

## Book Reviews

—

## Boekresensies

### The public and private life of Sol Plaatje

**Brian Willan and Sabata-mpo Mokae, eds, *Sol T. Plaatje: A Life in Letters***

Historical Publications South Africa, Cape Town, 2020

xxv + 359 pp

ISBN 978-0-9947207-6-4 (hardcover), 978-1-990981-46-3 (eBook)

R390.00

There has been an upswing in attention to South African biography in the past few decades, with a welcome trend towards remaking or revising the canon of important figures from the South African past. This has included edited collections of the works of prominent individuals, and notable among these have been early-twentieth century black African politicians and writers. Historical Publications Southern Africa (renamed from its previous moniker, the Van Riebeeck Society) has published four edited collections of the writings of such individuals since 2008, including Isaac Williams Wauchope, Richard Victor Solope Thema, and A.B. Xuma. *A Life in Letters*, a collection of Solomon T. Plaatje's correspondence, is the fourth such volume in just over a decade. There are 260 letters, written from 1896 to 1932, included in the book. Most are in English, but some are in Setswana, Dutch/Afrikaans, and a few are in German. Although a number of the letters are from the collections of the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand, the reviewer counted twenty-seven different collections across three continents. The book is thus an excellent resource not only for historians, but also for students and the general public who now have access to a wide range of Plaatje's thoughts, opinions, and emotions that are evident in his letters.

There is something immediate and revealing about reading these primary sources: the directness of Plaatje in his own words rather than through the mediating assessments of biographers – notably the co-editor of this volume, Brian Willan in his *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (Johannesburg, 1984) and *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Thekiso Plaatje, 1876–1932* (Johannesburg, 2018). Reading the correspondence conveys the range of Plaatje's talents, but also the complex role of letter writing in building and maintaining the social worlds of the Batswana in the face of increasing racist policies and the actions of white-minority rule in the Cape Colony, Transvaal, and later, the Union of South Africa in the twentieth century. As editors, Willan and Mokae provide a 12-page introduction, as well as short contextual openings to each of the eight chronological parts around which the book is organised. They provide concise context on the “public amnesia” toward Plaatje's life and work following his death in

1932, and the revival of interest in Plaatje since the 1980s and 1990s, when his “public memory [was] ... reclaimed” (p xi). Much of this revival arose from publication of Plaatje’s handwritten diary during the South African (Anglo-Boer) War, which focused primarily on the siege of Mafeking, in John L. Comaroff’s edited *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* (1973); a new edition of Plaatje’s 1930 novel *Mhudi* (Johannesburg, 1975), the first published novel written by a black South African; and a new edition of the 1916 book critical of the 1913 Land Act, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1982).

The letters in this edited volume help to map Plaatje’s social networks: they include Batswana, and more particularly, Barolong individuals, including the prominent Silas and Modiri Molema; female advocates for Plaatje’s cause in England, including Betty Molteno and Sophie Colenso; and transatlantic connections such as Robert Moton, the African American educator and principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, whom Plaatje visited in 1922. What is particularly valuable about these letters collected together in one volume for the first time, is their scope and range and the ways in which Plaatje combines public and private concerns. “I live in perpetual sadness and ... constant troubles” (p 78), Plaatje confided to Silas Molema at a low point in February 1914. In a tender exchange communicated to his seven-year-old daughter, Violet, in 1914, Plaatje refers playfully to “Doodles”, her nickname, thanking her for her “short illustrated letter” (p 92). This range of correspondence adds complexity to our picture of Plaatje beyond his public persona or popular memory of his life and legacy.

A skilled letter writer who drew on a range of local idioms and literary references, Plaatje conveys the passion, frustration and hopefulness of his political, literary, and educational causes. Less able to express his agency and views as an interpreter during the South African War, he soon found his voice through the editorship of the Setswana newspaper *Koranta ea Becoana* (1901–1904). He would also later edit *Tsala ea Becoana* (1910–1915). Plaatje noted in a letter (although signed as Silas Molema) that *Koranta ea Becoana* was “the only channel through which the truth can be disseminated to the native population of Bechuanaland” (p 18). Yet, his letters reveal the many registers employed by Plaatje, depending on his audience, ranging from deference to candour, in ways not always apparent in a public newspaper. His letters to government officials, prominent Cape liberals, and to Barolong allies – Silas Molema in particular – show a range of carefully chosen words. In a telegram in March 1913 to Thomas Zini, president of the Cape Peninsula Native Association and opponent of the Native’s Land Bill (it became an act in June), Plaatje wrote: “... please urge our people not [to] use language calculated to inflame” (p 68).

Plaatje’s agency, dignity and ambition is perhaps clearest in his Setswana letters. In complimenting Silas Molema for his publications on Tswana traditions, language and history, Plaatje expressed the hope that the Barolong would “appreciate these kinds of works because they show that something will remain even when people are no longer there”. They would, in his view, be “books that are read by the whole world just like white people’s books while other nations cannot [yet] do this” (pp 194–195). His vision of black South Africans within the world, rather than confined to localised place, was most clearly seen in his transatlantic travels to Britain and North America, which

contrasted with his more racialised experiences in South Africa. Writing to Betty Molteno from Canada in 1920, Plaatje reflected on how he enjoyed conviviality with the “motley crew” aboard the ship to Quebec and that Canadian passengers especially “came and went precisely as if there was no such thing as colour” (p 197).

Through his contact with prominent African Americans including W.E.B. Du Bois and John Edward Bruce in the United States, Plaatje saw the full global scope of race discrimination. He also found a readership of his work and an audience willing to hear about the plight of black South Africans. In a letter written in 1921 to Walter White, then assistant national secretary of the US National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Plaatje noted the uneven spread of news globally about violence against black bodies. As he put it: “American race-riots are receiving all the publicity they deserve... [they are] flashed throughout the world but not a word about ... the mowing down of scores of unarmed workers by a cavalcade of police [in South Africa]” (p 207). Many of Plaatje’s letters have resonance to the present, while also providing insight into the lived experiences of structural racism during his times.

One of the final letters in the volume is addressed to the general manager of the De Beers Mining Company on 15 March 1932. Plaatje requested financial assistance for school premises in the hope of furthering his efforts to improve African education, particularly by printing Setswana schoolbooks. Plaatje described the “scarcity of Sechuana readers” as “not a local but a national want” (p 314). His final years were devoted to furthering such causes, and to finding publishers for manuscripts including Plaatje’s translations of Shakespearean plays. Sadly, Plaatje’s premature death in 1932 meant that many of these projects are incomplete or remained in manuscript form without a publisher. Reading the letters, one feels pathos for what might have been, and the extent of Plaatje’s contribution.

Plaatje was a man of his time, caught between a world of empire and an increasingly racially-exclusionary South Africa. His letters provide a glimpse into his inner thoughts beyond what was published, yet there are still gaps in the volume. Occasional mention is made of Plaatje’s wife Elizabeth (Lillith) but these do not provide a full picture of domestic life, nor are there any letters between Plaatje and his wife in the volume, if such letters exist. Letters have their limitations, but of course private conversations he would have had in his lifetime have not survived as a written record. A more rounded view of Plaatje and his times is best achieved by reading his biographies, as well as a wider range of his oeuvre. Besides *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa*, Plaatje also wrote several other works, including pamphlets. A selection of these can be found in Brian Willan’s other edited collection, *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg, 1997; republished in 2016). Willan and Mokae’s edited collection of Plaatje’s letters is nevertheless essential reading for those interested in his life and his considerable contribution.

*Chris Holdridge*  
*North-West University*