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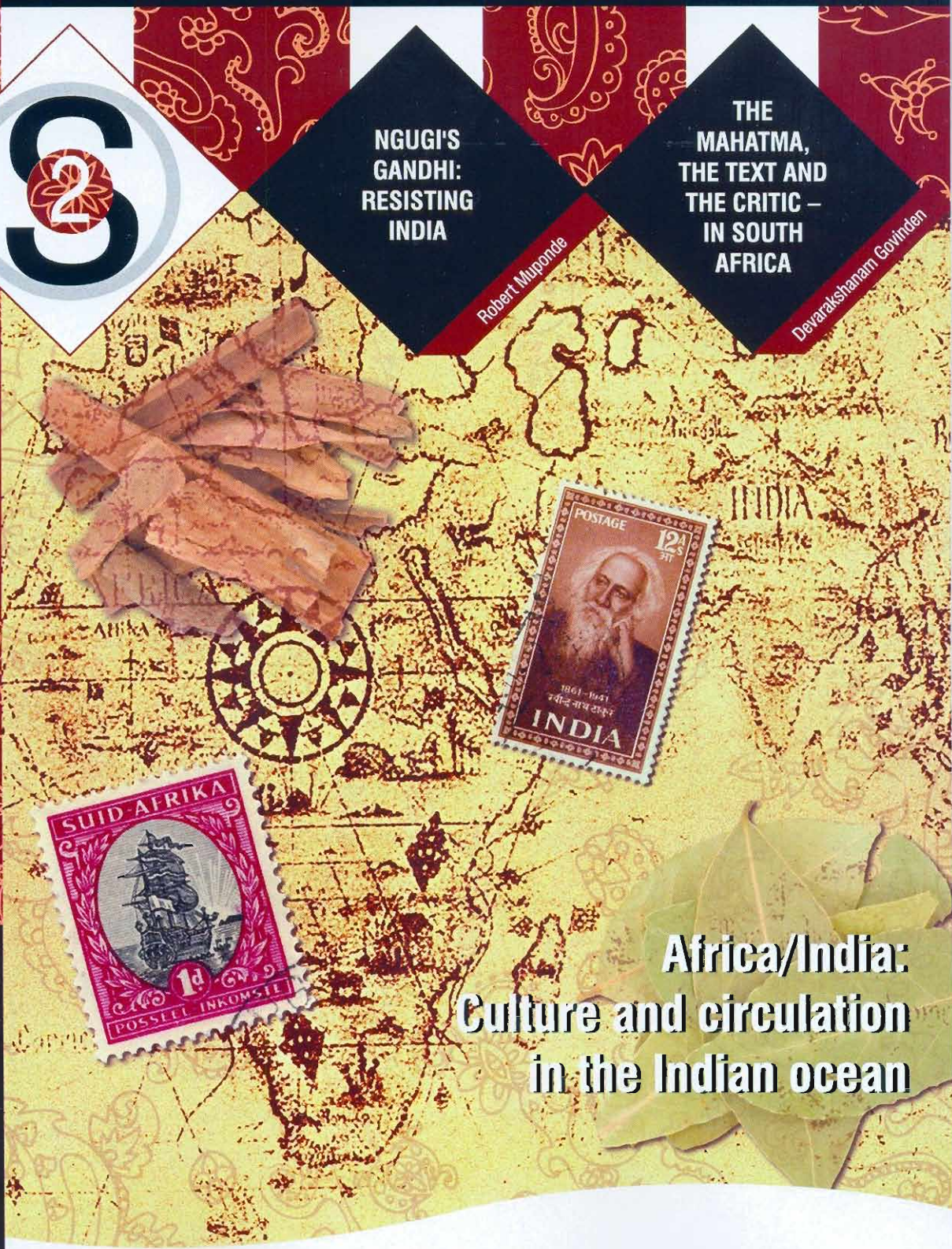
Robert Muponde

THE
MAHATMA,
THE TEXT AND
THE CRITIC –
IN SOUTH
AFRICA

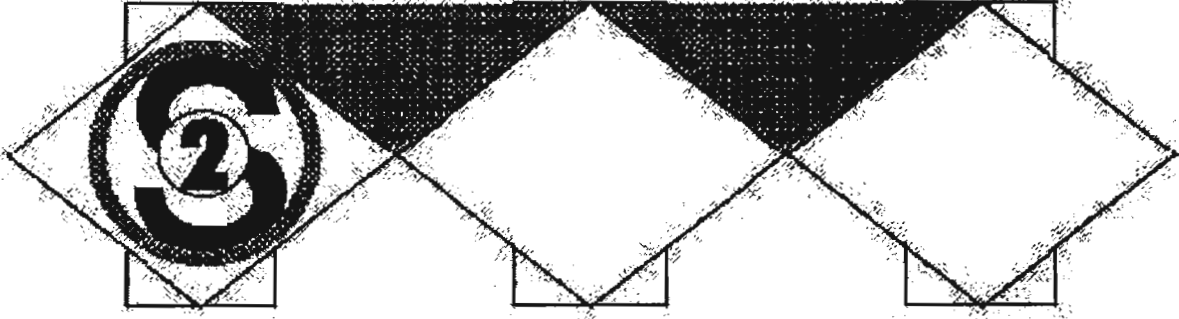
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Reviews

D. H. LAWRENCE AROUND THE WORLD: SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES.

Edited by Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell.

Empangeni: Echoing Green Press, 2007; xxii + 335 pp.

David Scott McNab

The avowed aim of this book is to bring together a diverse range of critical, historical, and other responses to the writings of the canonical English novelist D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) by South African academics at a time when Lawrence studies are in sharp decline in South African universities. The editors note in their introduction that the book was conceived in response to their realisation that there is “very little contemporary sense in the world at large of South Africa’s academic contribution to the study of Lawrence”, and “no representation by a South African in Takeo Iida’s wide-ranging and well-informed [book] *The reception of D. H. Lawrence around the world* (Fukuoka: Kyushu UP, 1999)” (p. xv). Their aim is to redress that situation by assembling a number of seminal essays from the past, and combining these with a range of new writings on Lawrence by academics working in South Africa today.

This is done by separating the book into five parts, as follows. *Part one: retrospect* contains nineteen items charting numerous high points in Lawrence scholarship in South Africa from the 1930s onwards, and considering the position

of Lawrence in university English syllabi today (pp. 3–90). *Part two: reprinted articles* presents nine important articles on Lawrence by South African academics, originally published between 1969 and 2000 (pp. 93–181). *Part three: new essays* consists of five newly commissioned critical essays that demonstrate the potential for vitality in Lawrence studies in South Africa today (pp. 185–292); while *Part four: poems* pays tribute to Lawrence in the form of two original poems (pp. 295–302). Finally, *Part five: addenda* contains further bibliographical and biographical information about South African Lawrenceans (pp. 305–26). The book as a whole must be considered a major contribution to Lawrence scholarship in South Africa, and an indispensable addendum to Takeo Iida’s volume cited above.

Prominently represented in *Part One* are a number of essays and letters by Prof. Christina van Heyningen, whose enthusiasm for Lawrence (among other “Greats”) inspired several generations of students at the universities of Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand and Natal (Pietermaritzburg) from the 1930s to the 1960s. (A biographical tribute to Christina van Heyningen in *Part five* reveals some of her many other interests, including Dickens and Milton, and pays homage to her reputation as a teacher: pp. 310–16.) Another influential essay included from this period is “Lawrence, last of the English” by Roy (J. C. F.) Littlewood (pp. 12–25), which prompted an animated exchange of letters with Christina van Heyningen in the pages of *Theoria*.

These letters are also reproduced in *Part One*, and it is extraordinary to realise that they were written half a century ago, so stimulating are the views expressed in them, and of such relevance to literary issues today.

Altogether, twenty-seven contributors are included in this volume, including some prominent international scholars, such as H. M. Daleski and Trevor Whittock. As may be expected for a collection of writings (including poems) assembled over such a broad time-scale and from such a diverse group of scholars, the outlooks, interests and topics covered are appropriately diverse, but all are united in their appreciation of Lawrence and their sense of the continuing value of reading him.

Yet, balancing this shared enthusiasm for Lawrence, is a darker note, sounded in a number of essays that consider the history and future of Lawrence studies in South African universities today. A typical example is the article by Peter Titlestad and Idette Noomé, "D. H. Lawrence at the University of Pretoria" (pp. 85–88), which, as its title suggests, is principally an overview of Lawrence's place in the undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi at the University of Pretoria from the 1960s to the present. In this respect, it contributes to the overall perspective achieved by a group of eight similar essays charting the rise and fall of Lawrence studies across South Africa, from the University of Cape Town to the University of Zululand. The conclusion of all eight essays is remarkably unified, so much so that one might suspect collusion were it not that the facts are too depressingly familiar to anyone who has taught in a South African English department recently. Lawrence, it seems, has all but disappeared from English courses, and in the few places where his works remain, they are seriously embattled and likely to disappear soon from the consciousness of literature students in this country. The causes are well known and lamented by a number of contributors: an uncontrolled rise in student

numbers alongside ongoing reductions in academic staff; increasing demands for "more practical and career-orientated" courses (p. 88); a decline in literacy among undergraduates, even among those registering for literature courses; students' reluctance to read lengthy novels; and a fashionable rejection of the writings of "dead white males", especially those who knew how to craft a coherent sentence in Standard English. What is even more depressing is that Lawrence's fate is in many ways a touchstone for the likely fate of other authors in a tradition that is still admired elsewhere as one of the most fertile in world literature. The death-knell sounded in these essays is intended to be a regretful one for Lawrence studies locally, but it resounds far more widely for those who can hear it – the more so for being echoed in the plaintive statement in the biography of one of the contributors that, "He is currently wondering how, as a young, white, English-speaking male, he will find a job in a South African university. He may become an unpublished novelist and disillusioned poet instead" (p. 324).

The essays that contemplate the past and the future of Lawrence studies are also worthwhile for going beyond merely describing the nature, direction, content and motivation of courses on Lawrence over the years; they offer insightful analyses of many significant issues, such as the importance of Lawrence's early champion, the Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis, and his perceptive ability to distinguish the strong from the weak in Lawrence: the "monotony" of his "fanatical seriousness", for example. Many also offer a vigorous defence of the value of Lawrence's writing: "his sensitive and uninhibited treatment of the flux of relationships", "the acute rendering of social interactions", his considerable satiric and comic talents, especially his ability to render "the disconcerting quality of female derisiveness" (pp. 87–88).

Overall, this is an immensely thought-provoking book, with contributions that are at once critical,

affectionate and scholarly. In many ways, it might be considered a sort of *Festschrift* to Lawrence studies in South Africa, and its publication could not have been better timed to draw attention to the achievements of South African teachers and scholars in dealing with D. H. Lawrence when his work is falling into oblivion alongside that of Chaucer, Milton, Dryden, Pope, and many others. It is sincerely to be hoped that this book might serve as the clarion that saves Lawrence in our academies, rather than as the memorial that it might otherwise become.

Finally, Echoing Green Press of Empangeni should be commended on the high quality of their printing and binding, which gives assurance of an investment that will survive the frequent scrutiny that its contents deserve.