



Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876–1932.

Brian P. Willan.

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“It is safe to say that Dr Brian Willan is easily the most well researched on one of Kimberley’s most iconic struggle heroes,” wrote the young local newspaper, the *Solomon Star*, on June 26, 2018, reporting on the launch of Willan’s biography of Sol Plaatje (Moraladi). Historian and honorary research associate at the Institute of the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University, in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, Willan has been a Plaatje scholar for 40 years. It would also be safe to say that his painstaking and dedicated research has substantially contributed to making Plaatje into something of an institution, certainly within the academy. For those who engage in Plaatje research, as is evident in biographies and secondary criticism that have appeared over the years, Willan is our touchstone. With this publication he extends knowledge to a wider public and that is thrilling. It is my view that the epic, 18-chapter, 711-page long biography, represents Willan’s *magnum opus*. His two earlier landmark works, the 1984 Plaatje biography and the 1996 *Sol Plaatje, Selected Writings* are superseded by this accessible, informative, elucidating and reader-friendly book. Nothing has been lost in dropping an academic register and everything gained in simply ‘telling the story.’

In addition to accessibility to a broader audience, Willan adds new information gleaned from his research over the past 34 years, updating the rather episodic 1984 biography and creating a seamless fabric of Plaatje’s life, without leaps in time or gaps in understanding. Beyond telling Plaatje’s life story in immense detail, Willan devotes two chapters to his Setswana and English literary works. In chapter 16, he renders a textual analysis of what he calls Plaatje’s “re-imagining and reimagining” of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* in his Setswana translation, *Diphosphoso*. Comment on this chapter must be sought amongst Setswana language and literary scholars. In chapter 17, Willan shares a delightful unpublished and incomplete Plaatje manuscript, “With other people’s wives.” He allows the reader to enjoy the story both for its own sake—a

history of the Bhaca people of the Eastern Cape who experienced miracles similar to the Biblical parting of the Red Sea—and in terms of what it might have meant to Plaatje, as a source of race pride.

For those already familiar with Plaatje’s life, the newness Willan brings is context, specifically in terms of the social, political and economic climate which shaped Plaatje as a man, a pioneer black journalist, an advocate and voice for his people, and a scholar. The value of this context is to enhance the reader’s appreciation of how Plaatje was compelled to swim constantly against the tide. He breathed an atmosphere of obstructionism, insult, derision, control, hostility, high-handedness, salt-in-the-wound, attempted and outright sabotage that was the diet colonialism fed its black so-called ‘subjects.’ The biography abounds in events that illustrate this degrading, demoralizing and debilitating context. As an example, Willan relates Plaatje’s experience in the wake of the 1920 Native Administration Bill whose ultimate aim was the re-tribalization of Africans (legalized some three decades later under Verwoerd’s Grand Apartheid) (chapter 15). The Bill which Plaatje said was indeed worse than the 1913 Natives’ Land Act, permitted only whites to serve as ‘native’ (i.e. African) representatives. The government gestured to Africans by consulting with *dikgosi* and a few carefully-selected African leaders at annual conventions. The purpose of those conventions, however, according to the Chamber of Mines, was to use those very Africans to control industrial action: perfect evidence of colonialism’s strategies of divide and rule using black intermediaries. Willan relates that, at the 1925 convention Plaatje elucidated the African view of two new ‘Hertzog Bills’ presented: one to remove Africans from voting and the other to give Africans additional land. Plaatje spoke eloquently to the point that it was not that Africans did not need land—he knew better than any how desperately they did need land—but that losing the franchise was too high a price to pay. Plaatje used an analogy to drive his point home: when a Dutchman wants to catch a jackal, he said, he holds out a piece of mutton that has poison on it, and the jackal walks round and round but does not take the bait. Should he and his fellow African consultants capitulate to the ‘Hertzog Bills,’ Plaatje declared, they would be more foolish than the jackal! Always clearly and painfully aware of hidden motives and

agendas, Plaatje wrote in the press, as if for posterity: “We shall this time let white politicians do their own fell work [...] so that when the tears of many victims of the Union’s legislative efforts at length draw retributive justice from the heights, no Prime Minister may say that we, too, have had a hand in this transaction.” (458).

There are also incidents narrated where the economic context and conditions colonialism bred, caused tensions and divisions among Africans themselves. Many clashes within the nascent South African Native National Congress (SANNC) surfaced in the struggle over scarce resources including employment, income and opportunity. Willan successfully surfaces the disempowering context of colonialism again and again.

This brings me to what I see as the greatest strength of Willan’s book. Whereas the 1984 biography left me despondent, this volume filled me with hope. I became intensely aware of how Plaatje rose even while his circumstances declined. Whereas conditions of life for blacks worsened, reading this biography one feels unmistakably the steady evolution in Plaatje in terms of accomplishments. Undeterred by setbacks, limited resources, and hostilities, he exuded a hope that seemed to ‘spring eternal.’ During his years as editor of *Tsala*, 1908–15, Willan tells us, his newspaper endeavour succeeded, even while he was compelled to invest time and energies in co-founding and organizing the SANNC, as its Secretary-General (chapter 8). During the World War I years in England, he rose to heights in terms of scholarly accomplishments even while he sustained a busy public speaking tour where he truly became the “great hearted fighter for the rights of his people,” as George Simpson remembered him (chapter 10). The hope and optimism, the rising as journalist, writer and scholar, even while the political, social and economic climate deteriorated became the pattern in Plaatje’s life, as Willan reveals, chapter after chapter. Struggling to support himself in England and publish his account of “native life” in South Africa, he had opportunity and doors open to him through a circle of loyal supporters who provided the intellectual, moral and occasionally financial support needed to ensure his progress (chapters 9 and 12). Back home, despite financial and all the other obstacles, *Diphosphoso* was published and enjoyed success and longevity in schools in Bechuanaland (today Botswana) as well as South Africa (chapter 16). This message of hope—that it is possible to rise, achieve and accomplish in spite of an unjust “settled system,” as Plaatje called it—is reminiscent of Charles van Onselen’s message in *The Seed is Mine*, his biography of the courageous and dedicated sharecropper, Kas

Maine, who struggled and survived with triumphant dignity in the very same South African context (albeit a few decades later), where whites were self-enriching while blacks were relegated to poverty.

What are the weaknesses of Willan’s biography? Among his most powerful claims, Willan reiterates and substantiates a claim he has consistently made over the past 40 years, namely, that Plaatje believed it was his purpose to be a bridge between white and black communities and that he demonstrated evenness in critiquing both blacks and whites. I concede that Plaatje was a bridge- and community-builder across the races but I see Plaatje differently, in that I read in his biting critiques deep insight into the evils of white supremacy, imperialism, colonialism and eurocentrism. I read in his self-sacrifice, his hope and his persistence an understanding of ‘evil,’ if I may quote Langston Hughes:

Looks like what drives me crazy
Don’t have no effects on you—
But I’m gonna keep on at it
Till it drives you crazy, too.

Plaatje used the masters’ tools, such as the press and the written word; he used irony extensively to probe hidden agendas; he travelled widely to publicise the very real grievances of black Africans; he aimed to empower Setswana children via Setswana language... I believe that until we have plumbed the depths of his large “treasure-trove” of Setswana journalism as Willan calls it, we risk overstating the case for his diplomacy and evenness. The scholarly excavation of his Setswana journalism may take time, however, since priority has been given to collecting his English language journalism, a mammoth project undertaken by the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust (SPET) of Kimberley, official steward of the Plaatje legacy. My only other minor quibble, I would like more of Plaatje’s own words. All who read Plaatje in his own words cannot help but be moved, much in the way people never fail to be stirred by the power and spirit in Martin Luther King’s voice. Otherwise, and overwhelmingly, I have nothing but praise for this book which has stirred and spurred my Plaatje studies. As *Diamond Fields Advertiser* journalist, George Simpson, said at the unveiling of Plaatje’s tombstone, one feels that “his soul goes marching on” in Willan’s witnessing.

As regards audience, I believe this volume will appeal broadly to the reading public as well as to students and scholars (for whom there are 89 pages of Notes), not only of South African history but to students and scholars across the humanities, the social sciences and law. The significance of this publication lies first

in the message of hope it can offer individual readers, especially those suffering still in the aftermath of colonial and Apartheid disenfranchisement and dispossession. Secondly, it broadens the field of Plaatje studies by making him accessible to general readers who will hopefully respond in various genres, media and modes. Together with Willan and thanks to Willan, Plaatje enthusiasts never cease to be inspired by the genius, brilliance, actions, relevance, thinking, intellect, elucidating writing and words of this lodestar and iconic struggle hero, Sol T. Plaatje.

Work Cited

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Karen Haire
karen.haire@spu.ac.za
Sol Plaatje University
Kimberley

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7631-4223>

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