

FACT AND FICTION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR IN AFRIKAANS HISTORY WRITING AND LITERATURE

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Opsomming

Beide feit en fiksie was nog altyd komponente van geskiedskrywing. In die onlangse verlede het postmodernistiese idees die vreedsame naasbestaan tussen feit en fiksie in geskiedskrywing versteur deur die onderskeid tussen die twee te probeer ophêf, waarheidsaansprake deur historici te bevraagteken en die bestaansreg van geskiedenis as 'n wetenskap in twyfel te trek. Sommige historici het afwysend hierop reageer, maar ander het dit as 'n uitdaging gesien. 'n Groeiende besef het onder historici posgevat dat die soeke na historiese waarheid bevorder kan word deur aan sowel feit as fiksie hul regmatige plek in die geskiedskrywing te verleen.

In Afrikaanse intellektuele kringe was daar ook in die afgelope paar jaar indringende besinning oor hoe die verlede hanteer moet word. In literêre tekste was daar, onder postmodernistiese invloed, toenemende bemoeienis met die verlede. Die idee dat daar geen essensiële verskil tussen fiksie en geskiedskrywing is nie en dat die romanskrywer 'n geskiedskrywer kan word, het veld gewen. Klein narratiewe het die korrektheid van die historiese metanarratief, dit is die tradisionele historiografiese beskouings, bevraagteken. Daar is sprake van 'n "herverbeelding" en 'n "heronderhandeling" van die verlede. Historici is uitaard skepties oor die "oortreding" van letterkundiges op hulle terrein.

Interaksie tussen Afrikaanse fiksie- en geskiedskrywers open nietemin interessante nuwe moontlikhede vir die interpretasie van die verlede. In hierdie artikel word enkele resente literêre tekste en geskiedeniswerke, wat die Anglo-Boereoorlog as tema het, ontleed om vas te stel hoe sodanige interaksie ontwikkel en wat die implikasies daarvan is. Dit is duidelik dat veranderde omstandighede in Suid-Afrika sienings in Afrikanergeleedere oor die Anglo-Boereoorlog sterk beïnvloed het. Trouens, die hervertolking van die Anglo-Boereoorlog gaan vir die Afrikaner in die eerste plek oor die herdefiniëring van die self in die huidige. Dit hou in 'n groot mate verband met die hedendaagse Afrikaner, 'n eeu na die oorlog, se soeke na 'n nuwe selfbeeld/kulturele identiteit in 'n meer inklusiewe samelewing.

In the era of postmodernist thinking the boundaries between disciplines, e.g. the boundaries between historiography and literature, have become vague and new possibilities for interaction between disciplines have opened up.¹ Contemporary Afrikaans fiction open new possibilities for the interpretation of the past, including the South African War (SAW), by Afrikaner historians. I wish to develop this argument in my paper by analysing a few post-1961 literary texts against the background of postmodern theory, particularly theoretical aspects of the relationship between fact and fiction, as well as a few history texts on the SAW which have been responsive to ideological change in Afrikanerdom.²

Traditional historiographical views on the relationship between fact and fiction

Reflection on the position of "fact", "fiction", "truth" and "reality" in relation to one another is not a new issue. From the origin of history writing as a profession there has always been factual and fictional elements in history texts. The use of fictional elements in history writing can be traced back to the "father of history", Herodotus, who in his quest for historical "truth" used not only "true facts", but also unverifiable material such as myths, in his work.³ Through the centuries historians often returned to the debate about the relationship between fact and fiction in history writing.

As history developed into a science historians became excessively preoccupied with factual evidence as the foundation of their discipline. Leopold von Ranke, one of the first truly scientific historians, was regarded as the model for the "objective" historian, who strove after historical truth by means of meticulous empirical research. His well-known "wie es eigentlich gewesen" dictum established a rigorous tradition in historiography, emphasising scrupulous verification, thorough sifting of evidence, total review of the "literature", and minute exactitude in reporting.⁴

When the positivists in the nineteenth century emphasised the ascertaining of facts as the first step towards framing scientific laws many historians set to work to collect all the facts

¹ See G. Olivier, "Twee weergawes van die Afrikaner se geskiedenis: *Die Dieper Reg* en *Joernaal van Jorik*" in H.C. Bredekamp (ed.), *Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing en letterkunde: Verlede, hede en toekoms* (JWC Institute for Historical Research, Bellville 1992), p. 175.

² See the glossary at the end for definitions of these and other terms frequently used in the paper.

³ G. Allen, "Die geskiedkundige rooidoek: Historici en hul feite", in J.W.N. Tempelhoff (ed.), *The exploration of fact and fiction: An interdisciplinary discourse* (PU for CHE, Vanderbijlpark, 1997), pp. 26-29.

Barzun and H.F. Graff, *The modern researcher* (San Diego, fourth edition, 1985), p. 257.

they could and in this climate "the historical conscience identified itself with an infinite scrupulosity about any and every isolated matter of fact."⁵

Although in some historiographical schools priority was still given to the meticulous collection of facts, the legitimacy of the fictional element of the historian's craft was gradually given credence in the course of the twentieth century.

Benedetto Croce, who rose to prominence by his vindication of the autonomy and necessity of history, viewed history as an artistic representation of the real, but reiterated that the narration of facts was the primary duty of history. He made the famous pronouncement that all history is contemporary history, meaning that history lives as a present interest and pursuit in the mind of the historian researching and recording past events. For Croce, though, history should not be poeticised or romanticised, historians should not go beyond what the evidence proves. Genuine history has no room for the merely probable or possible.⁶

In the same vein R.G. Collingwood emphasised the role of the historical imagination in the "re-thinking" and "re-enactment" of the past. He conceded that the historian's picture is an imaginary picture and that as work of imagination it does not differ from that of the novelist. However, what is different is that the historian's work is meant to be true, must conform to rules of method, and stands in a special relationship with historical evidence. Historiography is thus not imaginary in the sense of being fictitious or unreal.⁷

Huizinga emphasised the literary aspects of history and the essentially poetic and creative nature of historical accounts. This view was supported by many prominent historians. In the sixties and seventies it was fashionable to view history both as a science and an art. It was accepted that the factual and literary approaches to history writing could coexist peacefully.⁸

The postmodernist challenge with regard to the relation between fact and fiction, history and literature

From the eighties postmodern ideas disturbed this peaceful coexistence. There has been much rethinking in academic circles about the position and role of history as an academic discipline. At the core of historical discourse in the wake of postmodernism is the issue of the relationship between fact and fiction.

⁵ R.G. Collingwood, *The idea of history* (London, 1966), p. 127.

⁶ Collingwood, *Idea of history*, pp. 191-204

⁷ Collingwood, *Idea of history*, pp. 231, 241, 245, 246.

⁸ Allen, "Rooidoek", pp. 35-37.

Postmodernists, particularly in the field of literature study, emphasise the fictional aspect of historical practice, almost to the exclusion of the empirical side of historical research. Facts are regarded as human constructs, which cannot be distinguished from fiction. Hayden White, who was particularly influential in postmodernist views about history, referred to the dissolution of the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses.⁹ Postmodernists seem to reduce historical writing to a coherent but largely fictional narrative about the past, based on uncertainties. Agnes Heller views the grand narratives of history in postmodernist terms as "fictions using mainly non-fictitious characters as their protagonists."¹⁰ Patricia Waugh describes the textual limitations and the essentially fictional nature of historiography as follows: "The people and events here may 'match' those in the real world, but these people and events are always recontextualized in the act of writing history ... history, although ultimately a material reality (a presence) is shown to exist always within 'textual' boundaries. History, to this extent, is also 'fictional'."¹¹ According to N.F. Partner history can hardly be distinguished from fiction, because "in order to be written at all, (it) has to call on the fiction-making capacity of the mind ..."¹²

Essentialist historians responded aggressively to what they perceived as the postmodern "assault" on the right of existence of scientific history through the negation of factuality and the claim to truth by historians.¹³

The result of the postmodernist-essentialist interaction has been an emerging awareness of other possibilities than the extreme factual and literary approaches to the writing of history. On the one hand historians, even Hayden White in *Metahistory*, agree that established facts must be taken into account by historians in their research, although "fact" and "truth" are not synonyms. History is not mere "fiction." On the other hand the existence of an element of fiction in all historical narrative is acknowledged. Historical narratives are human constructs, consisting of "facts" and interpretations cast in a specific form by the writer.¹⁴

Tempelhoff discusses the fading of boundaries between fact and fiction in historiography. He shows how, although the historical imagination is bound by evidence and

⁹ Allen, "Rooidoek", p. 38.

¹⁰ Cited in J.W.N. Tempelhoff, "Feit en fiksie in die ontsluiting van die 'waarheid': 'n Verkenning vanuit die histories-hermeneutiese invalshoek" in Tempelhoff, *Exploration of fact and fiction*, p. 84.

¹¹ Cited in Etienne van Heerden, "Die geding met die geheue: Kontemporêre fiksie se bydrae tot teoretiese besinnings oor die historiografie", *New Contree*, 42 (Nov. 1997), p. 29.

¹² Cited in Tempelhoff, *Exploration of fact and fiction*, p. 96.

¹³ Allen, "Rooidoek", pp. 242-245, 37-39.

¹⁴ Allen, "Rooidoek", pp. 40-42.

documentation, the fictional element has gained recognition in historiography as a result of the resurrection of historical narrative. Post-structuralist historians question the use of the terms "fiction" and "non-fiction" in extra-textual reality. In the quest for relevant truths to address contemporary challenges yesterday's "facts" may not be today's or tomorrow's facts. Whereas the scope for the use of fiction as an aid to open up past reality used to be rather limited, it has recently started emerging as a tool to reach new insights about the past. Where historical writing needs to be more than a mere descriptive record of events, the fictional element comes into play. It is accepted that in certain cases fiction, rather than facts, is the best way to get to the truth about the past and to represent the past. The difference between fictional and historical narrative is one of degree rather than essence. Historians must be made aware of the possibilities of fiction as mechanism to open up the past and experiments in this regard should be encouraged.¹⁵

According to Allen postmodernism should be regarded as a challenge rather than a threat to the existence of the science of history. The questioning of the right of existence of history should be taken as an example of postmodern "playfulness", serving as a provocative statement aimed at eliciting vehement response. A positive byproduct will be introspection by historians. Allen suggests that "validity" within a specific period should be considered as substitute for "truth" as ideal of history writing. Historical "truth" may not be fully attainable, yet when an historical narrative is coherent and takes existing knowledge of the past into account "truth" in the knowledge and representation of the past becomes a distinct possibility.¹⁶ Tempelhoff confirms that it is indeed an arduous, although not impossible, task for the historian to reach a position where truth claims can be made on the basis of the available facts.¹⁷

Perspectives on fact/fiction relations and historiography in Afrikaans literary circles

Up until quite recently the interaction between Afrikaans literature and historiography was rather limited, despite the existence of a strong genre of historical fiction. Afrikaans historical fiction influenced Afrikaner self-perceptions, but its direct impact on historiography was small.¹⁸

More recently, as a result of the activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), interest in the interaction between "truth", "facts" and "fiction" has been particularly

¹⁵ Tempelhoff, "Feit en fiksie", pp. 82-93.

¹⁶ Allen, "Rooidoek", pp. 40-43.

¹⁷ Tempelhoff, "Feit en fiksie", pp. 79-80.

¹⁸ Bredekamp, *Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing en letterkunde*, p. xi.

acute in South Africa.¹⁹ The political potential of postmodernism seems to have become particularly relevant to the South African situation: Can postmodernism deal responsibly with the distant and recent past and its influence on the present?²⁰

What happened in other literatures in the postmodern age filtered through to the Afrikaans literature. A self-conscious engagement with the past was manifested in what became known as the emerging genre of historiographical metafiction. According to Etienne van Heerden an "uneasiness" with the past has developed among Afrikaans writers.²¹ This discomfort is not only restricted to the events of the past, but also has to do with the way in which those events are recorded. A theoretical reconsideration of historiography has been undertaken in literary texts. Questions with regard to the place of the subject in history, the interface of word and reality, the role of the past in the present, and postmodernist views of history are addressed. The textuality of history writing is emphasised.²² Problematising the past, questioning facts which used to be accepted, relativising the significance of past and present events, skepticism with regard to the authenticity of data and accepting that there is no clear distinction between fact and fiction are according to Du Plooy not limited to philosophical discussions, but form part of the normal way in which people experience reality.²³

Like in other literatures Afrikaans literary texts question historiographical truth claims. The inability of the subject to accurately gauge the past is made clear. Where historical facts used to be a stabilising factor in conventional historical novels, the slipping away of so-called facts in the emotional-psychological reality of the narrator is evident in historiographical metafiction and facts assume a destabilising function. Historical significance rather than "truth" is a primary concern: Who is representing the past, for whom, and with what purpose? The objective is not to collect historically correct data, but to try and make sense of historical facts. In the process the paradoxical relationship between the reality of the past and its textualised accessibility in the present is revealed. Historical correctness is not as important as issues regarding the processes by which memory engages the past.²⁴

¹⁹ S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee, *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998), p. 1; Tempelhoff, *Exploration of fact and fiction*, p. ii.

²⁰ Van Heerden, "Geheue", p. 26.

²¹ Van Heerden, "Geheue", p. 21.

²² See Olivier, "Twee weergawes", p. 175; H. du Plooy, "Die deurlopende koord", review article on *Boereoorlogstories*, compiled by Jeanette Ferreira, *Literator* 20, 3 (Nov.1999), pp. 201-212.

²³ H. du Plooy, "Die omvang van die groter ontwerp", *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap* (Apr. 1998), pp. 74-83.

²⁴ Van Heerden, "Geheue", pp. 30-32.

From a literary perspective it is argued that the novelist or poet can become an historiographer. The interaction between literary works and conventional historiography is described in postmodern jargon as “metahistorical intertext.” The purpose of the metahistorical questions in literary texts is to problematise conceptions of historiography and investigate the differences and similarities between historiographical texts on the one hand and creative work with an historical code on the other. Small narratives in the *petite histoire* genre, as opposed to metanarratives of macro history, feature prominently. In this genre the writer/narrator becomes an historiographer, transforming personal story into shared history.²⁵ By setting up the small narrative against the master narrative the unreliable, inaccurate and arbitrary nature of the master narrative is exposed.²⁶ The typical mode of autobiographical writing is practised in South Africa at the moment, life stories that proclaim one’s liberation from the bonds of the past and in many cases adopts the form of the confessional, reflecting a “split” self image.²⁷

André P. Brink, in a discussion of post-apartheid narrative, talks of a “reimagining” of the past that needs to take place and in which literature ought to play a leading role. It is the task of South African literature to extend, complicate and intensify the enquiries of the TRC, which equated “truth” with “facts”, before society can “sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future” and healing through narrative can take place. The enterprise of fiction must reach beyond facts. The “real” must not merely be represented, but imagined. Memory plays an important role in that it inspires the imagination.²⁸

“Facts” remain inaccessible except through our versions of them, which are dependent on memory. Therefore history “as such” also remains inaccessible, and our only grasp on history is attained through what has been written about it. Words, history, memory and language are almost indistinguishable. The “origins” of history, as recovered through memory, are encoded in language. History is “an act of language” in which events are narrativised and the processes of fiction are repeated. “History” literally coincides with “story.”²⁹

The past must, according to Brink, be reinvented through the imagination. It goes beyond memory and is in fact a “peculiar machination of memory.” The imagination plays a crucial role in the dialectic between past and present. History is described as a story produced by reality, fiction as a story productive of reality, and both are presumed to stand outside

²⁵ Van Heerden, “Geheue”, pp. 23, 32.

²⁶ Du Plooy, “Deurlopende koord”, p. 9.

²⁷ Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the past*, p. 6.

²⁸ A.P. Brink, “Stories of history: Reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative” in Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the past*, pp. 29-31.

²⁹ Brink, “Stories of history”, pp. 31-32.

of reality. The "story" side of both history and fiction is an embodiment of a complex of imaginings. A story may not be "the" truth, but is at least a version of it. Metaphors are "fabricated" by writers in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented. "Myth", concludes Brink, "may have preceded history, but in the long run it may well be the only guarantee for the survival of history."³⁰

"For Brink", remark Nuttall and Coetzee with regard to Brink's own recent novels, "the lacunae in the archives are most usefully filled through magical realism, metaphor, and fantasy, modes that allow for a large degree of affective and symbolic interpretation of the ways in which the past can be remembered and used."³¹

In South Africa the apartheid memory reshaped history around the "largely imagined" national consciousness of the Afrikaner and large tracts of the South African past were forgotten. The master narratives of apartheid are now being broken down to introduce a new vision of the concept of history. New perceptions of what constitutes history are emerging. In this context the possibilities of writing has shifted. As many diverse narratives as possible must be compiled to cover the existing blind spots and silences. Not the past as such, but the way we think about it and deal with it in language, has produced the present and poses the conditions for the future.³²

In the current process of political and social transformation in South Africa the past is being (re)negotiated. Contradictory voices are and should be heard. The versions of the past that prevailed in the apartheid era and the privileged memories associated with them are receding. New loci for the production of meaning are emerging. Afrikaners will have to re-establish their identities. They must adjust themselves to a situation where "the struggle against apartheid is being seen as the most significant and attractive lens through which to view the past."³³ This will require certain shifts in historical consciousness and the perceptions of past, present and future. The process of readjustment has already started and "white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans in search of ways of inscribing themselves into the new chapters of the country's history" have started producing new kinds of counter-memories.³⁴ Some of these are analysed in the following sections.

³⁰ Brink, "Stories of history", pp. 36, 37, 38, 39, 42.

³¹ Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the past*, p. 3.

³² Brink, "Stories of history", pp. 32, 33, 36, 37.

³³ Brink, "Stories of history", pp. 32, 33, 36, 37.

³⁴ Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the past*, p. 7.

Clues for “reimagining” the South African War in Afrikaans literary texts

Quite soon after the start of the apartheid period the younger generation of Afrikaans writers, particularly the so-called “Sestigters” (generation of the sixties), started dissociating themselves from narrow-minded Afrikaner nationalism and the idealised and mythologised history of Afrikanerdom. In the period between 1960 and 1990 Afrikaans literature had more credibility than Afrikaans historiography as a legitimate representation of the past.³⁵ Particularly for that section of the apartheid period Afrikaans literary texts are essential to get to the roots of “true” history. The type of “reimagination” of South African history suggested by Brink thus already started in the 1960s. Not only English-speaking, but also Afrikaans writers assumed a prophetic role in an essentially undemocratic state.

I showed in previous papers and articles how the traditional heroic image of the Boer warrior who fought in the South African War, which was utilised in the earlier phases of Afrikaner nationalism to promote Afrikaner unity around conservative religious and political values, has been reconceptualised in the Afrikaner culture to suit a new value system in new socio-political circumstances.³⁶

Literary texts, such as N.P. van Wyk Louw's *Die pluimsaad waai ver*³⁷ in the sixties and Etienne Leroux's *Magersfontein, o Magersfontein!*³⁸ in the seventies, played an important role in this reconceptualisation of the South African War. These texts brought to the fore issues such as Afrikaner divisions, the motives of the National Scouts, the moral justification of the war, fear, doubt. Leroux in particular demythologised history by satirising Afrikaner nationalist versions of the war and creating parodies of images of heroism. In the ironic closing scene of his novel he relativises the official politically biased version of the war.

Renders indicates how the younger generation in Afrikaans literature rejected the ideological content of representations of the SAW and how the war came to be seen in various literary texts as a civil war between different factions in Afrikanerdom, rather than an anti-imperialist war against Britain. The SAW “drove a wedge into the heart of Afrikanerdom” (my translation). The war is no longer depicted as a struggle between two white tribes, but has become a starting-point from where the struggle against exclusive white claims and domination can be launched. In this way the road to a new future, free from the legacy of the past, is opened through writing. Only by complete rejection of

³⁵ Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the past*, p. 7.

³⁶ J.A. du Pisani and L.W.F. Grundlingh, “Volkshelde – Afrikaner nationalist mobilization and representations of the Boer warrior.” Paper presented at the “Rethinking the South African War” conference, Unisa, Pretoria, 3-5 August 1998; J.A. du Pisani, “Volkshelde: Die Boerekrygerbeeld en die konstruksie van Afrikanernasionalisme”, *Literator*, 20, 3 (Nov. 1999), pp. 87-111.

³⁷ N.P. van Wyk Louw, *Die pluimsaad waai ver of bitter begin* (Cape Town, 1972).

³⁸ Etienne Leroux, *Magersfontein, o Magersfontein!* (Cape Town, 1976.)

traditional representations of the past reconciliation is made possible. The therapy consists in the exposure of the past and the unmasking of the underlying ideological assumptions. New values must replace the old ones. The Afrikaner must reach out to the "other."³⁹

In recently published texts in the Afrikaans literature the demythologising of the South African War continues. I wish to focus here on two texts, *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* by Christoffel Coetzee and *Verliesfontein* by Karel Schoeman, which are good examples of the possibilities of interaction between history and literature, fact and fiction.

In *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, which is in reality sham history presented as an alternative history of the war,⁴⁰ Christoffel Coetzee rejects chauvinistic historiography with instant judgements about "hero" and "coward".⁴¹ The references in his novel to canonised heroes such as Christiaan de Wet, Koos de la Rey and Danie Theron are neutral.⁴² In his narrative instances of unheroic behaviour by Boer men are mentioned. There are sarcastic remarks about "onse dappere Boerehelde" (our courageous Boer heroes) who had to be forced back to the commandos by women⁴³ and "sterk jong manne" (strong young men) who preferred to remain in the laagers after the initial successes in Natal with the excuse that they needed to pray.⁴⁴ Chief commandant Martiens Prinsloo unheroically surrendered and he was described by De Wet as "a leaking bag of fresh shit and thin blood."⁴⁵

Ironically an Englishman (Charlie White) and a black man (Jan Witsies) are portrayed as the "good" characters with moral integrity. On the Boer side some of the women (Soph, Ounooi, Anne) are depicted as the true heroes, symbolising the principle of eros.⁴⁶ In their mountain shelter they create a new order, where care, consolation, deliberation, protection and survival prevail. Coetzee departs from the traditional tendency in Afrikaans

³⁹ L. Renders, "Tot in die hart van boosheid: Twee resente Afrikaanse romans oor die Anglo-Boereoorlog", *Literator*, 20, 3 (November 1999), p. 116.

⁴⁰ See Renders, "Hart van boosheid", pp. 117-121 for a discussion of the literary devices used by Coetzee.

⁴¹ Christoffel Coetzee, *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (Cape Town, 1998), p.6.

⁴² Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, pp. 98, 256ff, 284-285.

⁴³ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, pp. 46, 48.

⁴⁴ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 152.

⁴⁵ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 98 – my translation.

⁴⁶ P. Müller, "In die teater van wreedheid", *De Kat*, July 1990, p. 24; Renders, "Hart van boosheid", p. 119.

historiography to use the memory of the war to promote Afrikaner unity. Instead he shows how the Naudé family is torn apart by the war, symbolising the divisions among Afrikaners. Furthermore the good relationship between the Witsies and the Naudés, and the love of an Afrikaner woman for an English officer demythologise the concept of an exclusive ethnic (tribal) consciousness as foundation of Afrikaner nationalism.⁴⁷

Coetzee negates the view of the South African War as a "gentlemen's war" by his explicit portrayal of human cruelty and degradation during the war. The main character, General Mannetjies Mentz, is the *bittereinder* leader of a type of free corps that operates as a retaliatory commando in the eastern Free State. Mentz is an everyman type, an egalitarian leader who shares the views and prejudices of his burghers⁴⁸ and yet commands supernatural respect because he can seemingly "see into the depths of their souls."⁴⁹ His philosophy by which he tries to rationalise the behaviour of his commando is that a human being is nothing more than a particular kind of animal. The instinct to survive becomes second nature. In the circumstances of war this second nature is elevated to the norm for behaviour. Each death in the war is an "insignificant" sacrifice that sharpens strategies for survival.⁵⁰ In terms of this rationalisation Mentz's men regard themselves as a new community that is coming into being and that fulfills the role of hangmen who must get rid of "undesirable" elements.⁵¹ They act collectively. The will of the individual is subjugated to that of the group. The end justifies the means. (Does this perhaps remind you of apartheid?)

Mentz's loyal supporters (Voss, Niemann and Groot Sakkie Deyssel) degenerate into bloodthirsty murdering machines, who brutally and sadistically kill *kakies* and *hensoppers* alike.⁵² They become an unholy trinity, the hounds of hell, symbols of the principle of revenge. These depraved perpetrators of senseless violence are reduced to superstition, carrying amulets with them.⁵³ In the black villages through which they roam they give vent to their sexual instincts by raping innocent girls.⁵⁴ They are the antithesis of the Boer warrior hero depicted in Afrikaner nationalist writings.

⁴⁷ Renders, "Hart van boosheid", p. 119.

⁴⁸ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 59.

⁴⁹ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 161 – my translation.

⁵⁰ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, pp. 167-168, 247, 249, 268.

⁵¹ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, pp. 189.

⁵² Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, pp. 185-188, 198.

⁵³ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 203.

⁵⁴ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, pp. 208-210.

At the end of the war, rather than to stand trial as war criminals because of their attacks on the Red Cross, executions of prisoners-of-war and body-snatching, Mentz and his men slip across the border to make a new beginning in German East Africa.⁵⁵ After the war the former comrades avoid conversations about the war, because they prefer to hide their feelings of guilt and self-reproach.⁵⁶ In retrospect the author supplies the following options to his readers for the moral judgement of Mentz: either he saw too much and let everything bypass him or he was so innocent that everything bypassed him in any case.⁵⁷ Thus Coetzee relativises the normal distinction between guilt and innocence. The novel is constructed in such a way as to force the reader to draw his/her own conclusions.

In the final instance the real villain is the war itself, which sucks everyone in the country into the vortex of violence. Mentz's character symbolises absolute evil, the dark side of human nature. He is not "out there somewhere", but part of every person's psyche. The evil within is symbolised by the festering sore on Mentz's back, which is always threatening to burst out from under the skin.⁵⁸ Every human being should, instead of dissociating him/her from the "villains" of history, continue to look for and exorcise the Mannetjies Mentz within him/herself.⁵⁹ Elements of Coetzee's novel reminds one of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It deals, like classical tragedies, with the choice of options by humans in borderline situations. It reaches beyond the SAW to portray the universal characteristics of humanity.

Coetzee emphatically discredits the traditional Afrikaner nationalist version of the war. In his portrayal the war becomes one of the blackest pages in Afrikaner history. Does an author such as Coetzee create new myths about Boer warriors? Does historical evidence exist that endorses the portrayal of the yielding to primitive instincts during the extraordinary circumstances of war by some burghers or is it a case of poetic licence? Should this type of "reimagining" of the war, in a period of revelations before the TRC of atrocities perpetrated by Afrikaner men, be regarded as part of the Afrikaner's way of dealing with the apartheid past? This is suggested in the text where Ounooi appeals to Frans to make peace with himself by confessing his guilt⁶⁰ and where mention is made of

⁵⁵ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 258ff.

⁵⁶ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 185.

⁵⁷ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 278.

⁵⁸ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 298. See Renders, "Hart van boosheid", p. 121.

⁵⁹ C. van der Merwe, "Afrikaans fiction on the Anglo Boer War." Paper presented at conference on "Rethinking the South African War", Unisa, Pretoria, 3-5 August 1998, pp. 12, 13.

⁶⁰ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p. 149.

"reconciliation" and "nation-building."⁶¹ Coetzee seems to suggest that similar skeletons as those removed from the cupboard by the evidence before the TRC may exist with regard to the South African War. He said in an interview that he wished the reader to see the connections between the war and the lies and truths exposed by the TRC.⁶² The apartheid period was, according to him, not the first time that the truth had been systematically distorted.⁶³

Whatever one's final judgement about the merits and demerits of Coetzee's text may be, he does succeed in stirring the imagination of the historian reading the text. His fiction is so convincing that the reader is conditioned to accept both fact and fiction as part of the truth.⁶⁴ Thus he opens up avenues for research about aspects of the war hitherto neglected in Afrikaner nationalist historiography. Is there really such a thing as alternative history, asks Henriette Grové, or is it a matter of different perspectives on the same event, where some aspects are overemphasised, others are brushed aside as insignificant, the focus is shifted and new interpretations are made?⁶⁵ André Brink states that Coetzee's novel turns the SAW upside down and forces the reader to view the war in a new light. It is more than debunking, it gives insight into the significance of history and how history should be recorded.⁶⁶

Karel Schoeman's *Verliesfontein* resembles *Mannetjies Mentz* in several respects: it also looks at the past from the perspective of the present, it runs counter to the official Afrikaner version of history, it depicts the Boer commandos in a negative light, and essentially it deals with universal aspects of human nature.⁶⁷

Verliesfontein deals with the events in a small town Fouriesfontein at the time of the invasion of the Cape by a Free State commando in December 1900 and how these events affect the lives of people. It is set within the contemporary frame of a visit by a writer, who is compiling a book on the SAW, to Fouriesfontein to see a monument and the grave of the Boer hero Giel Fourie. He loses contact with the present and walks like a ghost into the past of Fouriesfontein at the time of the SAW.

⁶¹ Coetzee, *Mannetjies Mentz*, p.149.

⁶² *Beeld*, 14 May 1998: S. Nieuwoudt, "Ek probeer alternatiewe waarheid oor die oorlog skets.

⁶³ H. Wasserman, "Hier's ons romanwenners", *De Kat*, October 1997, p. 90.

⁶⁴ Henriette Grové, "Só lyk die mannetjiesmens", *Insig*, Aug. 1998, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Cited in Wasserman, "Romanwenners", p. 90.

⁶⁶ Cited in Wasserman, "Romanwenners", p. 90.

⁶⁷ See Karel Schoeman, *Verliesfontein* (Cape Town, 1998), p. 7.

Names and places in *Verliesfontein* are fictional, but it is closer to the conventional historical novel in as far as its central event - the detention, flogging and shooting of Adam Balie by the Boer commando – is based on a real incident, the death of Abraham Esau in Calvinia during the SAW, described in history books.⁶⁸ However, it is written from an unfamiliar perspective. The three persons who report on the events in the town – Alice, Kallie and Miss Godby – are either English or pro-English, and the story is thus told from the perspective of the “enemy” of the Afrikaner. The narrative is, like Coetzee’s, subjective and incoherent. This technique is used deliberately: the awareness of the limitations of the different perspectives serves to expose the supposed certainties of the canonised versions of history as a delusion and to emphasise the need for re-investigation.⁶⁹

Contrary to the traditional Afrikaner nationalist historiography Schoeman’s narrative does not focus on the role of the SAW in stimulating Afrikaner unity, but on the separation of groups in South Africa. The brief occupation of Fouriesfontein by the Boer commando causes the divisions in the community to surface and leads to an irreparable breach “never to be removed again, even after the war ... to and fro the barbed wire runs, separating and dividing people in this irreconcilable country”.⁷⁰

Adam Balie, the leader of Fouriesfontein’s coloured community, suspected of pro-English loyalties and undermining activities by the Boer occupation force, is detained, flogged, and shot dead on the departure of the Boers from the town. Miss Godby views this incident as a deed of utter injustice and absolute evil.⁷¹ The perpetrators become representatives of the evil forces in history, whereas the English voice of Miss Godby bears witness of sympathetic humanity. By linking the narrative to Tennyson’s “The tears of heaven” the events assume a universal dimension.⁷² The behaviour of the Boer commando is but one example of the evil lurking in human nature. It is symbolic of all injustice in the history of humanity. What is disturbing is that apparently nothing has changed. Miss Godby remarks: “We have learnt nothing from what happened, the divisions have only been consolidated, the bitterness became sharper.”⁷³ Humanity is doomed to perpetuate the cycle of injustice and evil.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ E.g. B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war. A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁶⁹ J. Gerwel, “n Tyd van stilte”, *De Kat*, October 1998, p. 29.

⁷⁰ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 233 – my translation.

⁷¹ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 227.

⁷² Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 48.

⁷³ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 235 – my translation.

⁷⁴ Renders, “Hart van boosheid”, p. 126.

By focussing on Adam Balie's destiny, the war is portrayed as a conflict between Boer and coloured rather than between Afrikaner and Englishman. Schoeman exposes the declared racism of the Boer commando and their unrestrained hatred towards the coloured population. It is shown how the SAW bedevilled race relations and alienated communities from one another. Like in *Mannetjies Mentz* the perpetrators of evil were not punished. The shameful reaction of the white population to the maltreatment of coloureds was utter silence.⁷⁵ In *Verliesfontein* the Boer commando not only gave up the town but also all pretence of justice, thereby turning this war episode into their moral Waterloo.⁷⁶

Frequently in the text Schoeman reflects on how history was and should be used. He comments on the way in which history was used to serve the Afrikaner nationalist cause. Hero, freedom fighter, rebel, traitor, writes Schoeman, are the same thing, depending on from which perspective one views the past.⁷⁷ Ironically Adam Balie, the real hero who surrendered himself to the Boer commando to protect his people from further suffering, never received recognition, but Giel Fourie became a hero. Fourie was not really a hero (his death was an accidental event in an unimportant skirmish when the Boers surrendered the town without much resistance to the British), but through the labours of *dominee* Broodryk after the war he was elevated to the status of a hero and his image assumed legendary and mythical proportions. For Broodryk the young Boer who had died became a surrogate through which he could enjoy the gratification of an heroic act and eternal glory.⁷⁸ This is typical of the mythologising process through which the SAW and the Boer victims were portrayed in an aura of unimpeachable integrity, immaculate purity and heroism.⁷⁹ It is clear that in many respects the popular portrayal of the SAW in Afrikaner nationalist circles, which later became the official historiography, does not coincide with the truth about the past.

A radical revision of what used to be the official historiography is necessary to elucidate the hidden side of the truth. Schoeman writes that a hundred years after the war the traditional assumptions are no longer valid, because "one has become aware of other possibilities."⁸⁰ The evil must be exposed and the Afrikaners forced to confront their own heart of darkness. For this purpose Schoeman reflects about the way in which the past can and should be approached. He wonders how far back into the past the keen observer,

⁷⁵ Gerwel, "Tyd van stilte", p. 28.

⁷⁶ Renders, "Hart van boosheid", pp. 126-127.

⁷⁷ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 70.

⁷⁸ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, pp. 77, 88.

⁷⁹ Renders, "Hart van boosheid", pp. 123-124.

⁸⁰ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 11 – my translation.

bound by the "transparent walls of his world", can reach out.⁸¹ About the task of the novelist as historiographer Schoeman writes: "I am the only one who sees it, the only observer, the only witness ... I am the only one who knows about it, and if I do not record it, it will be lost as if it never existed."⁸² To come to a more complete knowledge of the past, it is necessary to listen to these hitherto suppressed voices. Like in *Mannetjies Mentz* the one-sidedness of the official historiography is thus rejected. The past is investigated in a creative manner to get beyond historical facts, to try and capture the essence of things. In this way the writer fulfills a vital function as uncoverer of the truth.⁸³

Both *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* and *Verliesfontein* bring a shocking corrective to the traditional representation of the SAW in Afrikaans writing. As a result they destroy the myths on which Afrikaner nationalism has been built and force the Afrikaner to look into his own heart of evil. By presenting an unconventional perspective and debunking the SAW, the contemporary writer's absolute rejection of the ideology of the previous generations is signified. It is precisely the unconventional angle on the SAW which underlines its relevance for the present. By a disturbing confrontation with the past the centenary of the SAW can contribute to more nuanced and balanced perspectives on the past. "The one who does not remember the past, is doomed to relive it" is the conclusion in *Verliesfontein*.⁸⁴

The nature of literary texts such as the ones which have been analysed endorses the viewpoint that lively interaction between literature and history writing can only benefit both disciplines. Ankersmit states that literature offers a "treasure-house of deep and unsuspected insights into human nature" and expresses the opinion that we must "fictionalize the past if we wish to discover the truth about it." He views "practical" truth about the past as something involving "nuances, shades of certainty and of the admixture of wonder, amazement, horror, disbelief." Truth is "the temporary result of an ongoing process in which the balance between truth and fiction is shifted continuously." Fact and fiction can only articulate themselves thanks to these shifts. To fight against fiction and falsity would be a self-destructive exercise.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 44 – my translation.

⁸² Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 89 – my translation.

⁸³ Renders, "Hart van boosheid", p. 123.

⁸⁴ Schoeman, *Verliesfontein*, p. 244.

⁸⁵ F. Ankersmit, "Truth, fact and fiction" in Tempelhoff, *Exploration of fact and fiction*, pp. 1, 5, 7, 9-10.

Reinterpretation of the South African War in Afrikaans history writing

Continual reinterpretation of the past in the light of new information, insights, interests and focuses lies at the heart of the development of historiography. But has a reimagining of the SAW, of the type recommended by André Brink, taken place in Afrikaans historiography?

The defeat of the Boers in the SAW signified a setback for the Afrikaners' ideal of freedom. The sense of injustice and the emotional response to the war stimulated within Afrikaner nationalism strategies of empowerment, which culminated in the election victory of the National Party in 1948. After that the memory of Afrikaner subjugation was kept alive to justify and defend the position of power that had been attained. The consolidation of Afrikaner power was seen as a priority to guarantee national survival. The Afrikaners could not allow another SAW or something similar to happen. If they relinquished power their survival would be threatened. Much of the Afrikaner historiography of the apartheid period started from the premise of the freedom struggle of the Afrikaner and the realisation of a nationalist ideal. When Afrikaans novelists (e.g. *Die Sestigers*) started dissociating themselves from the idealised and mythologised history of the Afrikaner, historians uncritically continued on the nationalist road for some time.

The intellectual liberalisation which took place in Afrikanerdom as *verligtheid* gradually gained the upper hand over *verkramptheid* filtered through to historiography. The traditional one-sided positive heroic view of the Boer warriors and their freedom struggle has persisted in some Afrikaner nationalist historical works and will be maintained in right-wing circles.⁸⁶ However, the lapse of time and research in official documents by professional historians have in the course of time brought more objective perspectives on the SAW. Some myths and images have been reconceptualised. From the seventies the younger generation of Afrikaans historians who chose the SAW as field of research, without necessarily dismantling the heroic image of the Boer warrior, started investigating the darker side of the war. Most Afrikaans historians became aware of the possibilities of interaction between fact and fiction. They had on the one hand been steeped in the Rankean "wie es eigentlich gewesen" tradition and were according to Grundlingh obsessed with the "delusion of 'objective-scientific' historiography", but had on the other hand also been acquainted in the course of their training with the poetic or literary element of historical writing.⁸⁷

Albert Grundlingh's *Die 'hendsoppers' en 'joiners'. Die rasonaal en verskynsel van verraad* (1979) was the first comprehensive study of the *hendsoppers* and *joiners* on the Boer side. He indicated that some republican burghers never took up arms during the

⁸⁶ See W.A. Gronum, *Die Bittereinders Junie 1901-Mei 1902* (Cape Town, 1974); J. Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 1990).

⁸⁷ A.M. Grundlingh, "Sosiale geskiedenis en Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika" in Bredekamp, *Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing en letterkunde*, p. 41 – my translation.

war⁸⁸ and that others left the commandos without leave.⁸⁹ When the tide turned against the Boers many, eventually almost 20 000 burghers, laid down their arms. Some did it in despair or as a result of exhaustion, others for material gain or because of self-indulgence. Some of them tried to persuade other burghers to stop fighting.⁹⁰

Quite a number of burghers went further, betrayed the Boer cause and entered British military service as guides, scouts and members of burgher corps. Most of them were among the lowest class of Boers, but their leaders were often decent and respected persons, who believed that it was in the interest of their people (*volk*) to bring the war to a close.⁹¹

Grundlingh contrasts the behaviour of the *hensoppers* and *joiners* with the "vernunftige krygskuns en verbasende uithouermoë" (military prowess and perseverance) of the majority of Boer warriors and comes to the conclusion that they excluded themselves from the "heldetydvak van die Afrikaner" (heroic age of the Afrikaner).⁹² However, his study brought a new perspective on these less heroic sections of the republican population. He showed that it would be misleading to negate their existence or to condemn them in a generalised manner.⁹³

Fransjohan Pretorius's *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (1991), recently also translated into English, is a comprehensive study on the social aspects of commando life. For the greater part it endorses the heroic view of the Boer warrior, but it rejects the "eensydige lofsang vir die bittereinder" (one-sided praise for the *bittereinder*) and also pays attention to the negative aspects of commando life.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die 'hensoppers' en 'joiners': Die rasionaal en verskynsel van verraad* (Pretoria, 1979), p. 8.

⁸⁹ Grundlingh, *'Hensoppers en joiners'*, p. 10.

⁹⁰ Grundlingh, *'Hensoppers en joiners'*, pp. 20 and further, pp. 58, 82 and further, pp. 133-136.

⁹¹ Grundlingh, *'Hensoppers en joiners'*, pp. 162, 198 and further, p. 261.

⁹² Grundlingh, *'Hensoppers en joiners'*, p. 355.

⁹³ See also A.M. Grundlingh, "War, wordsmiths and the 'volk': Afrikaans historical writing on the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 and the war in Afrikaner Nationalist consciousness, 1902-1990" in E. Lehmann and E. Reckwitz (eds), *Mfecane to Boer War. Versions of South African history* (Essen, 1990), pp. 43-53.

⁹⁴ Fransjohan Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Cape Town, 1991), p. 17.

Pretorius discusses religious indifference among some burghers,⁹⁵ looting of private property by burghers⁹⁶ and theft of the property of brothers in arms.⁹⁷ He recognises the presence of a criminal element on commando. In the war situation even law-abiding burghers were guilty of offences. There were cases of excessive drinking.⁹⁸ Afrikaner attitudes towards blacks were characterised by racism, which led to human rights violations such as the execution of people of colour captured in the possession of arms without giving them a fair trial.⁹⁹

With regard to the level of morality on commando Pretorius points out that information about sexual relationships is meagre, because it was a taboo topic at the time. Apparently the average burgher was chaste. A few cases of adultery, sex before marriage and fornication involving black women were reported. There is no written evidence with regard to rape and homosexual relations.¹⁰⁰

The overall impression created in Pretorius's text is that, although the predominantly heroic behaviour of the Boer warriors during the war is beyond doubt, they were physically and morally not superhuman and that, as in any society, there were black sheep.¹⁰¹

Afrikaans historiography thus opens the possibility of an alternative image of the Boer warrior hero, by exposing the reality of less heroic Boers, and by posing questions with regard to the possible existence of socially pathological behaviour on commando. This alternative image and other aspects of an alternative version of Afrikaans historiography have not been taken as far as in contemporary Afrikaans literature. However, there is hope that the new generation of Afrikaans historians (unfortunately there are not many of them), free from the nationalistic baggage of the past, will make progress in this regard.¹⁰² There is much scope for new focuses of research with regard to the SAW or a re-interpretation of themes which have been covered in Afrikaner nationalist historiography. A few possibilities that flow from the texts analysed above include: aspects of the relations between Boers and blacks during the war; the role of Boer women in the war; ideological,

⁹⁵ Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, pp. 197-202.

⁹⁶ Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, pp. 234-241.

⁹⁷ Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, pp. 241-244.

⁹⁸ Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, pp. 244-249.

⁹⁹ Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, pp. 282-301.

¹⁰⁰ Pretorius, *Kommandolewe*, pp. 253, 340-346.

¹⁰¹ See also Fransjohan Pretorius, "Afrikaner nationalism and the burgher on commando." Paper presented at the "Rethinking the South African War" conference, Unisa, Pretoria, 3-5 August 1998.

¹⁰² Grundlingh, "Sosiale geskiedenis en Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing", p. 48.

class and other divisions in Boer society. Other topics come to mind, e.g. the role of the so-called *boslansers*, i.e., those Boers that continued the struggle because of their fear of being captured by the English. And is it not time for new biographies on the republican presidents at the time of the SAW?

Conclusion

The Afrikaners commemorate the centenary of the SAW at a time when they are involved in a renewed struggle for survival, but this time in a completely different socio-political context. The temptation exists to use the commemoration merely as a nostalgic gaze into the past, romanticising Boer heroism. But that would mean that the same struggle is still being fought and would imply that the process of democratisation, which is producing a new political constellation in South Africa, is negated. Etienne van Heerden views the SAW centenary as an exercise in retrospection and reflection about the significance of the past, a testing ground for the way in which Afrikaners are dealing with the past.¹⁰³

This retrospection is bound to the present-day realities and must serve to help define the position of the Afrikaner in the new South Africa. Afrikaners are politically more divided than ever and a monolithic Afrikaner nationalist version of the SAW does not exist any longer. The claims with regard to the religious and racial superiority of the Afrikaner have long been dropped. The reimagining of the past, and particularly of landmark events in Afrikaner memory such as the SAW, is part of the search for cultural identity in changed circumstances, which call for a new set of values. The idea that the past determines the future via the present is well-known.¹⁰⁴ The current situation in South Africa calls for a new self-image (not only by the Afrikaner, but also by other groups), comprising elements from the past and the present. A new vision of the past is a crucial first phase of the redefinition of the self in the present. This paper has tried to show how the interaction between fact and fiction, literature and historiography can help to strengthen such a vision.

¹⁰³ *Die Burger*, 1 Oktober 1998: Etienne van Heerden, "Oppas vir goedkoop nostalgie."

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 1949), p. 328.

Glossary

The following definitions are taken from *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (London, 1975).

Fact: The quality of being actual; something that has actual existence; an actual occurrence; a piece of information presented as having objective reality.

Fiction: Something invented by the imagination, specifically an invented story; fictitious literature; an assumption of a possibility as a fact irrespective of the question of its truth.

Imagine: To form a mental image of (something not present); to use the imagination.

Memory: The power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained esp. through associative mechanisms.

Reality: The quality or state of being real; a real event, entity or state of affairs; the totality of real things and events; something which is neither derivative nor dependent, but exists necessarily.

Truth: The state of being the case; the body of real things, events and facts; a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality; a judgement, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true; the body of true statements and propositions; the property (as of a statement) of being in accord with fact or reality.

Truth, veracity, verity, verisimilitude: shared meaning element – the quality or property of keeping close to fact and avoiding distortion or misrepresentation.