

'amphibious', 'ecotonal', 'generative' and more). But sometimes a striking comment or image shifted my thinking, for example the deceptively simple statement that the

[e]lemental distinction between North and South, the ratio of sea to land in the Southern hemisphere is four to one part, whereas in the Northern Hemisphere it is a mere one and a half to one part. (163)

Other times I wanted to know more, as when Rimil Bhattacharya introduced me to the elderly Chinese pilgrim scholar, Fahian (also known as Faxian), and his 'wondrous arc' of travels on land and water in search of Buddhist texts and relics in the fourth to fifth century C.E. (177). If the lack of a bibliography is a disappointment, generous endnotes and references to each chapter enable old and new admirers to go on thinking Hofmeyr's thoughts after her and following her leads into new areas of research.

TERRY BARRINGER

Email: tabarringe@aol.com

doi:[10.1017/abd.2024.1](https://doi.org/10.1017/abd.2024.1)

Sabata-mpho Mokae and Brian Willan (eds), *Sol Plaatje's Mhudi: history, criticism, celebration*. Woodbridge and Auckland Park, James Currey and Jacana (hb £80 – 978 84701 276 0, £80; e-book – 978 18470127842020). 2020, xxii + 248 pp.

This beautiful text, illustrated throughout with reproductions of covers of *Mhudi* and 'woodcuts from the artist Cecil Skotnes [from] the Quagga Press edition of *Mhudi* published in 1977' (xxi), presents a comprehensive assessment of contemporary critical issues arising in the study of the novel, *Mhudi*, by 'foundational author' Solomon Tsheledi Plaatje (134) in celebration of the centenary of its completion in 1920. The book contains an introduction by the editors, renowned Plaatje scholars Mokae and Willan, whose combined expertise in and familiarity with Plaatje's entire oeuvre and this novel shine through; twelve end-noted chapters of the highest calibre, comprising one poem, criticism, and fiction; a bibliography of all editions of *Mhudi*, a list of contributors and an index. These lively and innovative readings will be most interesting to all scholars of Plaatje and southern African literature as they engage the multifarious critical concerns and enduring political questions raised within the pages of *Mhudi*.

Like *Mhudi*, this collection is a first of its kind, as recognized in its joint win in 2020 in the category Best Non-Fiction (Biography) at the South African National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences Awards. The text presents a new way of presenting critical theory, using knowledges created in fiction, non-fiction and poetry as complementary if different discursive traditions. The book opens with a poem in Xhosa by Siza Nkosi-Mokhele, 'Bra Sol Othandekayo.' Every chapter comments on the prescience of Plaatje's choice of fictive content for *Mhudi* in its enduring resonance and relevance, and, affirming Plaatje's position as pioneer South African intellectual, committed cultural and word worker. Several chapters interrogate Plaatje's innovations

with literary form, genre and voice which extends the discussion of *Mhudi* as the first African novel in English. Willan's chapter, '*Mhudi*'s genesis: the writing and publication of *Mhudi*', explores the circumstances of the writing of the text, including significant edits introduced during the decade-long publication process which both dominated and curtailed much early scholarship on *Mhudi*. Zakes Mda's chapter, 'On writing historical fiction vs fictionalised history', examines the ways in which the love story of *Mhudi* rewrites a colonial archive because it comprises African historiography of an aspect of African history, that of the vanquishment in 1830 of the Barolong by the Matabele and the repercussions of the 'tribal succour of Europeans' (139) of the remaining Barolong and the Batswana before the Boers turned on them nonetheless. Chris Thurman focuses on the absences and latent presences of British forces in *Mhudi* in his chapter, "'In front as at the rear": black soldiers, white imperialism and *Mhudi*'.

Laurence Wright's chapter, "'The glory of the silver trees": *Mhudi* and the Union celebrations of 1910', highlights the productive and generative capacity of the novel, with readings of Plaatje's unique contributions in the development of South African literary symbols, signs and metaphorical resonances. Antje Krog, in 'Comets, porcupine holes, chiefs and wagons: a complete interconnected universe in *Mhudi*', highlights intertextual resonances between *Mhudi* and !Xam stories as well as Plaatje's contemporary Thomas Mofolo's *Shaka*. The politics of writing English in African culture both historically and contemporarily rather than Setswana or, as Doke spells it, Chwana, as noted by Pooe and Shole (157), is a prominent discussion point, as is the extent of Victorian and Romantic influences, as well as Plaatje's potential uses of the epic and romantic. Bhekezizwe Peterson argues in 'Reasoning creatively in *Mhudi*' that *Mhudi* presents the idea of 'modernities in world history' (139) and comprises a new framework for critical reading which allows a speculative or imaginative aspect, generated within an African ideological expression. Peterson posits the hallmarks of an African critical historiography. Eileen Pooe and Shole J. Shole's chapter, 'Maropeng: on repatriating *Mhudi* as a Setswana novel', explores the possibility of 'linguacultural transfer' (156) as translating *Mhudi* into Setswana through '*phetsolelo*' and 'transcreation' (154) as a means of cultural repatriation. They argue that the novel was conceived in Setswana and should swell the Setswana cultural store.

Every chapter foregrounds the prescience of Plaatje's focus on justice for land dispossession in *Mhudi* and its importance in all of Plaatje's works. Lesego Malepe's chapter 'Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* and the issue of land in South Africa: past, present and future', as well as Sabata-mpho Mokae's compelling short story 'When the bones call', are particularly evocative of the long-standing effects of this policy. Willan's '*Mhudi* and the critics' is a welcome introduction and exploration for any scholars joining the discussion at this juncture. His dedication to Plaatje scholarship is inspiring.

'Deferred hopes and dreams: a reflection of Plaatje's dedication to Olive Ngwetsi' by Karen Haire is a unique contribution as it situates Plaatje and his work as a father and husband within his own family, and also in relation to his own contemporary African American poet Langston Hughes; positing interconnections of blackness worldwide in a common cultural moment is bravely undertaken. Jenny Božena du Preez has the only chapter dedicated to the study of Plaatje's depiction of gendered propensities in 'Women's solidarity in *Mhudi*', which is a welcome intervention with unique ideas inspired by African American critical thinkers,

Barbara Christian and bell hooks. All of these excellent chapters will galvanise Plaatje scholars to new heights in turn.

JOANNE RUTH DAVIS

Research Associate at SOAS Centre for World Christianity;
Research Fellow at Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study

Email: jojiki@gmail.com

doi:10.1017/abd.2024.2

Duncan Clarke, *The Quiet Rhodesian: silent servant, 1909–1981*. No place of publication given: Royal Sable Publishing (hb \$45.78 – 978 1 991 22052 3). 2023, xviii + 310 pp

This tantalizing book proffers a biographical account of the author's father, Gerald Clarke. The 'Old Man', as the younger Clarke styles him, is posited as the longest-tenured civil servant in the history of colonial Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), having begun his government service in 1927 (229). For about half of this time, Clarke was a key administrative functionary operating at the pinnacle of Rhodesian statecraft. He served as cabinet secretary and secretary to the office of the prime minister from 1953 to 1970 as white Rhodesia attempted to stem the tide of decolonization.

Regrettably, despite the author's academic training (a PhD in Economics from St Andrews) and personal proximity to his subject, the younger Clarke is generally unable to impart penetrating insights on the critical historical events his father was privy to. This is not so much due to the shortcomings of the writer, but his subject's personality. Duncan repeatedly underscores the rationale behind the book's title, emphasizing Gerald's reluctance to record his engagements with Rhodesia's high politics. Duncan relays, 'there was no private diary, no memoir, no autobiography, no state papers left at home or any that went astray . . . nothing was ever disclosed, or any confidence betrayed' (230). Duncan claims that his father only ever gave one interview, to a BPhil student at Oxford (30–1). However, at least one biography of Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith (with an intriguingly similar title) appears to have benefited from an exchange with the 'Old Man'.¹

This reticence to develop a parallel non-official record is not atypical. Historians of colonial Zimbabwe will recognize the 'Old Man's' silence. Many records of the renegade government that unilaterally declared independence from British colonial rule in 1965 have been destroyed or suppressed. As the protagonists of Rhodesian resistance die out, there have been few major revelations concerning some of the major mysteries of the independence struggle, such as the 1975 disappearance of Edson Sithole, a prominent Zimbabwean nationalist. Gerald Clarke's guarded manner elucidates this culture of discretion.

In the absence of significant written documentation, Duncan relies on a hodgepodge of published works, interviews with his father's contemporaries, and

¹ Berlyn, P. (1978) *The Quiet Man*. Salisbury: MO Collins, 174–5.