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REVIEW**



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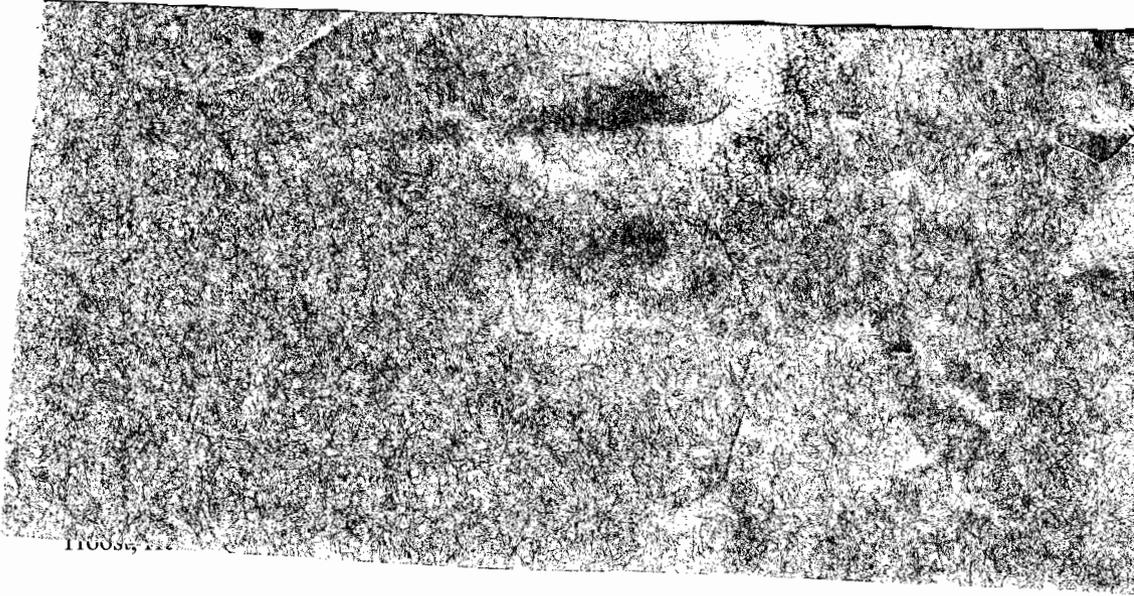
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***Stimela: Railway Poems of South Africa.*** Edited and introduced by Laurence Wright. Empangeni: Echoing Green Press, 2008. xii & 78 pp. Illustrated. ISBN: 9780620419383

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Invited to review this collection of South African railway poems, I read in awe and delight. 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 knowledge 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 siècle*, 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), famous South Africans (Guy Butler, Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali, Sydney Clouts and Don Maclennan) and well-known

contemporary names 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. Various lesser known poets are also included, 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 Wallace. They are moving, and 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 as 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, while subsequent poems in the collection turn a spider's eye to the details of isolated railway stations, the sequestered lives of railway workers, brief encounters between travellers and the sense of Karoo Gothic.

The railways (the South African Railways and Harbours, or SAR & H, as they were known for most of the twentieth century) 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 white South African social myth. Not a great deal of this particular Afrikaner socialism is evident in the selection of poems; nor is the largely unacknowledged role of the long teams of black railway gangs, who sang in rhythm in order to coordinate 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 Class 15F and the remarkable C25 locomotive with its water condensers. The collection is driven by a powerful and legitimate nostalgia, its topic concerning a fundamentally important aspect of South Africa's industrial heritage: 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. The interest, internationally, in railway history and heritage is large and commands great sums of money. The decision to represent this history by means of poetry delights me in the meeting of imagination, metaphor, and matter. 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. The majority of the poems are good; some particularly good, not only for their content but also for their poetic quality, their epiphany of things.

The anthology is introduced by a lucid, engaging and illustrative essay. Laurence Wright brings literary appreciative and skilful literary comment and scholarship, as well as historical and social context, to the introduction. The emphasis falls in turn on 'imperial ambitions', on the reaction by early black poets to the phenomenon of the locomotive on the landscape, on war and the strategic significance of the railways as well as the pathos and bitterness of conflict, on the engineering entailed in the development of powerful locomotives in Southern Africa with its water shortages but abundant coal, on travellers and other individuals whose consciousness the poets engage with; on the romance of the small and remote sidings – such as Tweefontein and Graspan, the axis of the British advance to Kimberley, or Hanover and De Aar, the famous junctions that would scarcely feature in South African civic life were it not for their railway role – and on the broad and powerful metaphor of the 'permanent way'. The South African railway systems, as Wright points out, formed the backbone of modernisation of the country in the early twentieth century. The popular imagination that has shaped itself in response to rail travel and the phenomenon of the great steam locomotive seems fundamental to twentieth-century society. The pull of the sight of a working locomotive, the romance of long-distance rail travel, the seeming heroism of the teams of black railway work gangs from the past (which gave rise to the iconic South African 'nation-building' song *Shosholozo*) all speak in the popular consciousness of the importance of this collection. The introductory essay is an informed but accessible tribute to this power of popular imagination.

Economic and strategic changes have brought change to the significance (as well as the glamour) of the railway network. Over the years much of the network or system has been closed down. The old steam locomotives have been replaced by electric and diesel-electric units. The branding, the image and the deeply national connotations of the railways have changed as the system has become semi-privatised. Cost effectiveness has seen the loss of much of the impact of the system as road transport takes over. But, with the future of oil in question, it is not too far fetched to consider the reintroduction of steam locomotives (given South Africa's abundant coal resources) and the recovery of the strategic importance of rail.

For these reasons, as well as for reasons of industrial heritage (a largely neglected

but important aspect of South African public heritage), the collection and Wright's introductory essay has particular value. Echoing Green Press has also done a very good job in the design of the book, and I enjoyed the use of symbolic locomotive bogies as glyphs at the end of each poem. Included also are four dramatic black-and-white photographs of locomotives in settings such as rural railway stations or escarpment railway passes. To my mind *Stimela: Railway Poems of South Africa* is a serious contribution to South African socio-literary history as well as to the practical development of heritage tourism and awareness. I wish I had thought of a project like this myself.