine no more than the prisoner had left. Naturally this good nature was made matter for spiteful comment by the Rooinek papers, which went so far as to state that my father-in-law was interested in canteens in the dorp when as a matter of fact he was only partly owner of one; while the 'Critic' actually declared that he issued permits for drunkenness, an utterly false charge, seeing that there was no such printed form issued to landdrosts. (pp. 14-15)

It should not be forgotten that prior to the war of 1899-1902 the partnership of A.H. Nellmapius, I.A.B. Lewis and Sammy Marks held a monopoly for the distilling of alcohol in the Transvaal. This was perhaps the most notorious of all the concessions granted by Kruger's government, but certainly not the only one. Charles van Onselen points out that the consumption of cheap alcohol by black miners worked in favour of the mining companies: 'the more money the mine-workers spent on liquor, the less they saved; and the less they saved the longer they worked before returning to the peasant economies of their rural homelands.' It is significant that a large proportion of the shares in the company that held the monopoly was held by South African mining capitalists. In contrast to the petty corruption that Sarel and his father-in-law indulged in, there is by implication the much more ambitious, efficient and successful exploitation by the capitalist financiers of labour and resources on the Rand. Blackburn was under no illusions about the motivation and morality of the Uitlanders in Johannesburg:

Here in Johannesburg the men who by act or word admitted that one had any duty higher than the consideration of his own interests could be regarded with suspicion and contempt..... Who are the supporters and admirers of Rhodes in South Africa? Almost to a man they belong to the class who declare their faith in the doctrine of might against right, who shout for the extension of an empire or anything else if they can share in the plunder..... If the enslavement of the workers, the crushing out of the poor man and the perpetration of countless deeds of cruel injustice in the cause of capitalist ascendancy be a creditable work then Cecil Rhodes is of all men entitled to praise.

In comparison the corruption practised by Sarel and his father-in-law is of almost negligible proportions. But more importantly, Blackburn suggests that if it were not for what he calls in another context 'the grossest, most material, unscrupulous and sordid community that civilisation has produced' neither the opportunity nor the motivation for public corruption on anything like the scale that it was practised at the time would have existed. It is against this background that Blackburn retains the reader's sympathy for Sarel. His artless and transparent claims to being 'honest and kind-hearted' and never being 'properly
understood and appreciated’ are so obviously attempts to rationalise the manner in which he accepts bribes. The tactic of confessing his mistakes is designed to gain the reader’s sympathy, particularly as he goes on to depict himself as the victim of a poor education and the ‘clever advocates of Johannesburg’. He tries, in fact, to paint a picture of himself as the poor boy who has been frustrated in his efforts to make good by the wiles of the ‘clever and educated wicked’.

Part of Sarel’s charm lies in the fact that he always overstates his case in order to make it sound the more convincing. As a consequence he reveals more to his audience than he realises. The little boast about his success at getting more ‘convictions than [his] father-in-law [had] in having them upheld on appeal’ is the first of several clues as to how he and his father-in-law, working together as public prosecutor and landdrost, managed to make the law a profitable business. However, Blackburn is careful to suggest that the processes of law are not entirely in the hands of unrestrained licence. Sarel the petty official may be able to get away with accepting bribes, but his father-in-law does not have the same success. Many of his judgements are reversed on appeal. The implication is that there is a limit to the corruption practised in the courts, that it is confined largely to the lower functionaries in the court, and is not found as readily in the upper echelons of the bench. Sarel’s character gives Blackburn the opportunity, in the midst of all the comedy, to inject a note of restraint to counter the more violent accusations of the jingoes who would have blackened Kruger’s administration irredeemably. Also, Blackburn always lets economic pressures show — Sarel was never paid enough to be honourable.

It is worthwhile spending some time examining Blackburn’s picture of the Boers in this novel. In the following passage, for example, credulous old Piet Faurie is sold a bottle of foul sticky medicine by an English apothecary. The medicine is said to guarantee immunity from exploding lyddite shells, the terror of the Boer commandos:

Piet, being foolish, thought it must be good medicine because it had a dreadful smell, being what is called asafoetida. Piet took a very large quantity with him when he went with the commando to Sandspruit, and at first caused great trouble, for the Burghers would not have him in any tent because of the odour, until he told them it was a cure for lyddite, when they all begged some, and rubbed their heads so many times a day that the Kafir servants could only be got to come near them with the sjambok. But the cruel part of the business was that the stuff was no protection at all, as was proved very soon, for the very first Burgher killed by lyddite had not only rubbed his head, but his body, and had been living alone in the veld for a week, as the others would not have him with them. (p. 25)
This episode is amusing in its own right, but its humour is not untouched with pathos. Sarel, who spends most of the war in a double-bind situation, trying to defect to the British to save his own skin, is intent on exposing the Boers' lack of sophistication and gullibility. His object is twofold: to discredit his countrymen, and to present himself, by contrast, in a favourable light to his potential British audience. Unwittingly, he goes much further than that and reveals his own limitations as surely as he tried to ridicule his compatriots. For example, Sarel accepts without question the notion that 'Kafir servants' must be driven to work by means of a sjambok. The event elicits no comment from him, and he passes on immediately to the cruel fate that awaited the burgher who put his faith in the medicine to protect himself from being killed by lyddite. Without wishing to labour the point, the issue that is at stake here is Sarel's incapacity to recognise that the sjambokked 'Kafir servant' shares a common humanity with the Burgher who was killed. But it is the first person narrative form in the end that makes the throw-away line all the more effective as a comment both on Sarel's morality and the community from which he has derived his value system. The point that is being made is not so much about the gullibility of the Boers, but the really 'cruel part of the business' which is concerned with the Boers in general and Sarel's indifference to the 'Kafir servants'. The final effect is to re-enforce the notion that, whereas the Boers may be capable of feeling for their own, they remain indifferent to the suffering of others. This idea is given further strength by the fact that for all Sarel's attempts to disclaim his people and appear in a superior guise to them, he shares their values and attitudes, as for example when he describes how he dispensed justice to the black population:

...if we flogged all the guilty Kafirs, the landdrost got a name for cruelty with the Rooinek papers, and the Government would not pay all the fees of the jail doctor who examined the Kafirs for flogging; so there was nothing for it but to fine them what money they had, except when much labour was needed for the roads, when of course they were always sent to jail without the option of a fine. (pp. 13-14)

However, apart from the odd aside there are very few references to the black population in the novel. It would seem that for Sarel they were not an issue.

What English-speaking writers saw as evidence of Boer religious hypocrisy and exclusivism is used generally, in the fiction, as a vehicle to express moral outrage and re-enforce the negative stereotype of the bigoted and narrow-minded Boer. Few of the authors who were writing at the time of the conflict were able to distance themselves sufficiently to
use what they saw as the Boer attitudes to their religion as an integral part of a novel’s structure. Blackburn, however, was one of the few novelists at the time who used the relationship between the Boer and his religion and incorporated it into his overall fictional design. For example, after the apothecary’s medicine has failed to protect the Burghers from the fatal effects of lyddite, many of them feel that an unfair advantage has been taken of them:\(^{13}\)

In like ways did many unworthy Rooineks take advantage of the faith of trusting Burghers, thereby bringing the name of Englander into evil repute, as in the early days in the Colony and the Transvaal.

The predikant took the subject for his sermon one Sunday, and used words of wisdom when he made plain that while it was only right and godly to spoil an enemy, as did the Israelites the Egyptians, yet it was sinful to ride upon the ignorance of a Burgher; and he read the story of hairy Esau stealing the birthright of his brother and deceiving his father, for which he was justly punished by being made the servant of servants, as the British would be to the Boers whom they had so greatly deceived. The sermon had a very comforting influence, being preached on the Sunday after the battle of Elandslaagte when the people were beginning to doubt all that had been said about the Lord being on the Boer side. (p. 25)

While the reader may be tempted to laugh at the way the wily and ‘unworthy Rooineks [have taken] advantage of the faith of trusting Burghers’, such an attitude implies a particular moral stance which must compromise his view of what Sarel goes on to relate. However, here it is necessary to distinguish between Sarel’s intention and the author, Blackburn’s. Sarel is intent merely on showing up his brother Boers in a bad light in order to make his own standing with the British appear to the good. But it is what he unwittingly reveals that gives the reader a clue to the writer’s deeper intention. Firstly, the English are represented as sophisticated confidence tricksters, the Boers as gullible hicks. But the relationship between the two is more complex than that. The Biblical allusion to Jacob and Esau suggests that a special relationship exists between the two antagonists, a relationship as intimate, complex and fraught with the potential for jealousy and violence as the relationship between brothers. Far from being implacable enemies like the Israelites and Egyptians, between whom it is ‘only right and godly to spoil an enemy’, the implication is that the British and Boers are in fact bound to one another by bonds of blood. But there is a basic flaw in the predikant’s sermon. There are two stories in Genesis relating to Jacob and Esau. In both of them it is Jacob, not Esau, who resorts to dishonest means to deprive his brother of his birthright, not the other way around. The sermon may have been intended by the predikant to boost the flagging
morale of the Boers after their defeat at Elandslaagte, but Blackburn, by juxtaposing Rooinek exploitation of the ‘ignorance of the Burgher’ with the predikant’s text on Esau, forces the reader to the uncomfortable conclusion that neither side has any claim to moral privilege. Further, it is worth noting that Sarel is uncritical of what the predikant has to say, noticing only the propaganda value of his speech for boosting morale. A further twist in this episode is the fact that it was Jacob who founded the people of Israel with whom the Boers identified so closely as God’s chosen people. The parable had to be twisted if it was to have any value at all. It is a difficult thing to admit that the founding father of a people one has chosen to identify oneself with as the chosen people of God is depicted in the Bible as heartlessly materialistic and a confidence trickster.

Writing for a readership derived largely from a sophisticated imperial power, Blackburn was assured of a sympathetic response to any parody he might make of the Boers and their attempts to govern themselves according to the precepts of the Old Testament. This was particularly so as the official Anglican response to the war was that it was a holy war which was being waged in the interests of the black people of South Africa.¹⁴ The fact that President Kruger did not believe, on Biblical grounds, for example, that the world was round was perceived as added evidence of Boer backwardness and stubbornness.

In the following extract, Paul du Plooy represents a prejudice the British harboured about backward, bigoted, Bible-ridden Boers. Like so many deeply held views, it prevented the British from acknowledging very easily that there were other types of Boers. If one is to judge from the fiction of the time in which, for the most part, Boers are depicted as variations on Paul du Plooy, this kind of perception must have been widely held. However, in the character of Ben Viljoen, with whom he was well acquainted in real life,¹⁵ Blackburn presents the complementary hard-headed, practical side of the Boer people, which was not often perceived by the novelists. Viljoen is shown as no Bible-punching backvelder, but as a pragmatic Vechtgeneraal who has to cope with the immediate problems of keeping his men motivated and alert. According to Sarel, Ben Viljoen is credited with persuading General Piet Joubert to cross the border and invade Natal:

This success pleased him very much, for he was a young man who had had much to do with Rooineks, and did not care to read in his Bible how pride goeth before a fall. ‘Nay,’ said he, when an old Burgher named Paul du Plooy read him this, ‘I believe that part which says the first shall be last and the last first, and the humble shall be exalted. That’s me. So now go on horse-guard and take your Bible with you, and read it closer before you throw it at my head again.’
This Paul du Plooy had been a Dopper, but did nothing but study the Bible and quarrel with the deacons. He next went over to the Dutch Reformed Church, where the predikants are more college-learned; and they confuted old Paul so often that he left them and had a Church of his own made up of his family, though he was always trying to get Burghers to join, and did not even mind having Rooineks and Germans and a Jew, who only pretended to agree because Paul sold him tobacco cheaper than any one else, whereby the old man lost money.

When I heard Ben use these jeering words, and saw how abased the old Burgher was, I felt sorry for him; but before long I learned to mitigate my grief, for old Paul proved a great depression in the laager. He would come half-a-dozen times a day to Ben or the General, carrying his Bible and pointing out some verse which showed that the Boers were either in the right and were going to smite the Rooineks hip and thigh, or if we got a reverse it was a punishment for not holding more prayer-meetings, at which Paul did all the praying. As Paul always had a verse to prove what he said, and could talk more persuasively than an auctioneer, much time was wasted in listening to his discourses, which gave many Burghers an excuse for not fighting.

At last Ben Viljoen made an order that no more verses were to be shown him or the Burghers unless they encouraged fighting, and then they were not to be discovered until they had worked out true, — an order that puzzled Paul deeply, and for a time checked the output of prophecies, (pp. 33-34)

Here the reader is presented with a picture of a Boer who can quote from the Bible with the best of them to his own advantage. The difference is, he does so cynically, without any sense of trying to establish his own moral rectitude. Paul, in contrast, is concerned chiefly with assuaging his hurt ego. Unlike Viljoen, Paul is the victim of his own religious convictions. Viljoen reacts to the demands of the situation. In contrast Paul seeks prophecies and justifications. His position is a parody of that of the ancient seer or prophet whose function it was in ancient times to consult the oracles and give the commander advice about when it would be most propitious to join battle with the enemy. Putting one’s trust in God, or the gods, before battle has long been a favourite ploy of generals, but seldom as effective as sound planning and imaginative and detailed strategy. Nonetheless, there is undeniable comfort to be drawn from the notion that the Lord is on one’s side. Blackburn’s Viljoen is well aware of the danger of committing all his military eggs to the Lord’s basket; he prefers to leave his options open. Here Blackburn is touching on a weakness that bedevilled the Boer command structure at the beginning of the war. Initially, the Republic armies were dominated by cautious old men who were reminiscent, in many respects, of the patriarchs of the Old Testament. But after General Piet Joubert’s death and General Cronje’s defeat and capture at Paardeberg, it was Ben Viljoen and his contemporaries who took over: Louis Botha, De la Rey, De Wet and Smuts. It is
worth noting that when, after the war, Ben Viljoen, G.G. Munnik and C. Louis Leipoldt, all of them Afrikaners, came to write their novels in English about the war, none of them mentioned the Bible as playing any determining role in the lives of their characters or in the conduct of the war.

A crucially important element in Blackburn’s writing, particularly in *A Burgher Quixote*, is the use he makes of negative stereotypes of the Boers as a means of directing his satire at the very forces which were intent on exploiting and waging war against the Transvaal in the name of the high-sounding principles of imperialism. Blackburn uses the same technique to lay bare the false heroics of war and thereby strip it of its glamour. For example, many popular writers, including Kipling, referred to war as a game which should be approached in the same spirit as a Rugby or cricket match at a public school. The sentiments expressed in Sir Henry Newbolt’s ‘Vitai Lampada’ were well-known and applauded:

The sand of the desert is sodden red, —
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; —
The Gatling’s jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England’s far, and Honour a name.
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’

In contrast, it was a common belief, amongst the writers of popular fiction at any rate, that the Boers were cowards who took unfair advantage of cover and fled as soon as there was any possibility of being shot. In *A Burgher Quixote* Blackburn’s Boers appear at first glance to conform to this stereotype. At the beginning of the war they do not hesitate to apply for bogus medical certificates to avoid being called up for commando duty. In fact, Sarel ‘got a certificate from the district surgeon that [he] was suffering from an internal complaint that might prove fatal, not merely if [he] got into fighting, but even, as the doctor told [him] privately, if [he] got near to where the danger was’ (p. 22). For Sarel and his fellow burghers the acknowledgement of fear has nothing to do with their moral status, but is simply a part of the practical business of staying alive:

I have noticed, among other great peculiarities of the English that make them so different to us Afrikanders, one thing very particularly, and that not only in their talk, but in their books and newspaper writings. It is their obstinate refusal to confess like men that they know fear. How often have I heard young Rooineks, fresh come to
the country, boasting of being in danger, such as crossing a river in flood, or going close to a smallpox ambulance, and even playing cards during a thunderstorm, and saying they were not frightened. Now all this is vain boasting and unseemly, for it is natural and religious for men to have fear, as the Bible often shows; and for a man to proclaim that he knows not that godly feeling, which is given us that we may keep out of danger, is to confess himself a blasphemer. We Afrikanders are much more honest in this thing, for we are not ashamed to declare openly when we are afraid; and there is no phrase more often on our lips than, ‘I got a bad schrick,’ which means, ‘I got a bad fright,’ a thing no Rooinek would say, his vanity and ignorance of the Bible preventing him from being truthful in such matters. We have seen how dangerous such foolishness may be in war-time, for again and again, if the British had been more fearful, they would not have had so many of their soldiers killed. (p. 290)

Sarel has reason to suspect that the Rooineks are merely boastful in denying that they are ever afraid, for at the beginning of the war when he was given the job of recruiting men for commando duty many of the Rooineks who qualified were among the first to avail themselves of the racket Sarel and the district surgeon were working in false medical certificates.

Whatever the case, Sarel remains honest about his emotions, which is one of the reasons he retains the reader’s sympathy to the end. Moreover, his experience never equips him to cope successfully with a world in which ‘all’s fair in love and war’, in which honesty is regarded with ‘suspicion and contempt’. Notwithstanding all his attempts to adapt to the new ways, he remains an amateur in a world increasingly dominated by professionals, be they soldiers or capitalist financiers.

It is difficult to reconcile the fact that although *A Burgher Quixote* was hailed as the Boer War novel of its day (it went through three editions shortly after it was published) it disappeared from view within a short space of time only to be rediscovered and recognised for its undoubted worth by researchers recently. In the absence of evidence it is only possible to speculate that Blackburn’s humane values have not been hospitably received in the genre. However, by way of contrast it might be as well to place *A Burgher Quixote* briefly in the context of the other major works of satire that appeared at the time: H.H. Munro’s *Alice in Pall Mall*, G.K. Chesterton’s *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and Hilaire Belloc’s *Mr Clutterbuck’s Election*. These writers, like Blackburn, focus on the war in a way that anticipates the sense of the absurd that has been characteristic of writers of war fiction of a much later and more cynical era. Whereas it may be generally expected that writers will conform to the ideological concerns of their times, research has revealed that this is not always the case. Satire especially tends to be non-conformist as it probes
and questions the received wisdom of the age. The satirists mentioned in this article are all to a greater or lesser extent exemplars of this asynchronic tendency of which Blackburn is certainly the best example. Unfortunately, there is not the space to devote to a similar examination of Munro, Chesterton or Belloc. Nonetheless, it is necessary to make some observations on their work before concluding. The element of fantasy, as the titles of Munro and Chesterton’s novels suggest, is an important factor in determining the quality of their satire. For instance, Munro works within the absurd construct created by Lewis Carroll in *Alice through the Looking Glass* (1872). Munro has his Alice question a War Office spokesman, the White Knight (the Marquess of Lansdowne), about the tactics and weapons used in the war:

‘...have you ever conducted a war in South Africa?’ [asked the White Knight].
Alice shook her head.
‘I have,’ said the White Knight, with a gentle complacency in his voice.
‘And did you bring it to a successful conclusion?’ asked Alice.
‘Not exactly to a conclusion — not a definite conclusion, you know — nor entirely successful either. In fact I believe it’s going on still.... But you can’t think how much forethought it took to get it properly started. I dare say, now, you are wondering at my equipment?’

Alice certainly was; the Knight was riding rather uncomfortably on a sober-paced horse that was prevented from moving any faster by an elaborate housing of red-tape trappings.

‘Of course, I see the reason for that,’ thought Alice; ‘if it were to move any quicker the Knight would come off.’ But there were a number of obsolete weapons and appliances hanging about the saddle that didn’t seem of the least practical use.

‘You see, I had read a book,’ the Knight went on in a dreamy far-away tone, ‘written by some one to prove that warfare under modern conditions was impossible. You may imagine how disturbing that was to a man of my profession. Many men would have thrown up the whole thing and gone home. But I grappled with the situation. You will never guess what I did.’

Alice pondered. ‘You went to war, of course —’
‘Yes, but not under modern conditions.\(^{16}\)

By means of burlesque and irony Munro ridicules the outmoded thinking of the War Office and the red tape that characterises the bureaucracy. He turns the British conduct of the war into a grim joke in order to lay bare the gross inadequacies of the generals and the Secretary of State for War, and their failure to realise that the enemy might go to war ‘under modern conditions’. The White Knight goes on to explain why the British troops in South Africa were sent obsolete equipment: if it fell into the enemy’s hands it would be of little use to him.

These writers, then, Munro, Blackburn, Chesterton and Belloc, reflect a view of war which is at odds with the more generally accepted heroic
picture that has pertained since the turn of the century to the present time. The point is not that a satirical view was unusual because it clashed with prevailing modes, but that the satire of these authors took the particular slant it did. Their satire does not have the savage wit of a Swift or a Pope, but conceives of the actions of men as grotesque, almost whimsical, attempts to come to terms with a bizarre and unpredictable universe which has more in common with the world as seen by an Ionesco or a Beckett than the world of static values and innocence of Henty, Hemyng or even Kipling.

NOTES

1. Some of the well-known authors and their now largely forgotten works that have contributed to the satire on the conflict include: H.H. Munro (Saki) (*Alice in Pall Mall*, 1900); Frank Harris (*How to Beat the Boer: A Conversation in Hades*, 1900); G.K. Chesterton (*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 1904); and Hilaire Belloc (*Mr Clutterbuck’s Election*, 1908).


3. Quoted in Gray, p. 85.

4. Quoted in Gray, p. 86.

5. The other two are *A Burgher Quixote* and *I Came and Saw* (1908).


12. In a letter to Blackwood’s in which he gives William Blackwood notice that he will be sending him the Ms. of *A Burgher Quixote* which he regards as ‘the work of [his] life’, Blackburn spells out his qualifications for writing with authority about the Boers:

   ‘Although I have followed up the new line I created in *Prinsloo*, and though the new work is strictly humorous, I have been very careful to keep as my objective throughout my desire to interpret and convey to English readers that strange mental attitude of the Boer which is always so great a puzzle to the newcomer, and leads to so much misunderstanding. I think I am justified in saying that I am accepted by South Africans as the leading literary exponent of Boer character. I have made a careful study of him for ten years, and have watched him in the Dorp, Veld, City and Battlefield, and I think I know him well, for he has been a delightful study. I have been on commando with him in two Kafir wars and had the specially good fortune to be the only English correspondent on the Boer side up to Elandslaagte,'
where I was at the request of certain Hollanders put under arrest and conveyed over the border to Delagoa Bay, and later I went to the front on the British side and was badly wounded at the Battle of Pieter's Hill. Since then I have been recuperating in Natal and writing the present book, which as an old journalist — I think I am senior acting pressman in the Transvaal — is a successful attempt to present the Boer as he is, with due regard to his good as well as bad points and his limitations.' (Blackburn to Blackwood, 29 September 1902. *English in Africa*, p. 35.)

13. This presentation of the figure of the opportunistic Britisher who takes advantage of the relatively unsophisticated Boers and cheats them out of almost all they own has a long tradition in South African literature. Bonaparte Blenkins in Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* provides the literary model for a type for whom, for Schreiner and for Blackburn, ‘Cecil John Rhodes is the embodiment of the unscrupulous plutocratic idea, a person utterly destitute of those humane considerations that should underlie the acts of a benefactor of his species’ (‘An Open Letter [To Mr W.T. Stead]’, *English in Africa*, p. 10).


15. Blackburn and Viljoen had become good friends when they had both worked on *The Sentinel* newspaper in Krugersdorp in the late 1890s. Viljoen was eventually to succeed him as the paper’s last editor. Manfred Nathan, himself a Boer War novelist, records in his autobiography *Not Heaven Itself* (1944) that Viljoen was the prototype of Sarel Erasmus. If this is true, Blackburn certainly did not stick closely to his original in creating his narrator. In a letter to his publishers Blackburn says of *A Burgher Quixote* that he was ‘expecting a review of it by Ben Viljoen who [had] returned to Johannesburg and [was] the man of the hour’ (Blackburn to William Blackwood, 4 July 1903, *English in Africa*, p. 39).


For a review of Stephen Gray’s book on Douglas Blackburn, see pp. 122-25.

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**NEXT ISSUE — THE CARIBBEAN**

The next issue will be a Caribbean issue. Apart from fiction and poetry, it will include articles on Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Sam Selvon, Wilson Harris, and Orlando Patterson.