

## Book Reviews

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## Boekresensies

### The public and private life of Sol Plaatje

**Brian Willan and Sabata-mpo Mokaë, eds, *Sol T. Plaatje: A Life in Letters***

Historical Publications South Africa, Cape Town, 2020

xxv + 359 pp

ISBN 978-0-9947207-6-4 (hardcover), 978-1-990981-46-3 (eBook)

R390.00

There has been an upswing in attention to South African biography in the past few decades, with a welcome trend towards remaking or revising the canon of important figures from the South African past. This has included edited collections of the works of prominent individuals, and notable among these have been early-twentieth century black African politicians and writers. Historical Publications Southern Africa (renamed from its previous moniker, the Van Riebeeck Society) has published four edited collections of the writings of such individuals since 2008, including Isaac Williams Wauchope, Richard Victor Solope Thema, and A.B. Xuma. *A Life in Letters*, a collection of Solomon T. Plaatje's correspondence, is the fourth such volume in just over a decade. There are 260 letters, written from 1896 to 1932, included in the book. Most are in English, but some are in Setswana, Dutch/Afrikaans, and a few are in German. Although a number of the letters are from the collections of the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand, the reviewer counted twenty-seven different collections across three continents. The book is thus an excellent resource not only for historians, but also for students and the general public who now have access to a wide range of Plaatje's thoughts, opinions, and emotions that are evident in his letters.

There is something immediate and revealing about reading these primary sources: the directness of Plaatje in his own words rather than through the mediating assessments of biographers – notably the co-editor of this volume, Brian Willan in his *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (Johannesburg, 1984) and *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Thekiso Plaatje, 1876–1932* (Johannesburg, 2018). Reading the correspondence conveys the range of Plaatje's talents, but also the complex role of letter writing in building and maintaining the social worlds of the Batswana in the face of increasing racist policies and the actions of white-minority rule in the Cape Colony, Transvaal, and later, the Union of South Africa in the twentieth century. As editors, Willan and Mokaë provide a 12-page introduction, as well as short contextual openings to each of the eight chronological parts around which the book is organised. They provide concise context on the “public amnesia” toward Plaatje's life and work following his death in

1932, and the revival of interest in Plaatje since the 1980s and 1990s, when his “public memory [was] ... reclaimed” (p xi). Much of this revival arose from publication of Plaatje’s handwritten diary during the South African (Anglo-Boer) War, which focused primarily on the siege of Mafeking, in John L. Comaroff’s edited *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* (1973); a new edition of Plaatje’s 1930 novel *Mhudi* (Johannesburg, 1975), the first published novel written by a black South African; and a new edition of the 1916 book critical of the 1913 Land Act, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1982).

The letters in this edited volume help to map Plaatje’s social networks: they include Batswana, and more particularly, Barolong individuals, including the prominent Silas and Modiri Molema; female advocates for Plaatje’s cause in England, including Betty Molteno and Sophie Colenso; and transatlantic connections such as Robert Moton, the African American educator and principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, whom Plaatje visited in 1922. What is particularly valuable about these letters collected together in one volume for the first time, is their scope and range and the ways in which Plaatje combines public and private concerns. “I live in perpetual sadness and ... constant troubles” (p 78), Plaatje confided to Silas Molema at a low point in February 1914. In a tender exchange communicated to his seven-year-old daughter, Violet, in 1914, Plaatje refers playfully to “Doodles”, her nickname, thanking her for her “short illustrated letter” (p 92). This range of correspondence adds complexity to our picture of Plaatje beyond his public persona or popular memory of his life and legacy.

A skilled letter writer who drew on a range of local idioms and literary references, Plaatje conveys the passion, frustration and hopefulness of his political, literary, and educational causes. Less able to express his agency and views as an interpreter during the South African War, he soon found his voice through the editorship of the Setswana newspaper *Koranta ea Becoana* (1901–1904). He would also later edit *Tsala ea Becoana* (1910–1915). Plaatje noted in a letter (although signed as Silas Molema) that *Koranta ea Becoana* was “the only channel through which the truth can be disseminated to the native population of Bechuanaland” (p 18). Yet, his letters reveal the many registers employed by Plaatje, depending on his audience, ranging from deference to candour, in ways not always apparent in a public newspaper. His letters to government officials, prominent Cape liberals, and to Barolong allies – Silas Molema in particular – show a range of carefully chosen words. In a telegram in March 1913 to Thomas Zini, president of the Cape Peninsula Native Association and opponent of the Native’s Land Bill (it became an act in June), Plaatje wrote: “... please urge our people not [to] use language calculated to inflame” (p 68).

Plaatje’s agency, dignity and ambition is perhaps clearest in his Setswana letters. In complimenting Silas Molema for his publications on Tswana traditions, language and history, Plaatje expressed the hope that the Barolong would “appreciate these kinds of works because they show that something will remain even when people are no longer there”. They would, in his view, be “books that are read by the whole world just like white people’s books while other nations cannot [yet] do this” (pp 194–195). His vision of black South Africans within the world, rather than confined to localised place, was most clearly seen in his transatlantic travels to Britain and North America, which

contrasted with his more racialised experiences in South Africa. Writing to Betty Molteno from Canada in 1920, Plaatje reflected on how he enjoyed conviviality with the “motley crew” aboard the ship to Quebec and that Canadian passengers especially “came and went precisely as if there was no such thing as colour” (p 197).

Through his contact with prominent African Americans including W.E.B. Du Bois and John Edward Bruce in the United States, Plaatje saw the full global scope of race discrimination. He also found a readership of his work and an audience willing to hear about the plight of black South Africans. In a letter written in 1921 to Walter White, then assistant national secretary of the US National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Plaatje noted the uneven spread of news globally about violence against black bodies. As he put it: “American race-riots are receiving all the publicity they deserve... [they are] flashed throughout the world but not a word about ... the mowing down of scores of unarmed workers by a cavalcade of police [in South Africa]” (p 207). Many of Plaatje’s letters have resonance to the present, while also providing insight into the lived experiences of structural racism during his times.

One of the final letters in the volume is addressed to the general manager of the De Beers Mining Company on 15 March 1932. Plaatje requested financial assistance for school premises in the hope of furthering his efforts to improve African education, particularly by printing Setswana schoolbooks. Plaatje described the “scarcity of Sechuana readers” as “not a local but a national want” (p 314). His final years were devoted to furthering such causes, and to finding publishers for manuscripts including Plaatje’s translations of Shakespearean plays. Sadly, Plaatje’s premature death in 1932 meant that many of these projects are incomplete or remained in manuscript form without a publisher. Reading the letters, one feels pathos for what might have been, and the extent of Plaatje’s contribution.

Plaatje was a man of his time, caught between a world of empire and an increasingly racially-exclusionary South Africa. His letters provide a glimpse into his inner thoughts beyond what was published, yet there are still gaps in the volume. Occasional mention is made of Plaatje’s wife Elizabeth (Lillith) but these do not provide a full picture of domestic life, nor are there any letters between Plaatje and his wife in the volume, if such letters exist. Letters have their limitations, but of course private conversations he would have had in his lifetime have not survived as a written record. A more rounded view of Plaatje and his times is best achieved by reading his biographies, as well as a wider range of his oeuvre. Besides *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa*, Plaatje also wrote several other works, including pamphlets. A selection of these can be found in Brian Willan’s other edited collection, *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg, 1997; republished in 2016). Willan and Mokae’s edited collection of Plaatje’s letters is nevertheless essential reading for those interested in his life and his considerable contribution.

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## **From South African veld to Western Front trenches**

**Rodney Atwood, *General Lord Rawlinson: From Tragedy to Triumph***

Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2020

xii + 316 pp

ISBN 978-1-4742-4698-9 (hardback), 978-1-3501-5113-0 (paperback), 978-1-4742-4700-9 (ePDF), 978-1-4742-4699-6 (eBook)

R600 (paperback), R550 (eBook)

Henry Seymour (“Harry” or “Rawly”) Rawlinson was born at Trent Manor, Dorset in England, on 20 February 1864. He was educated at Eton, and entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in 1883. His military career spanned the later years of Queen Victoria's long reign, the Edwardian era, the Western Front campaigns during the Great (First World) War of 1914 to 1918, and the crisis faced by the British Empire in the 1920s. He joined the King's Royal Rifles in India in 1884. His first service in the field was during the British invasion of Burma (today Myanmar) in November 1885. He entered the Army Staff College, Camberley, in 1893. He then served under Lord Kitchener in the Sudan in 1898, including at the battle of Omdurman. He was in the field throughout the greater part of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902. After the war he worked at the War Office, as Commandant of the Army Staff College, and at Aldershot. Then followed various positions during the First World War.

Although Rawlinson spent only approximately two-and-a-half years of his Army career of some 42 years in South Africa, it was thanks to his work on the South African veld that he cemented his reputation as a staff officer and commander, which in due course, led to other appointments (and concomitant failures and successes in the First World War). As an influential staff officer, and as a successful column commander in the field against the Boers, he contributed towards the ultimate (controversial) British victory, and as such, should not be ignored by South Africans. For good reason he was, many years ago, included in the *Dictionary of South African Biography* (volume IV, Durban, 1981).

Thus far, only one biography on Rawlinson has been written, namely by Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, *The Life of General Lord Rawlinson of Trent* (London, 1928), while *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914–1918* (Barnsley, 2004) was written by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. Mark Jacobson was the editor of *Rawlinson in India* (in the British Army Records Society's source publication, Volume 19; Stroud, 2002). Nearly a century after Henry Rawlinson's death, it is appropriate that this eminent soldier's life and career should be researched for the purpose of a new biography. Rawlinson was a child of his time; a fervent supporter of the British Empire and of all that British imperialism stood for. The current debates about colonialism and all its consequences are to be welcomed, and will benefit from informed debate; and one should not criticise something one does not understand. By studying the life and times of people such as Henry Rawlinson, one can gain a better understanding of what they believed in, what drove them, and what they achieved – for better or for worse.

Rodney Atwood's Rawlinson biography consists of a brief introduction (pp 1–4) and thirteen chapters, of which two are devoted to Rawlinson's role during the Anglo-Boer (or South African) War. In Natal, Rawlinson served under General George White, and with him, was besieged in Ladysmith for 118 days. He then joined Lord Roberts's staff in Bloemfontein, and took part in the advance to Pretoria, where he continued with staff work. In December 1900 he accompanied Roberts back to Britain, but the new commander-in-chief in South Africa, Lord Kitchener, asked Rawlinson to join his staff, which he did in March 1901. Soon, he commanded a successful British mobile column in the Western and Eastern Transvaal, and from July 1901 also in the Orange River Colony (as the former Orange Free State Boer republic was called after annexation), chasing after the elusive General Christiaan de Wet. On 14 April 1901, at Goedvoorzicht, he fell into Boer hands, albeit just for a few minutes. Towards the end of the war, he was back in the Western Transvaal, where he was present at the last major clash of the war, i.e. at Roodewal (Rooiwal, 11 April 1902). From 1 April 1901 to 31 May 1902, Rawlinson's columns had covered more than 8 000 km in pursuit of Boer commandos. After the conclusion of the peace (31 May 1902), Rawlinson accompanied Kitchener back to Britain.

Five of the biography's thirteen chapters are devoted to Rawlinson's role during the First World War, from his frustrated endeavours at Neuve Chapelle (March 1915), Aubers Ridge (May 1915), Festubert (May 1915) and Loos (September-October 1915), to the Somme (July-November 1916; as General Officer Commanding, GOC, of the Fourth [British] Army), and all the way to Amiens (August 1918) and beyond. At the Somme, the South African attack at Delville Wood, took place under his overall command. Like most World War I generals, Rawlinson struggled to find the path to success in a conflict of unparalleled scope and destructiveness, but eventually he won a series of spectacular conquests, thus making no small contribution to the ultimate Allied victory. The officers under whom Rawlinson served, as well as many of those who served under him, were veterans of the Anglo-Boer War.

After the war, Rawlinson organised the evacuation from northern Russia of those Allied troops who had taken part in the Russian Civil War, and then, in 1920, he became commander-in-chief of the British Indian Army. His reforms included the process of 'Indianisation', which meant that henceforth, Indian soldiers could get commissions in an army that formed the basis of British power. He died unexpectedly, on 28 March 1925, while still in office in India; a servant of the British Empire right to the end.

Atwood has done meticulous research for his biography of Rawlinson. Not only has he consulted a vast volume of archival sources, as well as a large number of secondary sources (see the Select Bibliography, pp 297–305), but from the no fewer than 1 384 endnotes (pp 241–296, which ideally, should have been included as footnotes at the base of the relevant pages) it is also clear that he has exploited the sources to the full.

A few small mistakes have crept in; for example, the “Long Tom” guns were of 155-mm (not 135-mm) calibre (p 33); Maritzburg (map, p 37) must be Pietermaritzburg; Roberts's army suffered more than 1 000 deaths from enteric (typhoid) fever (p 45) – in actual fact, many more died from typhoid, for example, in Bloemfontein alone some 1 600 perished; Simon's Town, not Simonstown (p 71); Deneys, not Dennis, Reitz (p 247, Chapter 2, note 14); and on p 166 the town of Middelkerke must be spelled correctly and consistently (i.e. not as Middelkerk or Middlekerke).

*General Lord Rawlinson* forms part of the Bloomsbury Studies in Military History series (with Jeremy Black as senior editor), which includes diverse titles, such as on D-Day, the First World War, the British Army in India, the 1711 expedition to Quebec, the Battle of the Atlantic, war and state-building in modern Afghanistan, postwar Japan as a sea power, and Australian soldiers in the Anglo-Boer War and Vietnam War.

The history of what is today South Africa, especially in the years 1795 to 1910, is inextricably linked to that of the British Empire. But the influence that British imperialism had on South Africa and all its people, lingers on to this day. In the light of the present 120th anniversary of the Anglo-Boer War, the most devastating war to be fought in South Africa, and in the wake of the First World War centenary – a war that caused divisions in South Africa, but a war in which South Africans also played a relatively small but important role – it is worthwhile revisiting the career of a committed career soldier, such as Henry Rawlinson. Rodney Atwood's *General Lord Rawlinson: From Tragedy to Triumph* is an excellent biography and is highly recommended.

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### **Bold new interpretation of Cape burgher identity**

**Teun Baartman, *Cape Conflict: Protests and Political Alliances in a Dutch Settlement***

UCT Press, Cape Town, 2019

206 pp

ISBN 978-1-77582-256

R300.00

Teun Baartman's *Cape Conflict: Protests and Political Alliances in a Dutch Settlement* offers a bold new interpretation of burgher identity, protests and political alliances in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony. Informed by exhaustive research, the work sets out a compelling revision of the history and motives of the Cape burgher protest movement of the late 1770s and 1780s. Baartman challenges a long-standing historiographical tradition, which has characterised the burgher protesters as Cape patriots and the protest movement as a harbinger of proto-Afrikaner nationalism. The

focus of the book is the brewing tensions between Cape burghers and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) that came to a head in 1779 and continued into the 1780s. Though triggered by a relatively insignificant event (the arrest and banishment of the prominent, but unpopular, Cape burgher Carel Hendrik Buijtendag), the period of protest that followed was shaped by ongoing disagreements between Cape burghers and the VOC over burgher status.

Rebuffing the “Cape patriots” narrative that was first espoused by Coenraad Beyers in publications in 1929 and 1967, the author argues that the protest movement was not that of a poor, suffering burgher population resisting an oppressive VOC. Rather, Baartman presents a persuasive case for understanding the burgher protest movement as a struggle between “leading members of the ruling elite for access to the centre of power” (p 188). By analysing the financial and property data of the VOC archives, and in particular the *opgraafrollen* (which offer rich detail on burgher households originally recorded for tax collection purposes), the work provides a detailed account of the economic standing of the movement’s participants. Chapter Seven focuses on the 404 burghers who signed a petition of protest and demands for reform in 1779, which marked the beginning of the movement. As Baartman explains, “the image that emerges of the Cape burgher protesters of 1779 is that they were mostly economically independent, and that many of them were prosperous settlers” (p 111). Rather than being a nationalist movement of disgruntled underdogs, the Cape burgher protests of this period are more accurately understood as an attempt by a group of wealthy farmers “to reshuffle the members of the [Cape’s] ruling elite” to enhance their own access to power and its concomitant resources and benefits (p 148). The author contends that the burgher protesters were not seeking to overthrow the VOC, but “to negotiate within the existing system” to effect change that suited their political and economic interests (p 186). As a struggle between factions of the Cape elite, the protest movement was hardly revolutionary.

Baartman’s argument is strengthened by his considered assessment of the Dutch character of the Cape at the time of the burgher protest movement. Recent strides in Cape historiography have highlighted the extent to which the Cape was engaged in a multitude of different networks (perhaps most notably in Nigel Worden’s edited volume, *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town*, published in 2012). One of these networks was of course the Dutch world. Yet, as the author rightly observes, the Cape’s Dutch connection and Dutch character during the VOC era are often “underexposed” in the related historiography (p viii). By examining the burgher protests of the late 1770s and 1780s through the lens of the Cape’s Dutch character, Baartman highlights often overlooked connections to the Netherlands, which “had far reaching consequences for the local political dynamics” at the Cape (p viii). In terms of its organisational, judicial and administrative systems, as well as the political and social customs of the elite, the VOC Cape may be described as Dutch Africa (more so than any other contemporary Dutch settlements on the continent).

Significantly, Cape burghers saw themselves as equal to Dutch burghers, in contrast to the VOC, which disagreed and regarded all those settled in its territories as subject to its power and prerogatives. However, the work reveals how dissatisfied Cape burghers “used the means provided by Dutch traditions of protest to influence policies in their favour and were often quite successful” (p ix). Among the Cape’s elite, this tradition of protest dated back to 1658, a mere six years after the VOC settlement was established, when the first petition by disgruntled burghers was presented to the Cape’s commander, Jan van Riebeeck (p 70). Baartman’s extensive archival research coupled with his foregrounding of Dutch traditions of protest have produced a convincing rebuttal of the “Cape patriots” interpretation of the burgher protests of the late-eighteenth century. Twentieth-century efforts to equate burgher protests that occurred in Dutch Africa with “the struggle of an Afrikaner nation in British Africa” were clearly influenced more by the context of their writing than by the evidence. Baartman has delivered an engaging, accessible study that sheds new light on an episode of Cape history that had been considered settled for many decades. It is a fine example of revisionist history.

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### **Liberation behind prison walls**

**Derek Hook, ed, *Lie on your Wounds: the Prison Correspondence of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe***

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2019

555 pp

ISBN 978-1-77614-240-8

[Price unknown]

The possibility of any interaction between a prospective reader and a book publication is often determined by the cover page. *Lie on Your Wounds* by Derek Hook is an exemplar of this debatable point. Indeed, with the ruthless and brutal nature of the apartheid government’s implementation of unjust laws and dehumanising the conditions of “non-whites” in South Africa in mind, surely one might have expected from one of its most formidable opponents, a militant model declaring war against an imminent enemy. Instead, the cover picture of the iconic late leader of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, smiles fervently at an object absent from view. Interestingly, he does so with a smile that may possibly alert the prospective reader that the book is about a gentle giant and not an authoritative leader who often held a grim and stern facial expression that instilled fear, dominance and power. These visuals, and the title’s further wording (particularly wording such as “the prison correspondence ....” and “letters of opposition to South African apartheid”) and the book’s striking cover design alert the reader of its orientation.



Evidently, the collection of prison letters between Robert Sobukwe, his family, comrades, colleagues, and friends indicate that Sobukwe was indeed a compatriot that adored and provided for his family. Sobukwe consistently used words of blandishment towards his wife, particularly “Darling” and “Hullo Darling” in their correspondence (pp 9, 12, 16, 18, 51 and 345 among others). Amidst the challenges and strains of gaol, Sobukwe maintained adequate communication primarily with his wife Veronica in an attempt to manage the domestic sphere. In a letter dated 9 June 1964, Sobukwe wrote “My girl is growing fast. It’s time, I think, you got her a bicycle...” (p 86) exercising a parental role in an unconventional environment, Sobukwe was concerned with ensuring that his children exercised and maintained adequate health. In other cases, Veronica used the letter correspondence to relay information from Sobukwe to relatives to communicate the well-being of the extended family and financial relationships he had with people in the community. Remarkably, Hook’s selection of letters accentuates the pivotal, selfless, dedicated and mammoth roles played by wives and partners of political figures detained in apartheid gaols. Veronica endured to ensure that the domestic sphere remained stable and she also visited Sobukwe regularly during his incarceration at different places in South Africa. The African idiom “Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bogaleng” (literally a woman holds the knife at the sharp edge) describes women of endurance and great stature such as Winnie Mandela and Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe, amongst others.

The letters are evidence and justification of the desire for intellectual stimulation and to circumvent the boredom and monotony of incarceration. Sobukwe often requested novels and reading material from Nell Marquard with whom he debated poetry, the arts, formal studies, and literature. The depth of the debates went as far as Sobukwe mentioning “I agree completely that when Hamlet kills Claudius at the end of the play he does not do so in vengeance. You say Hamlet does so as a judge; that he is now fully integrated. I have my doubts” (p 211). Sobukwe’s thirst for up-to-date knowledge was evident in his enthusiasm to follow international affairs including the political upheavals in Harlem and Nehru’s leadership.

The conditions from which some of the prison correspondence was written (pp 53, 333, and 415) sheds some light upon the fundamental need for human interaction, even though through pen and paper. Whilst at Robben Island, as the pictures in the book have contextualised, Sobukwe was prohibited from conversing with prison warders and was secluded from other prisoners, including Ahmed Kathrada and Nelson Mandela. Thus, the construction and response to letters was critical in soothing his loneliness.

The editor’s selection and presentation of Sobukwe’s letters is good particularly when one compares it to other publications on the history of Sobukwe and the PAC. The construction of a publication of this nature was no doubt immensely toilsome requiring the visitation of a plethora of archives. Hook’s compilation of Sobukwe’s letters is structured conveniently for readers and intellectuals who perceive archival expeditions as cumbrous and onerous. The book furthermore provides a foundation for historians envisaging academic work on the life and times of Sobukwe. Most

importantly, the experiences, constraints, and dynamics that Sobukwe grappled with are presented from “the horse’s mouth”, paving the way for a deeper understanding and closeness with Sobukwe. It is unfortunate that the censoring of communication (particularly letters) by prison officials has denied us access to critical information especially on the communication of political ambitions and ideologies. In an age of advanced technological development and the availability of a plethora of digital communication platforms, what shall be said of our lives?

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