

Fiction and Social History

J.A. Kearney, *Representing Dissension: Riot Rebellion and Resistance in the South African English Novel*

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Social historians have long affirmed imaginative literature as a means of enriching their visions of the past. Indeed, the relationship between such literature and how later commentators and analysts recreate the past, is complex and significant. For example, the ways in which the First World War is remembered and recreated in the English-speaking world are powerfully influenced by the novels of Remarque and Hemingway, the poetry of Brooke and Owen, as well as the memoirs of Sassoon and Graves. Writers of fiction can also be more perceptive and nimble than historians and other social scientists: for instance, sooner than their flat-footed academic colleagues, novelists such as Achebe, Armah and Ousmane appreciated the widespread and often rapid descent of nationalist elites in many African countries into oppression, nepotism and corruption. Historians should pay attention to the writers of fiction, as

chroniclers, and even retrospective creators, of the spirit of the past, and as the at times perspicacious analysts of contemporary social realities.

The book under review is a South African contribution to this way of looking at imaginative literature. It is a study, from the discipline of literary studies, of socio-political disturbance and violence as seen in South African novels in English from the early twentieth century – but not including the Anglo-Boer War – to the 1950s. Kearney groups the novels he discusses around a number of themes and events: the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906, the Boer Rebellion of 1914, the strikes of 1913-1914, the 1922 'Rand Revolt', white political conflict in the 1920s and 1930s, black rural unrest in the 1920s, the implications of the Second World War and its prelude for South Africa, black urban protest in the 1940s, and black urban protest in the early 1950s. He gives accounts of no less than forty-five novels, and, within each chapter discusses the context and draws conclusions.

The author sees himself as defending liberal values in a society where he considers them to be under attack from left and right. His touchstone, if not for the literary quality, then at least for the intellectual integrity of these books, tends to be their adherence to such liberal values. Kearney's emphasis on this is puzzling. His sensation of being embattled seeps into his scholarship and informs the arguments he is making about the first half of the twentieth century. Also, while authors should not be criticised for failing to attempt tasks they have not undertaken, it would be interesting to know how similar themes have been dealt with in Afrikaans literature.

This is not an easy read. Kearney discusses some books by authors with secure reputations, like Gordimer, or with reputations that are less secure but who are still recognised, like Buchan, Millin, Paton and Van der Post. However, many of the novels are (in literary terms) clearly excruciatingly bad, and surely only the dedication of a researcher such as Kearney could persuade him to read these period pieces, some by authors so deservedly obscure that he has been able to discover very little about them. Few of them appear to deal with the often traumatic events in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century in a way that might lift them above this ruck of second-class literature. While they illustrate the *mentalités* of the times in which they were written and of the communities from which the authors came, most do so without the leap of understanding and empathy that would imprint them on the South African imagination.

It is not an easy read in another sense as well. The book does not flow well and within each chapter the sections of general contextualisation, specific contextualisation (sometimes more than one such section appears in a single chapter), the discussions of the books themselves and the clumsy referencing system, results in a turgid and sometimes confusing experience for the reader. One wonders, in fact, if the author might not have stepped back and viewed his sources from a greater distance. There is insight and interest here, but he might tell us more, more readably, in a shorter book with a lighter touch that does not lumber through the plots of numerous works, most of which we will never read, nor want to read.

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