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Language and lived experience: *The wartime diary of W.D. Terry*

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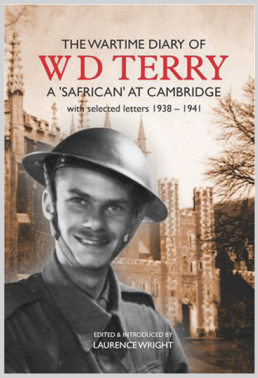

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Review Title:
Language and lived experience: *The wartime diary of W.D. Terry*

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In editing this publication Laurence Wright explores the fresh perspectives that W.D. Terry's diary can throw on World War II and especially on the effects the war had on a 'Safrican' at Cambridge, as the subtitle indicates. In the diary we get the story at first hand, seemingly immediately. What is fresh about it is not only this personal angle, but also Terry's wry outsider's view of Cambridge and British society in general. He is especially exasperated by Britain's general lackadaisical approach to the looming war and the lack of direction in the British government but is determined to show his mettle in the crisis and comments angrily on the 'blue funk' he initially senses among the population.

The David Terry we meet in the pages of his diary is an engaging personality, gregarious but also a bit lonely, but a good writer and a wry observer of society. He was born in 1916 in Parkview, Johannesburg, the only child of William and Nance Terry (born Ramsden). Wright describes the boy Terry as 'self-contained and exuberant', but with 'a fantastic brand of whimsy born of solitariness and an importunate imagination' (p. 9). Terry matriculated at Parktown Boys High and went on to study for a BA in English at the University of the Witwatersrand. After completing an honour's degree in English and training as a teacher at the Normal College in Johannesburg, he taught at Potchefstroom Boys High and also briefly at the University College of Potchefstroom. During this time, he won an Elsie Ballot Scholarship to Cambridge, with the prospect of spending a tranquil time in a rich academic environment. But, as Wright emphasises, Terry's time at Cambridge was a brief interlude 'threatened on all sides by international turmoil' (Wright 2017:10) – the turmoil of World War II.

Terry arrived in England in September 1938 during the Czechoslovakian crisis when war became more and more inevitable. During the summer of 1939 he visited the United States on a student tour and was returning to England by ship when Germany invaded Poland. He wrote his last tripos paper on 27 May 1940, the day the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk began. Amidst the devastating news of the fall of Paris and the collapse of France, Terry stood guard as an air raid warden (he was an enthusiastic member of the Local Defence Volunteers). With the world seemingly falling apart around him, Terry received his BA (Hons.) degree in English literature by proxy while moving out of Trinity College and made preparations to return to South Africa, and eventually sailed back from Southampton on 27 June 1940.

After completing his degree Terry was eager to return to South Africa, apparently to take his part in fighting the war in Africa as a way of helping England. 'When the threat to Africa developed I made for home', he wrote to the American journalist Lowell Thomas in September 1941 (see p. 206). In South Africa he did enlist as a 2nd lieutenant in the 9th Brigade Signals Company of the Active Citizen Force, but the government found that they had released too many men from the Education Department. Thus Terry remained in his job as English teacher and house master at Jeppe High School. In 1942 he married his childhood sweetheart Peppy Langstaffe. He moved to the Heidelberg Teacher's College, where, after a brief excursus in his father-in-laws' legal practice during 1945, he again started teaching in 1946. There he set his sights on an academic career and in 1951 completed his Doctor of Literature at Unisa with a thesis on Korzybski and the semantics of poetry. Ten years later he was appointed lecturer in English at Rhodes University, intent on promoting the Cambridge project of close reading and responding to works of literature. From interviews with former students Wright gleans that Terry was regarded as a good and popular lecturer, somewhat intimidating, but 'a skilful word and sentence surgeon'. It is thus as an academic with a fierce loyalty to England and to Cambridge that Terry's contribution has to be assessed.

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Terry's theoretical views considered: The 'leaven' of semantics

Wright frames the diary in two ways. In his introductory essay he puts the diary in the context of T.S. Eliot's views on the colonial and colonisation problem. In the article he, Wright (2017), secondly, considers Terry's theoretical views of semantics and his possible contribution to a South African literary-theoretical tradition. Wright regards Terry's thesis as 'a rich, summative account of his views on poetry and its social importance' (p. 31). In it, Terry contrasts the semantics of Alfred Korzybski with I.A. Richard's views on the reading of poetry. Where Korzybski had a forensic aim to rid ordinary language of its biases and stereotypes by continually testing it against scientific truth, Richards, in his efforts to use poetry as a kind of psychic balancing mechanism, had to resort to the slippery construct of a standard of individual experience. By bringing the two into dialogue Terry practiced a close reading 'leavened' by semantics, as Wright puts it.

Korzybski insisted on the big difference between the map of reality that language creates and ever-changing reality itself. Even a pencil does not remain the same from one day to the next. Through ordinary language it is very easy to take the maps of language (like 'Britishness', 'white monopoly capital', 'liberal' vs. 'socialist politics', the idea of 'politics' itself) as true descriptions of a dynamic reality. It is the function of the poets to put into words experiences that go beyond ordinary language, and in so doing, revitalise it. It is in this way that poetry neither affirms nor denies anything, but still tells the truth.

Terry's work can in Wright's (2017:14) opinion then be regarded as an early attempt at building a literary-theoretical tradition in South Africa before the wave of 'Theory' reached the country after the 1960s. His effort to erect a philosophically-based semantics of poetry, responsive both to the protocols of abstract thought and the changing reality of individual experiencing, is for Wright salutary in a time like the present when theoretical constructs are often uncritically 'applied'. In an era of 'fake news' it also is imperative to remain alert to the ways in which ideas and concepts tend to freeze, carve up and distort the ever-changing reality.

Coloniser and colonial identity

By combining the diary, mostly consisting of short, terse entries, sometimes flowering into longer expositions, with a selection of Terry's thoughtful and witty letters to family and friends, Wright gives readers a kind of stereoscopic view of the period and Terry's reaction to his times, but also of the dilemmas of career choice, national duties and allegiance, religious convictions and social attitudes that the war forced him to face. The introduction also explores Terry's relationships – and long-lasting friendship – with several women he met during his Cambridge years. The book, in short, paints a lively and multifaceted picture of a bright young South African in the maelstrom of history.

Terry is caught in the tension between the colonial problem and the colonisation problem that T.S. Eliot distinguishes in *Notes towards the definition of culture* (1962). The colonial problem means that colonisers 'never transplant the depth of their own culture' and the colonisation problem entails that the underlying tensions between the indigenous culture and an imposed foreign culture in the colony 'remain perplexingly opaque to public scrutiny'. This is partly why Wright regards identity as the central issue in Terry's diary, which he explores further in his introductory essay, titled 'Voyage round David Terry'. As a young Englishman born in the Union of South Africa, Terry's imaginary views of Cambridge and the Motherland clash with the reality of England and the Empire at the point where it starts disintegrating. His strong loyalty to England clashes with his disgust at Britain's indecisiveness and prevarication. He both identifies closely with England and observes it with sardonic humour, feeling, as he wrote to Peppy Langstaffe: 'like a worm in a whale's intestine – and the whale has indigestion' (Wright 2017:11). His feelings of both belonging and being an outsider are strengthened by his sense of the ideological differences between Afrikaners and English back home.

Wright finds Terry's emotional core in moments when he imagines himself standing guard over Cambridge and England – and civilisation itself. He writes that Terry can only relate to the British Empire in the motherland and make sense of his experiences 'by drawing on the materials of his complex heritage' (Wright 2017:3). Terry's sense of foreignness remains despite what Wright calls 'the affective legacy of Empire' and the 'moments of visceral identification and adopted nationalistic pride' that Terry experiences. Terry, for example, imagines the coming conflict as 'an Armageddon' which should be met 'as we met the Armada'. This *we* reveals to Wright how Terry's family background combines with his history lessons in South Africa 'to limn a staunchly throb-hearted, anglophiliac sensibility' that exposes 'the emotional pink heart of His Majesty's dominions' (Wright 2017:17). What we see in Terry's diary is what Wright in the Postlude describes as 'the indelible impact of empire on human identity' (Wright 2017:219).

Spirituality and devotion

The diary often mentions discussions of religious matters. In the introduction Wright also explores Terry's strong spirituality and life-long devotion to the semi-underground *Ordo Christi Redemptoris* (OCR), an independent religious movement with the aim to re-unite the Christian Church 'through private spiritual devotion and a return to the Holy Scriptures, the Creeds and Church Tradition as the sole authentic vehicles of Christian teaching', as Wright describes it (Wright 2017:23). During a period of research leave in England in 1950 Terry was ordained as Bishop or Grand Master in the OCR. The Order did not hold public services and encouraged its members to remain members of their original congregations and to exert their influence there. Wright cites a letter to his life-long friend Henry Archer in which Terry explains that he is 'cursed with a burning desire

to get to the bottom of Truth' – a quest that might seem silly to his family, but that he cannot abandon. Terry's religious questioning during his years at Cambridge thus 'culminated in a peculiar kind of private priesthood, its impact unknown and unknowable, echoing strangely that element of fantasy so evident in his younger years', Wright concludes (2017:25). This to him was the *well-spring* of Terry's life.

General comments

All in all, the book gives an enthralling picture of David Terry and the people around him, their circumstances and their way of life at the time. Their uncertainties are revealed as are the quaint academic customs of Cambridge at the time – a world that remains opaque to outsiders with its customs like Hall, places like the Backs and strange terms like *tripos* and *upper second*[1]. A long lost period is evoked in which one wears a suit and tie, has friends and fellow students to tea and conceals one's progress with women behind an easily decipherable code of Greek letters. And one writes only very cursorily about what one are actually studying. Yet Terry's very strong allegiance to England and to Cambridge remains up to his last visit to what he called his Mecca and where he felt at home, 'one of the club'.

Wright's edition of the diary is a very fine piece of scholarship. The introductory essay provides highly illuminating and lucid commentary on Terry and his diary. A lively and engaging portrait of Terry and his times emerges. The copious notes on persons and events mentioned in the diary are a research achievement in themselves: fellow students and their subsequent careers, war events, details of ships sunk, et cetera. The book even includes a chronological list of all the films, plays, ballet and music that Terry attended. The letters from Lowell Thomas on American participation in the war provide an important corrective to Terry's views. Including them was a very wise editorial decision. The book is attractively published and illustrated with black and white photographs from David Terry's Cambridge collection and from the Terry family, adding to its period flavour. The book is in short a monument of thorough research, but it is also presented in a fresh and entertaining way and with a wry humour of Wright's own.

Very relevant for today is Terry's resolve to maintain his composure amidst world-shattering events and his struggles with a colonial identity at a time when the empire was breaking down. His particular blindness regarding his own class position in South Africa just before apartheid was enforced by law, however, cautions his readers to remain humble and to keep questioning their own possible historical blindness.

The value of the book can be summarised in the words of Wright (2017) in the Prelude:

> Much of the diary's interest lies in its registering the mental and spiritual inroads war makes in the sensibility of an alert young colonial striving to find himself while studying at a great university, at the heart of wobbling Empire, itself adapting to the stresses of war. (p. 2)

The diary records wartime experiences both immediately, as they were happening as it were, and at a remove, after reflection and being put into narrative form in the letters (where Terry sometimes was seduced into using the jargon of his times). In this way the diary and the letters are instantiations of the productive tension between 'in-the-skin' experience and the abstract language used to talk about it. In other words, the book remains true to the *leaven* of Korzybski's semantics and to Terry's views on the forensic power of language.

1. *Tripos* is defined by the OED as 'the final honours examination for the B.A. degree' and *upper second* is regarded as a good mark – an average of between 60% and 69%. In other words, the student passed in the top of the middle stream of roughly 80% of students who achieve a percentage of between 50% and 69% (Yahoo Answers).

References

Wright, L., 2017, 'Theory before "theory": W.D. Terry and the semantics of Alfred Korzybski', *English Studies in Africa* 60(1), 12–30.