

Pre-publication review of *Stimela: Railway Poems of South Africa*, selected and introduced by Prof. Laurence Wright, Institute for the Study of English in Africa. Forthcoming with Echoing Green Press, Empangeni.

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I read in awe and delight, invited to give a referee's comment on this collection of South African railway poems. The idea of making an anthology such as this seems, on retrospect, to be fundamental South African commonsense; inspirational commonsense (as this faculty at its best always is). To my mind such a collection has not yet been made, and this is then a substantial contribution to South African literary representation and interpretation of the land and its social history, as well as to South African industrial heritage. Seeking out this range of poems is a research project in itself. Given the current interest in all forms of travel writing, as well as studies that reconstruct the socio-economic effect of western expansion in the nineteenth century, there are numerous excellent reasons for welcoming this anthology which is, moreover, a serious exercise in particularised literary history.

The poems are evidently gleaned from a widely diverse range of sources, over the past century, the earliest from the *fin de siecle*, the most recent (judging from the description of iconic advertising images) from the near present. Poets include the internationally famous (Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Wallace), the famous South Africans (Guy Butler, Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali, Sydney Clouts and Don Maclennan), the well-known contemporary names of such as Chris Mann, Mafika Gwala, Peter Clarke and Tony Voss). B. W. Vilakazi is featured, as is Ruth Miller, and there is a translation of a poem by the early Afrikaans poet Totius. There are various lesser known poets, ranging across the decades of the century.

The railways were the first significant modernising infrastructure of the country, first laid out in the decade or two before Union, leading to political conventions for the planning of a unified railway system after the South African War. The iconic colonial 'African Dream' of the 1890s was Cecil Rhodes's fantasy of a Cape to Cairo telegraph and railway. This had immense appeal in the popular mind, attested to by the appearance in England in 1922 (two decades after the death of Rhodes) of a five-volume popular compendium called *The Story of the Cape to Cairo Railway and River Route* (compiled by the journalist Leo Weinthal). The first two poems in the collection appropriately address this pan-African fantasy that was, in fact, partially achieved. Then follows a sequence of railway poems written during or about the South African War, including poems by Kipling and Edgar Wallace. They are moving, and they attest to the importance of mechanised troop transport in modern warfare. The South African War was a sad testing ground for modern warfare, and these poems are an important contribution, among other things, to the genre of war poetry. The first two poems, dealing with Rhodes's vision, are flowery, even bizarre, in their late Victorian idealist rhetoric. The war poems bring a more vernacular kind of tone to the discourse. And there are three translations into English of fascinating early poems from the black South African perspective, where an entirely different discursive set is evident; where the highly metaphorised locomotives are seen as intrusive and interpreted over and against indigenous myth. Imperialist idealism, the

bitter realities of war, and indigenous metaphor set up a superb platform for the anthology.

Subsequent poems in the collection turn a spider's eye to the details of isolated railway stations, the sequestered lives of railway workers, the sense of brief encounter between travellers, and most of all the sense of Karroo Gothic, the lists of names of small remote sidings, Tweefontein and Graspan, the axis of the British advance to Kimberley; Hanover and De Aar; the famous junctions that would scarcely feature in South African civic life were it not for their railway role. The railways (the SAR & H as they were known for most of the twentieth century, the South African Railways and Harbours) formed the backbone of the country. The 'great north road' of the missionaries and hunters in the mid-nineteenth century came to incorporate, at least as far as Kimberley and Mafeking, the railway line. The Afrikaner socio-political establishment adopted the SAR & H as a major employer for its people, developing a thorough-going subculture of the railway worker and his administrative support systems. It is deeply part of South African white social myth. Not a great deal of this particular Afrikaner socialism is evident in the selection of poems. Nor is the probably largely unacknowledged role of the long teams of black railway gangs who sang in rhythm in order to co-ordinate their man-handling of heavy stretches of track.

Some of the poems speak of the loss of the romance of the coal-fired steam-engine, the F15 and the remarkable Garrett locomotive with its water condensers. The collection is driven by a powerful and legitimate nostalgia. The topic concerns a fundamentally important aspect of South Africa's industrial heritage, and I suspect that this anthology will be very well received by the public. The interest, internationally, in railway history and heritage is large and commands large sums of money. The decision to represent this history by means of poetry delights me in the meeting of imagination, metaphor, and matter (in the social history of the late nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth century, the locomotive must surely rank as a central topic for its economic as well as engineering significance).

Because this is a topic-driven anthology there are one or two poems that would not, in the normal way of things, be anthologised. They are too pat, too keen to find rhyme. But they work in this collection, since they indicate enthusiasm and they contribute to the topic. These are only one or two. The majority of the poems are good. Some are particularly good, some fascinating, not only for their content but also for their poetic quality, their epiphany of things.

To my mind *Stimela: South African Railway Poetry* is a serious contribution to South African socio-literary history as well as to the practical development of heritage tourism and awareness. I congratulate the anthologists and I wish I had thought of a project like this myself.