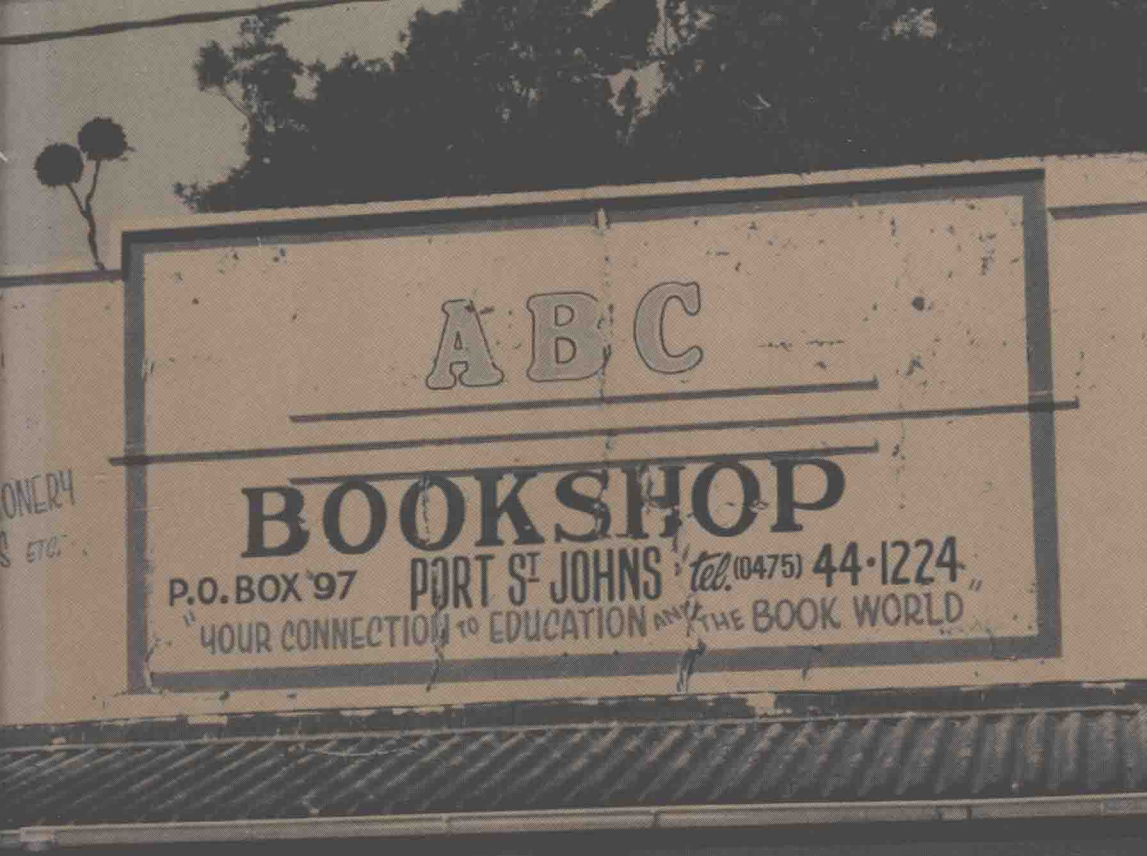

South African textual cultures

White, black, read all over

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Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York

distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York,
NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 7614 5 *hardback*

First published 2007

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset
by Action Publishing Technology Ltd, Gloucester
Printed in Great Britain
by The Cromwell Press Ltd, Trowbridge

For my parents
and for Patrick

Acknowledgements

Lincoln College's warm collegiality was a great source of intellectual and material support during the gestation of part of this work as a doctoral thesis; thanks to the Rector and the Fellows, especially Stephen Gill and Peter McCullough. I am grateful to my colleagues in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics at the University of Sheffield for helping to make my first years of full-time employment pleasantly productive – in particular: Neil Roberts, Dominic Shellard and Richard Steadman-Jones. Financial and institutional support from the following is gratefully acknowledged: the Commonwealth Scholarship Secretariat, Association of Commonwealth Universities; the South African National Research Foundation; the Board of Graduate Studies, Faculty of English Language and Literature, Oxford University; Lincoln College, Oxford; the University of Sheffield Learned Societies Fund; and the University of Sheffield Arts and Humanities Devolved Fund, which graciously provided support for colour plates.

I owe a great deal to friends and family for intellectual and emotional support over the years. For homes from home, long phone calls, food, music and encouragement, inadequate words though they are, 'Thank You' Pascale Aebischer, Camel, Natasha Distiller, Michele Gemelos, Joanna Gill, Somdatta Ghosh, Lucy Graham, John Holmes, Karen Junod, Thomas Knollys, Hamish Mathison, Peter McCullough, Lisia Moala, Paige Newmark, Grant Olwage, Lisa Retief, Adrianne Rubin, Deborah Seddon, Timothy van Niekerk, Undine Weber, Sandra Willows and Angela Wright. Special thanks to my Scottish family: Marti, Alasdair, Kirsty, Catriona and Annabel MacLeod, and Casper. Gail L. Flanery and James A. Flanery have become family: I am very lucky. Thanks, too, to my early teachers and mentors at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, particularly Wendy Jacobson and John Gouws, whom I now count as friends. Valued support and advice has been received from, among others, David Attwell, Rita Barnard, Laura Chrisman and Stephanie Newell, who did me the honour of reading part or all of the manuscript; Elleke Boehmer and Hermione Lee, who examined my thesis; and Paul Eggert and Isabel Hofmeyr. Particular credit is due to Peter D. McDonald, an exemplary thesis supervisor who continues to be a wise, enthusiastic and generous

mentor. Manchester University Press's anonymous readers made very useful observations, and I am grateful to the press's staff for their professionalism and good humour in seeing this book into print.

Participants and audiences at conferences and seminars – in St Andrews ('Re-Ma(r)king the Text'), Grahamstown ('Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures of the Book'), York ('Texts, Ma(r)kers, Markets'), Cardiff (CEIR), Cape Town (SAHS), Stirling ('Textual Cultures'), Edinburgh ('Material Cultures'), London ('Colonial and Postcolonial Lives of the Book'), and Kolkata/Calcutta ('New Word Orders') – have provided timely comments during the course of this project.

A great many people have facilitated research for this book: Mrs Blanche La Guma honoured me with her willingness to recall details of her and her late husband's extraordinary lives; Mr Justice Albie Sachs gave generously of his time to reminisce about his friendship with Alex La Guma; James Currey and Keith Sambrook spoke with me about their pioneering work at Heinemann Educational Books; Ulli Beier corresponded with me from Australia; Mark Spencer Ellis discussed his school edition of *Cry, the Beloved Country*; Hugh Macmillan lent me Lewis Nkosi's copy of *A Walk in the Night*; Mike Kirkwood recalled publishing Coetzee at Ravan Press; Zakes Mda spoke to me by telephone from Ohio; Isobel Dixon met with me in London. Numerous others – in Britain, South Africa, the United States and Germany – responded to telephone, e-mail and written enquiries, and I am grateful to them all.

I acknowledge the following with thanks for research assistance, access to, and permission to quote, archival material: the National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown (especially Paulette Coetzee, Malcolm Hacksley, Anne Torlesse, Crystal Warren and the late Elaine Pearson); the National Library of South Africa, Cape Town; the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg (Jewel Koopman), and Mrs Anne Paton; the Robben Island Mayibuye Archive, University of the Western Cape, Belville, Cape Town; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, State University of New York at Buffalo; Special Collections, the University of Reading Library (especially Michael Bott); the Stefan Heym Archive, University Library, Cambridge (David Lowe); the British Library (Rare Books and Music Reading Room, the Sound Archives, and Newspaper House at Colindale); Macmillan Publishers Ltd and the Macmillan Archive at the British Library; Random House (especially Jo Watt); Harcourt Education; J. Murray Wilson and Michael Friher, the Owl Club, Cape Town; Theresa Campbell; Mrs Alison Mégroz Lord; Duff Hart-Davis and the William Plomer Trust. Thank you to Peter McDonald and Faith Binckes for making available material from the Publications Control Board Archive, Cape Town, and to Nicole Leistikow for permission to cite her unpublished thesis on Bessie Head. I wish to record my particular appreciation to library staff in Oxford – at the

Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, the Vere Harmsworth Library and the Bodleian Old Library (especially David Busby, Sally Matthews, Helen Rogers and Vera Ryhajlo in the Upper Reserve) – for their efficiency and helpfulness.

I acknowledge permission to reprint, in revised form, material previously published, as follows:

- 'The Editorial Empire: The Fiction of "Greater Britain" and the Early Readers of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*'. *TEXT: An Inter-Disciplinary Annual of Textual Studies* 15 (2002), 237–60.
- '"Your Passage Leaves its Track of ... Change": Textual Variation in Roy Campbell's "Tristan da Cunha", 1926–1945'. *English Studies in Africa* 46.1 (2003), 47–61.
- 'Introduction: The Institutions of South African Literature'. *English Studies in Africa* 47.1 (2004), 1–15.
- '"Hurled By What Aim to What Tremendous Range!' Roy Campbell and the Politics of Anthologies, 1927–1945'. *English Studies in Africa* 48.1 (2005), 63–85.
- '"Local" Writing, "Global" Reading and the Demands of the "Canon": The Case of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*'. *South African Historical Journal* 55 (2006), 20–32.

Like a number of the authors discussed in this book, I have crossed borders and negotiated complicated relationships with national identity and 'home'. I thank my parents, Nan and Eddie van der Vlies, for their love and example, and dedicate this book to them, with profound gratitude. It and a great deal else would have been impossible without the support of Patrick Denman Flanery, whose sharp eye and patient presence has been, and remains, a source of calm and constant wonder.

Andrew van der Vlies
Sheffield and Oxford

Abbreviations

APC	Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg
AWS	Heinemann African Writers Series
BL	British Library, London
Cry (C)	*Cry, the Beloved Country.* London: Jonathan Cape, 1948.
Cry (S)	*Cry, the Beloved Country*. New York: Scribner's, 1948.
Heart (H)	*From the Heart of the Country*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
Heart (R)	*In the Heart of the Country*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978.
Heart (S)	*In the Heart of the Country*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1977.
HEB	Heinemann Educational Books Archive, University of Reading
HRHRC	Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
MABL	Macmillan Archive, British Library, London
NELM	National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown
NLSA	National Library of South Africa, Cape Town
PCB	Publications Control Board Archive, National Archives of South Africa, Cape Town
Mayibuye	Robben Island Mayibuye Archive, University of the Western Cape, Belville
RUL	Special Collections, University of Reading Library, Reading
RUL Cape	Jonathan Cape Archive, University of Reading Library, Reading
RUL Hogarth	Hogarth Press Archive, University of Reading Library, Reading
SAF	*The Story of an African Farm*
SUNY	Poetry Collection, University Libraries, State University of New York at Buffalo

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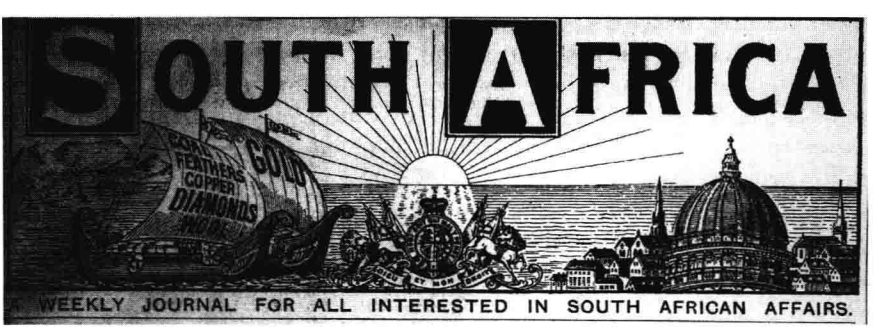
Introduction: South African textual cultures

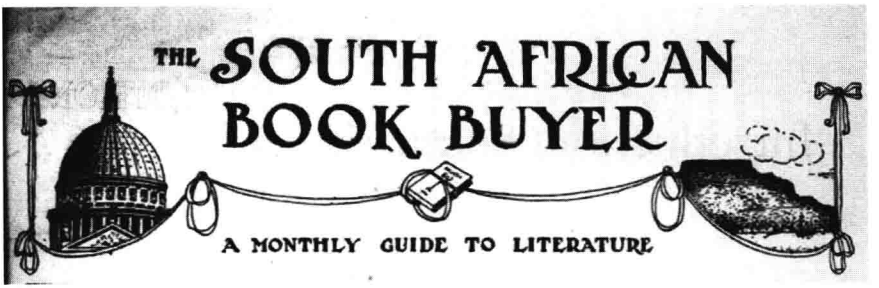
Books and the nation

The cover of *South Africa*, a weekly British journal established in 1889 as a guide to Southern African financial and mining news but promoted as being 'for all interested in South African affairs', carried a banner representing the processes of exchange which supported the British Empire and on which it modelled itself in the late Victorian age.[1] Ships transport various commodities from the South African colonies, represented by Cape Town's idyllically conceived Table Bay, to Britain, represented by the City of London's spires and the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. No reciprocal commerce is figured: the outer edges of Empire provide rugged natural iconography and raw materials, and their recompense is membership of a virtual body politic over which the sun of Empire never sets (we see it here, shining on the royal coat of arms) and, most importantly, a model: history, religion, civilisation.[2]

The cover of the *South African Book Buyer*, a 'co-operative catalogue' and journal of 'literary articles' published in 1906 for British publishers wishing to advertise to South African readers and booksellers, offers a version of similar imperial–colonial traffic: a ribbon, tied around a single



1.1 *South Africa*, 14 January 1911



1.2 *The South African Book Buyer*, September 1906

book, binds colony and metropolis, represented – as in *South Africa*'s banner – by Table Mountain and the dome of St Paul's, but here reversed so that if any narrative is to be constructed it should start with London.[3] While the colonies might be said to sustain the imperial centre by providing raw materials, in terms of cultural production, the relationship is emphatically one of dependence.

This banner is nonetheless richly and usefully suggestive in its placement of a physical book at the centre of its representation of cultural commerce. Many scholars have explored the role of books and writers in the construction of postcolonial national identities, and there is by now a large body of work in the field. Timothy Brennan, for instance, observes that nations are 'imaginary constructs' whose existence depends on 'an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role'; Homi Bhabha suggests that the 'repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' informs the 'conceptual ambivalence' of national identity – that it is literally a case of '*writing the nation*'.[4] The book arguably has been central to processes by which South Africa has always defined itself in relation to an elsewhere (the geographic designation itself bespeaks the urgency of being other than *Africa*). It is this elsewhere which has interpreted South African literary production as *South African*, validating, contesting, consuming it, adducing it as proof in political arguments, using it to calm its own displaced anxieties. Leon de Kock observes: 'Just as South Africans have, over the past three centuries, fashioned themselves in response to projections of a bigger world out there, so their collective struggles have come to assume a certain allegorical significance for that world.'[5] This is often a *textual* process, and it is exactly these processes of exchange, identification and anxiety in relation to writing from the country which form the subject of this book.

Almost no book written and none produced in Southern Africa was advertised in the *South African Book Buyer*; that the journal lasted for just three issues hints at the relatively small market in the region, either for books in general or for books in English. Printing came late to Southern Africa, the first press arriving only in 1784, and for much of the

nineteenth century almanacs, newspapers for the growing white and small, black, educated classes, and religious and educational material (including in indigenous vernacular languages) published by missionaries accounted for most of its printed material.[6] Manfred Nathan's seminal 1925 survey of literary production in the region, *South African Literature*, noted that books produced in Britain 'have always had a large and authoritative circulation in South Africa', while 'the indigenous author has had to struggle in the teeth of a constant prejudice against "the local article"'.[7] The majority of intended and likely readers of colonial novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were British, inhabitants of Great – as opposed to Greater – Britain, and metropolitan critical opinion, or sales, sealed the success and set the tone for the reception of work written in the colonies and published in Britain. This early reliance on overseas markets for writing from South Africa, and the country's consumption of material produced abroad, persist to the present day, with only a very recent suggestion that the situation is changing. Michael Chapman notes that, in the last decade of the twentieth century, publishers of literary novels could usually hope to sell only 1,000 copies in South Africa.[8] In 1999, local publisher Annari van der Merwe suggested that local publishers, while hampered by the greater margins possible for metropolitan publishers, were faced too with the fact that 'writers themselves' still 'opt to have their books published in the United Kingdom rather than in South Africa', '[b]ecause English is an international language; because there are historically such strong ties with Britain, and because the South African market for fiction is so small'.[9] As a consequence, many *South African* novels continue to be edited and published abroad, and re-imported into South Africa, despite an increase in new local imprints.

This was not initially only a matter of savvy economics, of course: many English-speaking, white South Africans regarded themselves as largely British and looked to the home country for models *and* markets. That they would naturally do so was taken for granted in metropolitan British critical circles. In 1891, Theodore Watts-Dunton argued in the *Fortnightly Review* that there was an unbroken line of descent from *Piers Plowman* to the work of 'certain English, American, Canadian, Australian and South African bards', that all writing in English was 'the birthright of every English-speaking man wheresoever he may have been born'; as such, it was 'to be judged by the canons of criticism of the mother-land'.[10] Gail Low remarks that this 'tropic emphasis on English Literature's origin, parent or root status' persisted well into the 1950s, as a way of 'containing centrifugal forces in anglophone writing'.[11] John Lehmann's *London Magazine*, for example, expressly endorsed a metropolitan standard, Lehmann believing that one should judge South African writing 'more as if South Africa were part of Britain as the South [*sic*] States of America are part of the USA, than a separate country of colonists from Europe who have grown from nationhood'.[12]

Dominion critics largely echoed this opinion for much of the early twentieth century. In 1926, the New Zealand journalist Hector Bolitho, working briefly in South Africa, declared that the country could 'not expect to have culture' because 'as long as England [was] England, she [would] be the pulse of English culture and her dominions must be suburbs. Standards are set here and the South African who writes must achieve English standards: he must have his books published in England.'[13] In describing South Africa as a suburb of metropolitan England, Bolitho invoked British and European intellectuals' widespread distaste for the mass market, the public of the sprawling suburbs (a dismissive appellation freighted particularly at this time), but while he recognised the restrictions on literary production in colonial societies, Bolitho nonetheless acted as a kind of impresario for their writers.[14] He edited *The New Countries: A Collection of Stories and Poems by South African, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand Writers* (1929), introducing it with the assertion that the time had come to believe that something more important than agricultural products could be produced in these 'young countries': their writing.[15] Writers had to appear in London, but this did not mean they should efface their origins.

A deference to standards set in Britain – or Europe more broadly, and later in North America – has produced what J. M. Coetzee calls 'white writing', writing which is 'white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African'.[16] This 'Eurocentrism', suggests Daniel Herwitz, is best understood as a result of a refusal by twentieth-century, white South African society to remake its cultures 'in a way that reflects essentially new conditions of existence which are neither European nor "native"'.[17] Because so many South African writers in English have sought to publish abroad, the 'character and identity of South African literature', veteran South African critic and writer Lewis Nkosi noted in 1994, has been largely 'determined somewhere else, by people outside of the community in whose name the writer claims to be speaking'.[18] Stanley Ridge argues that no history of South African literature can pretend to any degree of comprehensive treatment without considering 'the literary and political role of the metropolitan standard in some detail', accounting for the 'exigencies of publishing in enforcing the standard, and making the colonial writer address a metropolitan (imperial) public'.[19]

Contested categories: 'South African', 'South African literature'

Naturally, any attempt to write about 'South African literature' begs a number of questions which I have not been blithely ignoring. For a start, what is 'South African'? The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first use, as a noun for a 'native or inhabitant of South Africa' (defined as the 'area of southernmost Africa' now constituting the Republic of South Africa),

to the beginning of the second British occupation of the Cape in 1806, when, according to G. M. Theal's *Records of the Cape Colony* (1899), the outgoing Batavian Governor, J. W. Janssens, referred to 'Dutch South Africans'.[20] The adjective 'South African' had entered common usage by the 1820s: the South African Public Library was founded in 1822, the South African College (a forerunner of the University of Cape Town) in 1829 and the region's first weekly newspaper in English, the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, edited by John Fairbairn and Thomas Pringle, began publishing in 1824. By the late 1840s, 'South Africa' had begun to refer to the region encompassing its British colonies, independent Boer republics and black African chieftaincies, as an entity within Britain's sphere of influence if not wholly under its sovereignty. Sir Henry Pottinger became the first High Commissioner for South Africa in January 1847; Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa (the positions were ordinarily linked until 1900), actively promoted a South African federation during the 1850s.[21] He was unsuccessful, and a distinct regional identity was slow to emerge, along with the disentanglement of a proto-postcolonial South African polity from the Empire. Many English-speaking writers from South Africa's British colonies (the Cape after 1806, Natal after 1843, the Orange Free State and Transvaal after 1902) and, later, from the Union of South Africa (formed in 1910 from those territories) had long considered themselves British.[22] As subjects of the British Empire they were, strictly speaking, British – although a distinct but co-existent (with imperial) South African citizenship was established in 1928.[23] Black South Africans arguably developed a national(ist) consciousness in response to their exclusion from this racial and geographical identity, after 1910.

As Rosemary Jolly notes, different linguistic and ethnic communities have experienced different kinds and structures of colonialism, and political and cultural liberation, in different degrees, and at different times. With such a fraught history of staggered, partial and racially overdetermined national identity formation, there has naturally long been fierce debate about when – and indeed if – South Africa became a post-colonial state.[24] Was it with the Union of the Cape and Natal colonies and the defeated Boer republics in 1910 or the Statute of Westminster which granted relative autonomy to the Commonwealth's Dominions, in 1931? For many Afrikaans-speaking whites, the watershed was undoubtedly the election of an Afrikaner nationalist Government in 1948, or the Union becoming a white-ruled Republic, outside of the Commonwealth, in 1961. It was only in 1994, however, that the first fully multiracial democratic elections heralded a *new* South African nation state.

The complexities of these changing polities demonstrate, Dennis Walder suggests, 'the limitations of thinking of "colonial" and "post-colonial" as distinct, rather than intermingled conditions which vary according to the historical and cultural specifics of the place'.[25] Stephen Slemon suggests

that 'settler' literatures inhabit a '"Second World" of discursive polemics', a 'space of dynamic *relation* between ... binaries such as colonizer and colonized, foreign and native, home and away', and while this is certainly the case for much white writing from South Africa (as for Australia or New Zealand), some would argue that the situation is even more complex.[26] David Attwell offers the phrase 'textured postcoloniality' to describe the peculiarly inflected temporal space of South Africa's multiple partial transitions, its history combining those of settler–colonial and autochthonous, indigenous societies.[27]

Given the contested identity of the nation, and the peculiar conditions of much of the writing produced there in any language, attempts to offer generalised accounts of literary production have been bedevilled by ideological pitfalls. The category of a South African literature has always necessitated ingenious elaboration, or wilful exclusion. Manfred Nathan's *South African Literature* defined its subject as writing in numerous genres '*in or of South Africa*'.[28] It went without saying that the literature in question was by white writers, in English or Dutch; 'Black writing in English or indigenous tongues was ignored, even as a possibility', comments Walder.[29] Francis Carey Slater needed a footnote on the opening page of his Preface to the *New Centenary Book of South African Poetry* (1945) to describe the work selected for the anthology. Intended as clarification, it does little but obfuscate:

> NOTE.—For the purposes of this preface (1) English Poetry = the poetry of the British Isles; (2) Afrikaans Poetry = poetry of South Africa, written in Afrikaans [and] (3) South African Poetry = poetry of South Africa, written in English.[30]

Contemporary scholars, recognising that writing in English is but one of a number of literatures which might be called 'South African', are necessarily similarly cautious. Many are sceptical, too, of any project which fails to interrogate its own assumptions about the existence of a national literary identity. Michael Chapman's admirably ambitious 500-page volume in the Longman Literature in English series, *Southern African Literatures* (1996, republished 2003), attempted to chart a multilingual, regional, literary heritage, but subjectively evaluated all 'identities, practices and aesthetic possibilities in the context of a just idea', that of a progressive, humanitarian, multiracial nation.[31] His Introduction dismissed 'the cause-and-effect mode of explanation associated with traditional historiography', readily admitting that his study sought to intervene 'in the construction of a literary and moral narrative'.[32] Stephen Gray, who had himself produced an earlier survey history, had reservations about Chapman's dogmatism, but praised the volume as a whole for offering an 'argument about pertinent issues' which 'open[ed]' the field.[33] As if in response, however, David Medalie suggested that genuinely opening the field of South African literature(s) should entail 'resisting the ideological pressures of the present', exactly what he and