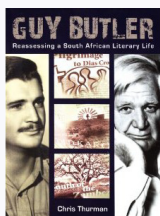




What the Butler didn't see

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Guy Butler: Reassessing a South African Literary Life

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What the Butler didn't see

Author:

Hedley Twidle¹

Affiliation:

¹Department of English, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Hedley Twidle

email:

hedley.twidle@uct.ac.za

Postal address:

Department of English, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

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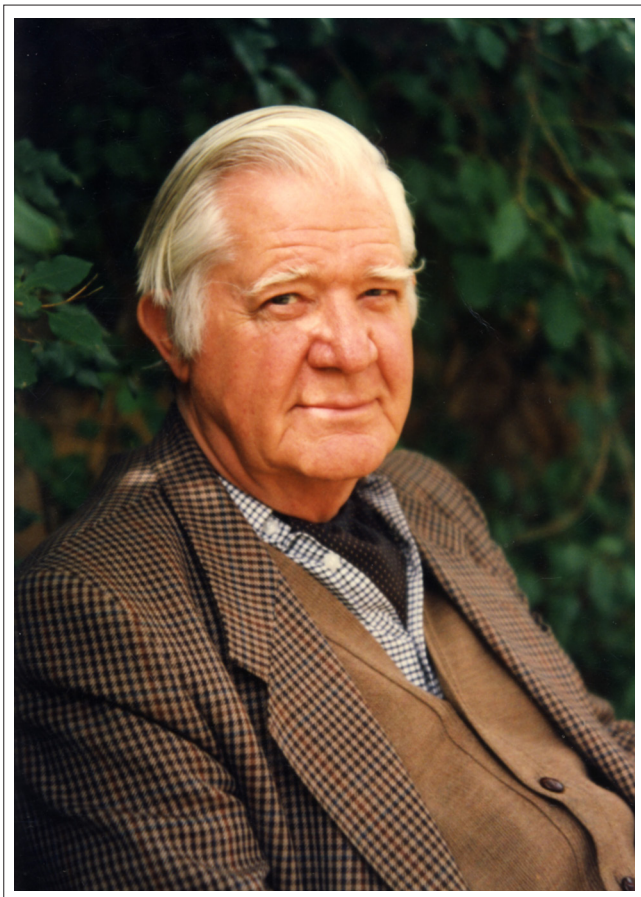
In an introduction titled 'Fault lines', Chris Thurman quite candidly sets out the challenges to the would-be biographer of Guy Butler. The many roles encompassed by his subject – as academic, essayist, poet, playwright, Christian, historian, autobiographer, cultural spokesman – form one set of difficulties. Then there is the fact that the kind of embitterment, emotional turmoil and general spitefulness that one expects (and, dare one say, looks forward to) in a literary biography is largely absent: the subject was by most accounts a devoted husband and churchman who maintained that he was given 'a good life in a lovable world'¹. Yet perhaps the most searching question is that of relevance: *why* write about Guy Butler, asks Thurman in the opening lines; or even, for the great majority of South Africans, who *is* Guy Butler?

Since his death in 2001, it seems that this figure – and the particular set of roles and values that he advanced for English literature and English speakers in a southern African context – have swiftly receded from view. In the literary academy today, there are many who might be more familiar with the derogatory term 'Butlerism' (coined by Mirk Kirkwood in a well-known attack of 1974) than with the man himself. All of which suggests how his is an *oeuvre* which is quickly dismissed as conservative, Eurocentric, paternalistic – 'white liberal' in all the most problematic ways. 'It seems to me that the cultural role of English', Butler wrote in a well-known formulation, '– caught between two increasingly violent and exclusive nationalisms – is to keep on stating, with patience and courage, that our common humanity can unite us'². Taken out of context, this mixture of historical naivety, preachiness and untested humanism suggests why the Marxists, historical materialists and postcolonialists have had little time for Butler.

A major premise of Thurman's book, however, is that both admirers and detractors have a misinformed understanding of the man's life and work; in particular, they do not acknowledge the sophistication of his account of South African linguistic and cultural politics in the second half of the 20th century. In this Thurman follows the lead of the poet and critic Stephen Watson, who supervised the doctoral work from which this book grew and in an introduction to Butler's *Essays and lectures*³ (1994) framed the terms of debate. Cynics, he admitted, might regard Butler's concern with the English language in South Africa as, 'at root, political'; the even more cynical might suggest its 'elevated status coincides all too suspiciously with the political demotion of his community', becoming 'a kind of rearguard action to maintain the dominance of white English-speakers in South Africa'. Yet for Watson, as for Thurman, his prolific output tells a more complex and interesting story, one about the encounter of tradition and modernity throughout South Africa, and 'the difficulties of reconciling the claims of each in a country whose modernity is itself incomplete'.

The urge to enter into the fray of cultural politics as soon as possible leads Thurman to a rather unusual method of structuring his work. He quotes the advice of the Yeats biographer R.F. Foster – 'a strict chronological ordering must form the basic grid; integrating themes then grow across the lattice' – only to break it, offering a book ordered thematically under titles like 'Christian, romantic, soldier', 'Artist/activist', 'Historian-mythologist'. One of the reasons for this is no doubt the existence of Butler's own autobiographical trilogy – *Karoo morning*¹ (1978), *Bursting world* (1983) and *A local habitation* (1991) – which this work is clearly in close dialogue with throughout. Yet for a reader not already familiar with these detailed memoirs (and one not steeped in the Butler legacy at Rhodes University in Grahamstown), navigating through a text where the angle of focus constantly changes can be a challenge. As a sourcebook of elegantly appraised literary-critical engagements it is valuable; for those expecting a more straightforward biography able to be read from cover to cover it is less approachable.

What this format does enable however is an ability to range across the various written modes in which Butler worked. A thoughtful and nuanced account of Butler the cultural politician is then able to consider not just the positional logic of his essays, but also to read his poems, plays, correspondence and memoirs in a revealing counterpoint. One of the most interesting sections is that titled 'Ecologist', where Butler's meditations on land, belonging and the possibilities of 'a local habitation' can be explored in a way that compares a late poetic sequence like *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross* (1987) with his early 'farm plays' *The dam* (1953) and *The dove returns* (1956) (which, incidentally, are revealed as an influence on the playwright who would produce such important work centred on the Eastern Cape, Athol Fugard).



Guy Butler, circa 1980 (courtesy National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown).

Thurman suggests that, although Butler's early poetics of the African landmass veer towards unreconstructed Romanticism and a politically suspect idealisation of the farms of the Eastern Cape, taken as a whole, his writings on South Africa's 'landshapes, landscapes and manscapes' (to borrow the title of a 1990 collection of aerial photographs by Herman Potgieter for which he wrote the introduction) edge towards the kind of ecocritical approach that is gaining adherents in literary departments: a sense that 'the resolution of human conflict and the preservation of natural resources are, in fact, mutually inclusive'. In this sense, Butler's accounts of conservation practices, indigeneity and 'exotics' in botanical terms still have resonance in a 21st century environmentalist context where natural and social history seem ever more intertwined.

Thurman's detailed and generous work leaves one with a feeling of great admiration for Butler: his early campaign to have South African writing recognised and taught in the academy; the sheer earnestness with which he continued to explore the awkward historical position in which he found himself. Yet on the vexed question of what it means to 'do English Literature' in the South African university today, I emerged still uncertain that Butler has much to say to us, but not entirely because of the caveats voiced by Thurman.

Perhaps the reason for his neglect lies less in the in-fighting and changing fashions of literary academe than in the obvious fact that English *has* triumphed, bulldozing all before it. But this has nothing to do with the efforts of university professors; it is the English of neo-liberalism and global finance, of Mbeki's African Renaissance: English as the master-code of global modernity. The retrospective effect is to make much of Butler's writing on the subject almost impossibly innocent, almost quaint, in its ignorance of the socio-economic motors of language usage.

So that even when Thurman closes with the hopeful assertion that his subject will remain 'a significant figure in the history of South African literature', I was left thinking instead of the 1977 fragment by Butler which he quotes in the penultimate paragraph, a doggerel-like but curiously affecting 'Epitaph':

He strove, both in and out of season.
 To use his modest gift aright;
 Still went on rhyming without reason
 Far into the night;
 Rhymes of the desperate word,
 Absurd
 As the floundering of a beheaded bird.

 He hammered for help on the doors of the sky,
 He heard the dead silence of God;
 Lost in the syntax of how and why
 To and fro he trod.
 At last he halted, numb,
 Struck dumb,
 By his long suspended sentence to the tomb.

References

1. Butler G. *Karoo morning: An autobiography, 1918–1935*. Cape Town: David Philip; 1978.
2. Butler G. *Essays and lectures, 1949–1991*. Watson S, editor. Cape Town: David Philip; 1994.