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The literary, personal, and scio-political background of William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe

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2014-08-26
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/15252

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> to conceal and control what could not be hidden or ordered; it was denied by the mere existence of that which it sought to restrict ... [144]

Wolfe here refers to the submersion below the veneer of everyday life of the "moral violence" [145] of subjugated and oppressed people which must eventually surface. It is a submerged violence which in his eyes permeates Africa and to which he is sympathetic; it manifests itself in Wolfe as a "sudden impulse to swift and dangerous political action" [146] in which Zachary becomes a "weapon":

> Zachary ... should be a pivot. He had seemed an omen; he should be a tool, or a symbol, or a weapon. I had begun by feeling sad and ended by feeling violent. The rain poured down incessantly, clamorous with thunder, seared with lightining. Ah, would that it might batter down this studio, this churchlike temple of my past, flood it and spoil it, that I might step forth free with Zachary and Caleb, with moral violence, to conquer Africa! ... I too would work in living flesh. [147]

Rupert Friston, a man with "the face of a prophet", [148] becomes for Wolfe a key to freedom from his past (and by implication Western civilization); they plan to "work in living flesh" through the promotion of "miscegenation" and Eurafrica. Ironically Zachary Msomi, through his marriage to Mabel van der Horst, the goddess of Eurafricanism, becomes a tool in the disintegration and destruction of Friston. After Friston's mysterious death, Wolfe feels that he is "like a bucket with no bottom". [149]

Similarly, Van Oudijck's disintegration is described in his statement that "everything ... faltered". [150]

But what Wolfe calls "moral violence" is not an adequate definition of the ...atening and potentially violent "forces" which Wol... ...enses are submerged below the surface of everyday existence in the colonial milieu. It remains, as in The Hidden Force, an alienating, all-pervading and ultimately incomprehensible presence, occasionally hinted at, but never fully realized. The undercurrents of unease, danger and potential violence that permeate Turbott Wolfe and inform the background to the fatal careers of Wolfe and Friston can be seen as related to the violence of the colonial experience. It is also associated with the occult and supernatural [151] - manifestations of Wolfe's and Friston's alienation from Africa - and with the unnamed "horrors" that Friston confronts in the extremities of a nightmare of drugged madness.

Like Couperus, Plomer speaks in terms of "mysteries", "darkness", "horrors"; for colonial intruders the "almighty violence of Africa" is an indefinable and potentially fatal force.

The undercurrents of violence that permeate Plomer's novel may be intentionally prophetic; Turbott Wolfe is at one

level concerned with the decline of imperialism and white dominance in Africa, and portrays a society on the brink of violent change. But it is also clear that in terms of the literary background of Turbott Wolfe, Couperus's notion of a mysterious, incomprehensible "hidden force" profoundly influenced and informed Plomer's novel.

Chapter Two: PLOMER'S PERSONAL HISTORY AND TURBOTT WOLFE

INTRODUCTION

On republication of Turbott Wolfe in 1965, Nadine Gordimer wrote:

> As a rule... the umbilical cord between a man and his work is his own business. But Turbott Wolfe is one of those books that it doesn't seem possible could have come from the environment in and about which they were written and to which one reasonably looks for a clue in the particular personal situation of the author. [1]

Other critics have echoed the statement that it is "impossible to conceive of any full analysis of the work of William Plomer that can totally abstract it from his life without sacrificing depth, perspective and understanding." [2] Plomer himself gives numerous clues to a fuller understanding of Turbott Wolfe; he refers recurringly to the crucial influence of his early "double lives" between England and Africa on his literary development, [3] and comments that his "African" work "certainly could not have been written unless I had already spent some of my early years in Africa, and unless my father before me had done the same and had been professionally occupied with African natives..." [4]

It clearly becomes necessary to explore William Plomer's personal history, insofar as it affects his early literary development and the writing of his first novel, Turbott Wolfe (1925), completed when the author was twenty-one. The most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, and an analysis or explanation in terms of the personality and life of the writer has been one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary study. Furthermore, the relationship between the individual and his society is evident and crucial. Each individual's social history - his actual network of relationships and experiences of his environment - is in many ways unique; he develops within a social process which radically influences him and his writing. A literary product may reveal "connecting links, parallelisms, oblique resemblances, topsy-turvey mirrors. The poet's work may be a mask, a dramatized conventionalization, but it is frequently a conventionalization of his own experience, his own life." [5] This is not to say that the relation between a writer's life and his work is simply one of cause and effect; rather, the literary product is highly mediated by the author's experience and interpretation of his society and the historical moment in which he writes. It is on two broad areas - Plomer's "divided life" between England and Africa, and his experiences and perception of Africa - that this chapter will focus.

Two major problems face the critic attempting to throw light on Turbott Wolfe by examining aspects of the author's life and experiences. The first problem is the extent to which Plomer has been mythologized as a strikingly youthful genius. By examining some of the biographical aspects of Plomer's life that are relevant to Turbott Wolfe, it becomes possible to explore the relationship between Plomer's experience of social and political reality and the creative process. Turbott Wolfe should not be seen as a disembodied outpouring of spontaneous genius, but as a highly-mediated response to a variety of events, ideas and influences, reformulated into the novel-form.

The second problem is Plomer's celebrated reticence. Alan Paton once wrote with obvious frustration that

> Plomer was a good, gentle, gifted, industrious, reticent man. Sometimes you want to throw a brick at him, but in his gentle presence it doesn't seem to be appropriate. And what is more, you can't help liking him, even when you have spent hours trying to get him to say one exciting thing about Roy Campbell. [6]

Plomer's reticence extended to his autobiographies, and according to Paton, Plomer was "well aware that reviewers of his first two autobiographies thought he was holding back and not telling all." [7] Plomer's answer to this is revealing: "I never feel that candour is a constant

necessity." [8] The problems such an admission presents to the would-be critic or biographer, who must rely largely on the writer's version of his life for biographical details, are obvious. As one critic commented about Plomer, "the veil comes down with something like a thud time and time again." [9] It would be true to say that any writer of an autobiography creates a version of himself, a persona that to an extent conceals the real person behind the first person "documentary" of his life. Plomer's autobiographies inevitably include veiled allusions, exaggerations, distortions and omissions. Related to this is the fact that the urbane, reticent Englishman and "man of letters" Plomer later became, and who recalled his early experiences in Africa over a distance of decades, was in many ways very different from the young and selfconsciously rebellious Plomer who wrote Turbott Wolfe. Laurens van der Post, who first met Plomer when they worked together on Voorslag, recalls the young Plomer as "lively, extremely witty, with a loud and confident voice", and not at all reticent. [10] The critic or biographer must thus occasionally resort to "reading between the lines" of Plomer's autobiographies and other writing, or rely on the evidence of letters or the memories of those who knew him to fully illuminate various events and experiences. [11]

Growing up in the first two decades of this century, in both South Africa and England, meant that Plomer's literary development was crucially influenced by his experience of contrasting environments. This contributed not only to his essential "Englishness" and his "outsider's view" of Africa, but also to a deep-rooted sense of displacement in a foreign environment. Plomer continued to regard himself as a "displaced person" or "misfit":

> poets are generally rather misfits in the world, and I think I was a misfit from a very early age, and that might have started me writing poetry. [12]

The portrayal of the outsider or displaced person remained a recurring image in Plomer's work, first emerging in Turbott Wolfe. [13]

The setting and milieu of Turbott Wolfe hinge on Plomer's experiences in South Africa, as does the centrality of racial themes in the novel. Many critics have remarked on the relationship between Turbott Wolfe and some of the author's experiences in South Africa, documented in his first autobiography Double Lives (1944) and the almost unchanged Autobiography of William Plomer (1975). A reference to similarities between Plomer's experiences as a trader in Zululand and his protagonist Wolfe's trading-venture in "Lembuland" is often regarded as obligatory.

Yet the extent to which Turbott Wolfe is informed by Plomer's Zululand experiences, not only in terms of physical details but also in terms of the central concerns and ideas expressed in the novel, has often been underestimated and remains largely unexplored. The same is true for Plomer's experiences as a 1920 Memorial Settler in the Stormberg region of the Eastern Cape; it is here that Plomer began working on the idea of Turbott Wolfe, and his experiences at the farm Marsh Moor clearly inform the characterization and the setting of the novel. [14]

While Turbott Wolfe is at one level concerned with the portrayal of the alienated "outsider" in a foreign environment, the novel's concern with the all-informing "colour question" is directly related to Plomer's growing awareness of the racially divided nature of South African society. The single images of early childhood - for example the image of Africans as a source of warmth and security - are transformed through cummulative experience into a critical analysis of the "colour question", the central political issue of the day. This transition was not an inevitable progression, given Plomer's class-position and membership of what he calls the "ruling race" in a rigidly hegemonic and racially divided society. The question of how Plomer came to the analysis of the "colour question" expressed in Turbott Wolfe remains a crucial

one. Some critics have sidestepped the issue with oblique references to the author's "liberal vision", while others have attempted to situate the novel within the context of South African liberalism in the 1920s . [15] While the impetus provided by South African liberalism is important in understanding Turbott Wolfe, no critic has made a detailed examination of the role played by Plomer's active attempts to cross "racial barriers" and his encounters with members of the African intelligentsia in Natal who exposed him to political concerns and ideals beyond the narrow confines of his class and social station. As we shall see, these encounters radically influenced Plomer's views on race and the "colour question", finding direct expression in the major themes of Turbott Wolfe.

Section I: Between Africa and England

> To be a South African from time to time instead of all the time, is a help towards seeing South Africa from the outside as well as the inside. This interesting condition - almost one of split personality - has been mine for more than half a century. It has perhaps helped me to register certain impressions more clearly and to notice changes in atmosphere. (William Plomer) [16]

A. Between Africa and England

William Charles Franklyn Plomer was born on December 10 1903, at Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal. [17] Pietersburg in those days was a small pioneering dorp where Plomer's English-born father, Charles Plomer, had a job under the department of Native Affairs; according to Plomer, it "was no health resort, and the salaries of civil servants were augmented by a 'fever allowance'." [18] Before he was a year old, Plomer was taken back to England by his mother to recover from malarial fever. They returned in June 1905. Thus began a series of shuttlings back and forth between the two countries and the recurring ill-health which were to characterize his youth. Plomer's first autobiography is aptly titled Double Lives, and Plomer comments that they "had become habitual migrants: before I was two my mileage had exceeded the circumference of the earth." [19] This unsettling existence contributed to Plomer's sense of displacement and

alienation, with profound consequences for his literary development. His early geographical uprootings are the single most crucial aspect of Plomer's life and work:

> To them is owed the cosmopolitan nature of his writings, which are, perhaps inevitably, marked by the conflicts and contrasts that manifest themselves when black confronts white (South Africa), East meets West (Japan), members from an ostensibly more sophisticated level of civilization come into contact with a more primitive people (Greece) or one class is set against another (England). What is more, displacement is not only the most essential characteristic of Plomer's life, but may even be considered the greatest distinguishing feature of the work itself ... [20]

Plomer's early sense of "not belonging" and his concern with the idea of "displacement" can be traced in Turbott Wolfe, particularly in the character of his protagonist Wolfe. It also contributed to the "outsider's view" of Africa which informs the novel: Although Plomer was born in South Africa and travelled extensively before settling in England, he regarded himself from an early age as essentially English, and rooted in European culture.

Plomer's sense of his "inherent" Englishness was influenced by his parents whom he recalls in great detail in his autobiography and who represented for Plomer a "family legacy" of British ideals, attitudes and expectations. Both his parents had been uprooted from the upper-middle

class environment into which they had been born, and in the colonial service their lives became "nomadic and often isolated." [21] They were married in England in 1901, and sailed for Africa shortly afterwards. Charles Plomer had spent some years "adventuring" in South Africa before the marriage, but this was his wife's first trip "out". Apparently nobody had reminded them that there was still a war on, and her first impressions of the country could not have been favourable; Durban was crowded with refugees, and travelling to Pretoria was a nightmarish experience for a woman newly arrived from the tranquillity of a English country town:

> Along the line bloated, decomposing carcasses of horses and cattle, stinking and glittering and seething with flies and maggots under the burning sun, were varied by wrecks of trains, twisted rails and war debris, and by fortified blockhouses festooned with barbed wire and still guarded by sweating, scarlet-faced tommies... [22]

What fortified them was their unwavering pride in their Britishness and a patriotic sense of "duty" to the empire. Both their families were characterized by a long tradition of soldiering and civil service in various parts of the empire. Two of Plomer's uncles, born in India, had gone into the army and "excelled" at their chosen profession; one of these uncles had been killed at Nooitgedacht during the South African war, an event Plomer later commemorated

in a poem. [23] Charles Plomer had started his career in South Africa with a letter of introduction to Cecil Rhodes [24] and worked in the colonial civil service for many years. Plomer's mother always prided herself on remaining "English" and therefore "civilized" under the most adverse conditions. She was the kind of English wife who stoically "created homes that were duplications of upper-middle class homes in England, complete with gardens, furnishing and accustomed household routine", [25] no matter where she was. [26]

Plomer describes his parents as "intensely class-conscious" and "set in their sense of their origins, using it unconsciously as a defence against the indifference of others and against their own rootlessness, insecurity and deprivations." [27] Plomer's attempt to explain his parent's sense of British superiority, pride in their "origins" and class-consciousness in terms of personal and psychological factors tends to obscure the typicality of their beliefs and attitudes as members of a British ruling class elite in South Africa. The Plomers were part of a social stratum which tended to perceive colonial society in terms of a caste-like hierarchy, within which the ideological emphasis on racial superiority and "Britishness" was crucial; this perception was structurally related to the rigidly hegemonic social divisions

which characterized British South Africa. A sense of "Britishness" was facilitated through the use of the English language, the encouragement of cultural and social links with "home" and "the close interweaving of ... the ethos of public school, chivalry, colonial service and empire." [28] It is not surprising that Plomer's parents shared Cecil Rhodes's belief that the British were

> the best people in the world, with the highest ideals of decency and justice and liberty and peace, and the more of the world they inhabit, the better it is for humanity. [29]

Arriving in South Africa towards the end of the South African war, the Plomers may also have shared in the existing spirit of relieved optimism which prevailed amongst the British in South Africa, which John Buchan here describes in idealistic terms:

> Those were the days when a vision of what the empire might be made dawned upon certain minds with almost the force of a revelation ... It was an inspiration to youth to realize the magnitude of its material heritage, and to think how it might be turned to spiritual issues ... I dreamed of a worldwide brotherhood with the background of a common race and creed, consecrated to the service of peace. [30]

Plomer's father certainly believed that British civilization and imperialism in Africa were ultimately for the better. In his autobiography Plomer comments that

> Mid-Victorians, like my father, who had been brought up to be obedient and to think and do what they were told, and who were not of a questioning or analytical turn of mind, took it for granted that colonisation was on the whole a good thing, which, properly managed, brought the supposed benefits of civilization to the colonised as well as undoubted profits to European entrepreneurs and prestige to European empire-builders. His attitude to the blacks would now, I suppose, be called paternalistic. I can think of stronger terms of abuse. He did not think it was wrong for Africans to have to come to Johannesburg and be obliged to further an industrial revolution, though he knew the hardships and deprivations they suffered. He did think it right that, being there, they should be as well looked after as possible. [31]

Plomer argues that as far as his "family legacy" and upbringing are concerned, "no doubt they influenced me, but I suppose I am now old enough to have discovered my own identity and to be free of any false or inflated pride in my own heredity." [32] The influence of his background and class was perhaps greater than Plomer imagined. Despite the years he spend in South Africa and later Japan, England remained "home" for Plomer, and a cultural frame of reference. The older, urbane, reticent Plomer, a London "man of letters", was in most ways a conventional upper-middle class Englishman, with many of the attitudes and beliefs of his class, effectively cut off from the experiences of "other classes." Although he acknowledged the importance of his "African experience", he was, in retrospect, often scathing about his first novel, Turbott Wolfe, and about his youthful attacks on colonialism:

> Sensible men knew that, like other human activities, including Christianity and Socialism, colonising sometimes led to horrible abuses but need not necessarily or entirely be an evil thing. [33]

But the youthful Plomer was a very different person from the "man of letters" he later became, and surmounted many of the limitations imposed by his rigidly orthodox upbringing. Like most children of English colonial civil servants and administrators Plomer was educated in a network of English ruling-class schools, both at "home" in England and at St. John's College in Johannesburg. He consequently grew up with an absence of normal family life which was often the lot of children of colonial civil servants, finding himself far more often in an institution than in a family situation.

Plomer describes his youth as "one of those anomalous, marginal situations which have recurred all through my life." [34] This upbringing, which may to the outsider appear strange and even alien, was in many ways orthodox for his class and time; in the first half of this century many men with similar backgrounds have tended to exercise political and cultural dominance. Plomer's life until his mid-teens was in many of its visible details a training for membership in the administrative middle-class of British imperial rule. Plomer's younger brother James,

similarly educated, followed in the footsteps of the "family tradition" of soldiers and colonial administrators, and later became a commodore in the Canadian Navy. [35] In Plomer's case, myopia saved him from a naval career:

> It was discovered with alarm and resentment that ignorance had allowed me to read in a bright light in bed with the measles, and this had left me myopic. This circumstance strongly affected the course of my life and dashed my mother's unaccountable hope that I might go, by way of Osborne, into the Navy - a hope which meant nothing to me. [36]

Reminiscing about his childhood and orthodox education, Plomer sees himself as something of a "rebel". In "Conversations with my Younger Self" [37] the older Plomer explores the origins of what he perceives as his "unconventionality":

> As we were born soon after the death of Queen Victoria, you were an Edwardian child, and our parents were Victorians; if they had any religious, political, or social doubts, there was no sign of them. Why did they not succeed in instilling their confidence, their unquestioning acceptance of conventional standards of belief and behaviour, in their small, smiling offspring? [38]

Part of the answer to Plomer's question lies precisely in the division between Victorian confidence in the heyday of British imperial supremacy, and the spirit of uncertainty

and disillusionment which emerged alongside the gradual decline of empire in this century, exemplified by the pervading mood of post-First World War pessimism. [39] But a question which still needs to be answered is how someone with Plomer's orthodox background became the self-consciously rebellious "angry young man" who wrote a novel which despite its "outsider's view" of Africa, was also crucially and consciously engaged with South African social and political reality, causing a minor storm of controversy because of its unconventional ideas. In "Conversations with my Younger Self" and in his autobiography, Plomer explores this question by examining his early divided life between Africa and England, and his youthful "African experience" which crucially influenced his personal and literary development.

In 1908 Charles Plomer was appointed to act as resident magistrate at Louis Trichardt, "an outlandish and unhealthy spot at the foot of the Zoutpansberg mountains, well inside the tropics and highly malarial." [40] Plomer's first memory, dating from the period the Plomer family spent at Louis Trichardt, is a characteristic one:

> It had rained in the night, but now the sky was cloudless and the world of a celestial freshness and fragrance, exhaled by the sparkling green veld and wafted in the air. I strayed out of the garden, and standing on the bank of the stream suddenly saw on the opposite bank,

> perhaps twelve feet away, two large birds, a kind of wild duck perhaps ...
> Their plumage gleamed like many coloured enamel in the sun against a background of reeds, their eyes glinted like jewels, and they showed no sign of alarm, but watched me as I watched them ... as if the birds and I knew that we were part of the same life and that life was splendid. [41]

J.R. Doyle traces the bird imagery contained in this description to Plomer's poem "A Transvaal Morning", [42] and this kind of natural experience later assumes considerable importance in Plomer's writing. [43] Plomer's vivid recollection of this period of his life and his "delighted discovery" of his African environment is exemplified by the vibrant image-making which was to be a primary feature of his writing:

> ... the forms and texture of plants, the rasping leaves of the Cape gooseberry; the clear yellow flowers and hairy swollen pods of a nameless shrub; the long white thorns like steel nails that stuck out everywhere from the thorn trees; the intense perfumes of the small aromatic flowers of the veld; the metallic dinning of the cicadas at midday and the cool colloquies of doves in the afternoon ... multitudes of flying ants that came fluttering and flickering out after rain ... striped hornets ... tarantulas that waited, motionless as ornaments on a white-washed wall. At night one could hear lions roaring far off, or the nearby barking of jackals ... or the loud chorus of frogs ... [44]

These vivid childhood memories inform a poem Plomer wrote many years later, "The Wild Doves at Louis Trichardt". The last line of this poem is significant:

Men being absent, Africa is good. [45]

Plomer tended to romanticise the idea of an "unspoilt" pre-colonial Africa, an idea which emerges in Turbott Wolfe and which can be recognized in his recollections of this period of his life:

> ... although game, with the destructive advance of the white man, was getting scarcer, there were still, besides lions, not a few giraffes and hippopotami ... In the mountains, not easily accessible, was a wonderful lake with weird surroundings and no apparent outlet ... it was shunned by the Africans, who believed it bewitched. It was said to have been formerly the scene of human sacrifices. African life was not yet completely spoiled ... [46]

Significantly, Plomer's father at the time

> had interesting and responsible work to do. This included the delimiting of land to be set aside as native reserves ... [47]

Plomer never challenged the notion of pre-capitalist "native reserves", and was never fully aware of its segregationist underpinnings; for him, it meant the preservation of a primitive, naturally "pastoral" African way of life which he felt was rapidly disappearing in the early twentieth century. His memories of his ecstatic discovery of "African nature" reveal at one level a particularly romantic view of Africa, and also a lasting

selective "blindness" to the motivations of territorial segregation, both of which emerge in Turbott Wolfe. [48] It was at Louis Trichardt that Plomer's younger brother John died of diptheria and malarial fever. For Plomer, the Africa that was at one level exotic and romantically pastoral, was also associated with the idea of a fever-ridden white man's grave, an idea which often characterizes imperial literature. Given the Plomer family's history of malarial fevers and the death of his brother, it is not surprising that Plomer's protagonist Wolfe, while enchanted by the notion of glorious, primitive Africa, returns to England to die of an African fever. After John's death, the family returned once again to England:

> For us that was the last of Louis Trichardt, but our double lives, divided between England and Africa, had a long way to go. [49]

It is clear that the "contrasts between England and Africa must have sharpened the child's sensations ... the landscapes of Africa, so different from those of England, evidently made a strong impression from an early age, with the burning sun and the awesome beauty and power of the African scene later dominating [his] South African prose and poetry." [50] The opening scene of Turbott Wolfe, for example, derives some of its power from the contrast between a gloomy seaside town in England and a sun-drenched

Africa. [51] Plomer comments that

> My early impressions of life and landscape may have been especially vivid because the land was strange to my blood; I was coming to consciousness in a world unfamiliar to it. England was just as vivid because it was in the marrow of my bones ... [52]

The idyllic early memories of Africa Plomer describes in his autobiography present a strong contrast with the unsettling and lonely existence he now experienced in England. This contrast operates on the level of human relationships as well. In "Conversations with my Younger Self" the child Plomer is loved and secure in Africa:

> I am cared for by my parents. I am also cared for by a black nursemaid, and, when she is absent, sometimes by a black houseman or houseboy. They move about the house quietly, on bare feet. It is they who cook, who clean, who wait at table, who wash our clothes and dig our garden. When the huge flames of a grass fire threaten our house, it is they who make it possible to attack and defeat the fire. When lions roar at night, I feel wonder, not fear; our kind black servants have given me confidence ... And above all, when I am naughty, they don't scold or fly into a rage - they laugh. [53]

His first memories of England are very different:

> At the age of five you were in England, separated from your parents, and in a situation where several adults of both sexes amused themselves by teasing you ... God preserve me, in what is left of my life, from being either the victim or the doer of such a thing. [54]

Plomer recalls this period of his life as a time of private withdrawal and introspection. The effeminacy which Plomer saw in himself at this time perhaps "helped prepare the land for his homosexuality, the actual foundations being laid by a number of early homosexual experiences with young and adult males, beginning during his schooldays in what he called his "Titania" period." [55]

It was in England that Plomer began to regard himself as a social "misfit" and also a "rebel", an opposer of established norms which in a rigid public school environment manifested itself in an intense dislike of anything to do with cricket, "a rustic game [inflated] into "the done Thing", and even into a kind of mystic-patriotic cult bound up with notions of English Racial superiority." [56] Plomer's sense that he was "unusual" or "different" was linked to his desire to be an "artist", an idea which horrified his aunt, to whom he declared this intention.

In England Plomer also became profoundly aware of his class position, a class-consciousness which (at least in England) he was never able to escape, and which in Turbott Wolfe reveals itself in Plomer's scathing attacks on "poor whites": [57]

> In everyday life I began to perceive social and political distinctions. It became quite clear

> that the world was largely populated by beings called the lower or working class and that they were a race apart ... One had been born, evidently, a little Conservative (just as one had been born, or at least christened in the Church of England). Accordingly a rosette of blue ribbon was pinned to one's jersey or sailor blouse, but in the street there were rowdies with much larger, bright yellow rosettes which showed that they had been born little Radicals, and probably Dissenters as well... I had never heard of "the two nations" but I had grasped the doubleness of English life. [58]

Returning to South Africa in 1911, Plomer was plunged into the very different world of Johannesburg. Plomer's response to Johannesburg, which he perceived as rising out of the empty veld at an incredible pace, "conjured out of the waving grass by greed for gold",[59] was one of intense excitement and fascination. Plomer's father, still employed by the Department of Native Affairs, was now "concerned solely with Africans employed in the gold mines or in domestic or other service in the city." [60] Obliquely, through his father's work at the central pass office, Plomer became aware of the racially divided nature of South African society. But to a large extent he remained cocooned in the world of the British-born administrative middle-class, from where the alien "external world" was seen to be populated by people of "other classes" and those who were not British; "Boers", "foreigners" and of course Africans. The South African-born colonials of British descent were a particular thorn

in Mrs Plomer's flesh: according to Plomer, "colonials" tended to resent the "home-born", who had the "advantages of breeding or money or education, which might have given them an air of easy assurance" and who "provoked at times a feeling of inferiority in the colonial born." [61] Here can be found the seeds of Plomer's contempt for colonial settler society, exemplified by his biting critique of colonials and the "colonial ethos" in Turbott Wolfe.

Plomer's education continued at St John's College, at the time on the outskirts of Johannesburg. What is known today as "The Wilds" was then a mysterious koppie, from where there was a wonderful view over the Sachsenwald plantation (today the suburb of Saxonwold). Plomer recalls his time here as a happy one, where he was allowed to explore the "artistic side" of his nature.

But in 1914, before the outbreak of World War One, Plomer was sent once again to England, and to yet another school, this time Beechmont, where he was thoroughly miserable:

> At St John's the religious instinct was given full play...At Beechmont religion was repulsively boring, colourless, and hypocritical, poisoning some boys with superfluous feelings of sin and guilt. At St John's the Kopje was a paradise of which the boys had the freedom; at Beechmont the lovely environs of the house were permanently out of bounds. [62]

The sour Old-Etonian headmaster, The Reverend Bode, enforced a mid-Victorian notion of education, and "a false quantity or a missed catch were to him, it seemed, sins equal to theft, emotional spontaneity, "impurity", a taste for any of the fine arts, or any other of a long catalogue of deviations from an unlovable, impossible norm." [63] Nonconformity, spiced with the danger of punishment, was fashionable amongst some of the boys:

> Perhaps the most symptomatic of our conspiracies was excited by the troubles and The Easter Rebellion in Ireland; we were much stirred by these in 1916 as many young men were, twenty years later, by events in Spain. None of us was Irish, none of us wished to injure our country, but the Sinn Fein movement and the fate of Sir Roger Casement excited our sympathy. It was the idea of adventurous upsurgence against a repressive authority (associated in our minds with the odious Bode, with Kipling, cricket, sabbatarianism, gimcrack patriotism, and all that bag of tricks) which prompted us to form fanciful plots, send coded messages in invisible ink, plan sabotage, and so on, though nothing came of all this outwardly. Inwardly some of us had had a lasting subversiveness inculcated in us: self-respect had made it necessary. [64]

The "lasting subversiveness" and the idea of upsurgence against a "repressive authority" contributed to Plomer's selfconscious perception of himself as a "rebel" and "nonconformist", and re-emerged in South Africa at the time he wrote Turbott Wolfe and participated in Voorslag.

Plomer's education was erratic and unsettled; in 1917 he

was transferred to Rugby, where "by comparison with Beechmont they allowed a dizzy freedom." [65] But Plomer's progressive myopia made further book-work inadvisable, and an "outdoor life" was recommended. At the end of the war Plomer's mother was eager to return to South Africa:

> Treating me as a more reasoning being than I had yet become, she explained to me the arguments for and against my going with her, and then gave me the choice. As any enterprising boy would have done I chose Africa. [66]

In wartime England, Plomer had begun to feel the "great nineteenth century illusion of peace, plenty and progress" beginning to crumble. For the sixteen-year-old boy South Africa seemed to offer excitement and adventure after the drabness of war-time England:

> To arrive in Johannesburg, in the thin bright air of the high veld, five thousand feet above sea level, was exhilarating. It was especially so in 1919, if one was young: the world was supposed to have been changed for the better by the war, and bright hopes floated like cheap balloons. [67]

The circumstances of Plomer's return to South Africa are in some ways similar to the arrival of Wolfe in Turbott Wolfe: Wolfe, suffering from recurring ill-health, comes to Africa in the hope of regaining his strength, and the sun-drenched Africa he encounters contrasts vividly with the drabness of his life England, and holds the promise

of excitement and adventure. Similarly, Plomer's father, Charles Plomer, had been sent to South Africa partly because he was a chronic asthmatic, and the African climate was considered conducive to his health. South Africa, described by him as "the coming country", also presented him with the opportunity for numerous adventures during his "wander years." [68] The experiences of both father and son undoubtedly influenced the portrayal of Wolfe's arrival in South Africa.

As soon as Plomer was considered healthy enough, he returned to St. John's as a day-boy, and according to the school magazine, The Johannian, he excelled academically and was encouraged in his love for the fine arts and drama, denied him at Beechmont; a review of the annual school play comments that "Willie Plomer gave an outstanding portrayal of the Bishop of Carlisle." [69] Many years later, in a letter to Johannes Meintjies, Plomer also recalled his early attempts at writing poetry during this period:

> There are two or three poems about Johannesburg (one small one from 1920) - but not the one I struggled to write in 1919, sitting all alone one morning under flowering wattle in what used to be called the Sachsenwald ... [70]

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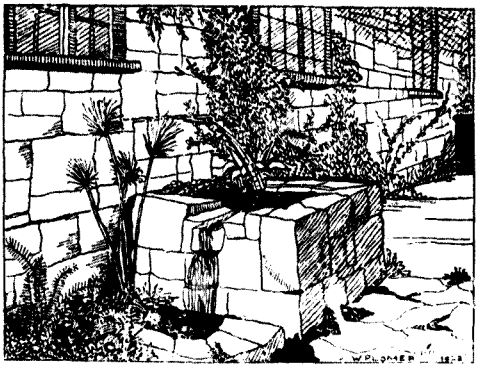

"The Terrace" at St. John's College : Woodcut
by William Plomer, from The Johannian.

Plomer's nonconformism i. the school environment seemed at this stage to be limited to "attending the barber for a haircut in order to avoid preparation of other work," [71] a habit which caused his father to complain to the school that his son looked like a convict. [72]

In the holidays parental pressure forced Plomer into the company of girls and young women:

> I did not take much to most of those whom I partnered on the tennis court or steered around the dance floor - nor they, I dare say, to me. "William is so critical", somebody said to my mother. [73]

This critical attitude seems to have characterized Plomer's attitude to South African colonial society in general:

> A displaced adolescent in a state of physical and emotional excitement, I found the consumer society in which I moved wanting in charm; it seemed mostly boring and second-rate. Nobody was making anything except money or plans to make more money. [74]

Plomer was clearly beginning to find the cocoon of white middle class colonial society limiting. It is not surprising that when he came across individuals who were in his eyes exceptions to the mediocre norm, Plomer was fascinated and intrigued. One of these exceptions was the

artist Edward Wolfe who made a tremendous impression on the adolescent Plomer, who saw in him an appealing bohemianism and nonconformism; Edward Wolfe was for Plomer the embodiment of what he later called the "politico-aesthete", an artist or "aesthete" who is also politically aware. [75] Previously, in England, Plomer had felt a similar admiration for his Uncle Emslie Horniman, who had been a fellow student with Vincent van Gogh at the Academie des Beaux Arts at Antwerp. In his autobiography Plomer refers to him as a "politico-aesthete", a concept informed by the idea of nonconformism and "the artist as outsider". [76]

Edward Wolfe was born in Johannesburg in 1897. His family background was peculiar; his mother was from Scotland, and his father a Lithuanian Jew who came to South Africa in search of his fortune, and who was quite a noted figure in South Africa by the turn of the century. He died in 1905 after falling (or being pushed) off the balcony of a Johannesburg gambling house, leaving his capable and formidable wife to take care of their son alone. This she managed admirably, saving enough money to take her and Edward to London. Thus Wolfe - like Plomer - began a lifetime of travelling between South Africa and England, and later to many other countries. [77]

From an early age the precocious Wolfe displayed a multitude of artistic talents. His first career was that of a child star of the South African stage, and between the ages of thirteen and sixteen he played most of the major child roles of the current repertoire in main urban centres and on tour. In about 1914 he met the concert pianist, Barclay Donne, who became Wolfe's music tutor and later his lover. Music remained a major interest and influence in Wolfe's adult life. Wolfe also displayed a remarkable talent for drawing and painting, an interest which became a career and brought him lasting fame.

Wolfe moved to London with Donne in 1916, and here his life was totally transformed:

> He had been launched as a professional, and widely admired, artist, he had become one of the members of the Bloombury Group, and had learnt to mingle with unconcerned delight among the intellectual and artistic elite of the day. [78]

In 1919 Wolfe was struck by a dangerous strain of "Asian flu", and there were serious fears for his life. Wolfe - like Turbott Wolfe - returned to South Africa to recuperate, aged 22. It is likely that the textures and colours of Africa experienced early in his life had more than a little to do with his passionate response to colour and warmth around him and his need constantly to recreate

them if they did not exist, for example in England. In South Africa his creative output improved by leaps and bounds alongside his health. His first exhibition in South Africa was held in 1920 at Leon Lerson's Johannesburg gallery. The show was quite successful, and Wolfe met several people who were to be important friends in the future; the painter Enslin du Plessis, for instance, and the 17-year-old William Plomer.

Witty, attractive, abrasive and eccentric, Edward Wolfe seemed to Plomer to be a haven of enlightenment in an environment populated by philistines. It is highly likely that Plomer's attraction to Edward Wolfe was sexual as well as intellectual, but it was his persona as an artist and "rebel" that made the greatest impact:

> Slight in stature, with a Byzantine face under a heavy black fringe, and gifted with a lively zest for life, he made his own world and lived in it. He had worked with Roger Fry at the Omega Workshop, and was later associated with the London Group. He was as good a friend to me as a nomad who brings one dates and water in a desert. His work and his talk and the vivid environment which, like a bower-bird, he had created for himself, refreshed my eyes and spirit and easily lured me away from the tennis parties and coming out dances. [79]

Despite Plomer's reticence about Wolfe, this vivid description gives some indication of the profound effect he had on Plomer. It is also possible to argue that if

any individual's characteristics, lifestyle and beliefs informed Plomer's portrayal of his artistic, nonconformist protagonist, Turbott Wolfe, it may have been Edward Wolfe; a possibility perhaps directly indicated by the use of "Wolfe" as his protagonist's surname. Writing to Enslin du Plessis in 1929, when Plomer himself had become a member of the Bloomsbury group, Plomer comments: "I should very much like to go with you to see Wolfe (Edward; not Turbott ..!)."[80] It seems likely that Turbott Wolfe is in some ways a veiled portrait of his friend and mentor - although in following sections it will become apparent that Plomer drew on many of his own experiences in his portrayal of Turbott Wolfe. Many of the surface similarities between Edward Wolfe and Plomer's protagonist are striking.

Edward Wolfe, like Plomer's protagonist, was a talented artist who, while in South Africa, dedicated his art to the portrayal of a local world, often painting vivid portraits of Africans. Fortified by the success of his Johannesburg show, he was eager to leave for London, but was distracted from this intention when he was introduced to a new realm of visual experience at the gold mines of Village Deep: "He was so excited by what he saw there that he decided to postpone his return until the end of the English winter, and spend some time painting the miners and the landscape." [81]

> At one time [writes Plomer] he went to live in a vacant barrack of a compound on a gold mine, the machinery of which chundered in the background as he showed me his drawings. These had caught in flowing lines the shapely sadness and exiled vigour of naked black miners. [82]

Despite his fascination with the miners, Edward Wolfe's sympathy "was generally human rather than strictly political; he was fascinated by the heroic aspect of the miners, their physical beauty and dignity ..." [83] This aesthetic appreciation, rather than an overtly political view, is echoed by Turbott Wolfe's idealized, romantic view of Africans as "noble savages", and his reluctance when it comes to political involvement.

Like Edward Wolfe, his namesake is portrayed as an extraordinary outsider in the context of a mediocre white colonial society - a quality which Plomer clearly admired in the artist - and creates for himself a vivid environment through his art. [84] The friendship between Wolfe and Plomer was a lasting one, and in 1929 Wolfe painted a wonderfully owlish portrait of his friend.

Meanwhile Johannesburg had become for Plomer a microcosm of South African society, characterized by contrasts and conflicts at many levels, the most obvious being racial and socio-economic conflict, exemplified in the mining industry. A writer whom Plomer later greatly admired, Lewis

Mariano Nesbitt, describes contemporary conditions in the mining industry in Gold Fever:

> The natives, whose own social and economic systems have been trampled under foot by the invaders, are debarred from any real participation in the benefits of that civilization ... are kept down by the legal imposition of inferior status, and by the denial of their rights to undertake and be paid for skilled work...At the mines they are, in fact, kept herded like cattle in compounds, from which it is extremely difficult to get out, even for a few hours. They are kept in close confinement, overworked, underpaid, and denied even such rights as are indispensable for the maintenance of their dignity as human beings. As for progress, that is quite out of the question for the native. His deprivation of all chance of profiting by it is ensured by the administration of laws made by those who are devoted to progress for themselves. [85]

Plomer's consciousness of what Disraeli called "the two nations" had emerged in England, but in Johannesburg Plomer became aware of the rigidly hegemonic structures of South African society. His awareness was also facilitated by his father's work at the central pass office and later in "tidying up the affairs of the Africans who had returned or failed to return from France" [86] after the war. His father was apparently regarded to be a "negrophilist, unfit for any really important post." [87] Plomer's attitudes to the pass system remained ambiguous, [88] but his father's involvement increased Plomer's knowledge and understanding of the exploitative and op-

pressive nature of [illegible] mining industry and the rapid urbanization of Africans. This understanding later informed his work, as can be seen from poems like "The Golden City" and "Conquistadors", [89] and his short story "Ula Masondo" [90] which Plomer claimed was the prototype of the "Jim comes to Jo'burg" theme in South African literature. [91] "Ula Masondo" tells the story of a "tribal" African who comes to Johannesburg to find work and is corrupted in the urban mining environment. Plomer, like some of his liberal contemporaries, was deeply concerned with what he perceived as the corruption of Africans in an "alien" urban environment, since he regarded Africans as out of place in a city. In his autobiography Plomer similarly draws a division between the rural environment (African) and the urban industrial environment (white):

> Arriving from all parts of Southern Africa to seek work, the unskilled black migrants of many tribes came as strangers, uneducated and bewildered, to the white man's new, urban industrial world ... [92]

Plomer's awareness of the racial divisions of South African society is initially experienced at a personal level:

> The freedom of a child has come to an end. As an adolescent I am hedged in by racial taboos which I am not in a position to break, however much I want to. [93]

Plomer's desire to "break racial taboos", and his "anger with the injustices and stupidities of [his] environment" [94] are key elements that informed the writing of his first novel, Turbott Wolfe. His position as a marginalized member of white South African society was at this stage brought home to him; he saw himself as a "rebel" and "outsider" in white society, while also forcibly cut off from African culture and society.

Plomer's life hitherto was characterized by an erratic and unsettled existence in both England and South Africa which profoundly influenced his personal and literary development; the theme of "displacement" remained a dominant theme in Plomer's writing. Simultaneously his upbringing and education ensured that he remained culturally and emotionally tied to England, which contributed to the "outsider's view" of Africa expressed in Turbott Wolfe.

Interestingly, Plomer's earliest surviving poems, dating from his time in Johannesburg and sent to Harold Monro, "the leading poetic impresario of the day", [95] reveal the extent of his "Double Lives" between Africa and England. Of the four specimens sent to Monro on April 4th 1921, [96] "Evening in Oxfordshire" is most obviously an "English" poem, "an inchoate derivation of a romantic

poetic style" influenced inter alia by Swinburne, John Freeman, Thomas Moult, very early Lawrence and Hilda Doolittle ("H.D."). [97]

A second poem, similarly dated 1920 and headed "At Present - A Fragment", is clearly engaged with a South African reality:

> Where men are tawny like the earth,
> And women amorous as birds,
> The songs to which their throats give birth
> Are strings of inarticulate words
> Set to fountainous dark refrains,
> Whose cadences are harsh with mirth
> And loud with crude insatiate pains. [98]

These lines are the beginnings of a significant poem, known in its final transformation as "Amanzimtoti" [99] Plomer associates his sense of displacement, marginalization and loneliness - which informed his perception of himself as "different", a social misfit or a "rebel" - with "artists"; Plomer perceived writers and artists as a small nonconformist intellectual elite, elevated from run-of-the-mill society. His development as a writer was thus influenced by his selfconscious nonconformism and aestheticism which came to fruition in late adolescence, at the time he began writing Turbott Wolfe. Plomer's rebelliousness and sense of his "unusualness" was echoed by his contempt for what he saw as the mediocrity of white

colonial society, its values and beliefs. Plomer's growing liberalism in adolescence is linked to the contempt he felt for the narrow confines imposed by the rigidly hegemonic nature and racial divisions of South African society; his "aesthetic" rebellion thus became linked to a social and political rebelliousness which focussed on racial taboos and anger at racial injustice. Plomer's embryonic perception of himself as a "politico-aesthete" was mirrored in his attraction to revolutionary and visionary modernist writers: [100] the growing sense of disillusionment and pessimism in post World War One Europe at one level found expression in literary modernism, which informs both structure and content in Turbott Wolfe.

Plomer now set out on a "journey of discovery" of South Africa outside the confines of his class and upbringing. Myopia once again prevented Plomer from furthering his formal education at Oxford or Cambridge, and he recalls in his autobiography:

> Then, I fancied some more erratic course. Oxford might have given me a better education, the chance of working out ideas among my coevals instead of by myself ... and the chance to take some part, however slight, in the English life of my time among my own compatriots. I see also the narrowing effects it might have had: it might have made me more of a prig and pedant than I am. Isolation, remoteness, self-reliance, and frugality were to be my tutors ... [101]

Plomer's desire to break out of the cocoon of white middle-class society led him to attempt a very different way of life in a new environment; In June 1921, having left St. John's College, the seventeen year old Plomer set off for the Eastern Cape to become an apprentice farmer under the auspices of the 1820 Memorial Settlers' Association.



Self-portrait by Edward Wolfe.



"... the shapely sadness and exiled
vigour of naked black miners ..."
Painting of miners by Edward Wolfe



Cover portrait of William Plomer, painted by Edward Wolfe, 1929. The portrait is in the National Gallery, London.



Cover portrait of William Plomer, painted by Edward Wolfe, 1929. The portrait is in the National Gallery, London.

Section II: In the Stormberg

> I like to think of myself being, in a miniature way, a "regional" writer of the Stormberg ... (William Plomer) [102]
>
> ... away up in the mountains, thousands of feet above sea-level, and not very far from "bleak Tarka's dens and Stormberg's rugged fells" ... ("Down on the Farm") [103]

If Plomer's decision to go to the Eastern Cape as an apprentice farmer was partly motivated by his desire to escape the confines and limitations of his environment in Johannesburg, it was also inspired by the example of his father who had in the 1890s spent some years exploring the country as a typical "colonial adventurer". Charles Plomer's stories of his exploits and adventures during his "wander years" in South Africa intrigued Plomer. [104] But as Plomer remarks about the 1920s: "Gone were the days when younger sons were "kicked out to the Colonies" with a letter of introduction, a hundred pounds, and a sense of adventure." [105] Plomer's opportunity for adventure presented itself with the formation of the 1820 Memorial Settlers' Association in 1920, which aimed to attract a new influx of white English settlers of a "desirable type" into the Union, partly an attempt to counteract the growing threat of Afrikaner nationalism and also to increase the white population. [106] According to Plomer

> The scheme was well thought out, and was often advertised in The Times and elsewhere ... South Africa once more appeared to many a "coming country", among them retired soldiers or civil servants from India and other parts of the empire - not least because of its attractive climate and cheap African labour. [107]

In June 1921 Plomer found himself bound for Molteno in the Eastern Cape, a dorp his father had known in the 1890s. Plomer was apprenticed to a sheep farmer, Fred Pope, at Marsh Moor, a Brontëesque name which Plomer felt suited the wild and desolate karoo landscape near the Stormberg mountains. [108]

According to Stephen Gray, who interviewed Mr and Mrs Stanley Pope, Plomer was a notoriously hopeless farmhand, and in fact quite a few unflattering anecdotes about his exploits became near-legends in the local community. [109] Plomer on the other hand saw himself as quite an expert in farming matters after some months at Marsh Moor. His chief joys were health and the magnificant landscape; what he did lack was "society". [110] This does not mean that Plomer was entirely isolated; apart from the Pope family, many labourers were employed on the farm, described by Plomer in idealized terms as looking like "heroic bronzes in their gleaming nakedness ..." [111] But most of the neighbouring farmers were Afrikaans speaking and Plomer argues that only twenty years after the South African War

mutual dislike and distrust made it difficult for him to get to know them. Similarly, "apart from the friendly intercourse of working together out of doors, anything like social intercourse with Africans was taboo." [112] Plomer rapidly found that leaving Johannesburg did not mean completely escaping the confines of white English-speaking society, and at Marsh Moor racial divisions were as entrenched as elsewhere in South Africa:

> Everything came back to [colour prejudice] in South Africa, and at Marsh Moor the colour bar was stronger than the iron ... hammered on the anvil. I remember when I first arrived I made a gaffe by suggesting that I should learn to milk cows. No white man, I was told, ever milked a cow: evidently it was not "the thing". If the Xhosa farm servants, who worked faithfully and well, lived at a low standard and were paid a pittance, that was the custom ... but to me their strength and grace, patience and humour, sad songs and cheerful banter, were a consolation and allurement. Once, when the Popes were away for a fortnight, I only saw African faces - but I only saw them across a great divide. [113]

It was a divide that Plomer would later attempt to cross, but for the moment he was limited to a growing sense of frustration and anger at the reality of a racially fractured society. The "great divide" which also separated him from his Afrikaans-speaking neighbours, presented an obvious contrast with his father's "wander years" in the Eastern Cape before the South African War, when he had been welcomed in Afrikaner homes and made to feel one of

the family. [114] Charles Plomer had made his way as a farmer and tutor (amongst many other temporary professions) and Plomer recorded his father's adventures in his autobiography. Plomer's short story, "Portraits in the Nude", written some years later and first published in Voorslag (1926), [115] is regarded by some critics as originating from Plomer's experiences in the eastern Cape. The story deals with the experiences of an Englishman, Cormorant, in an isolated platteland community. But given the division between Plomer and the Afrikaans-speaking community in the Stormberg region, it is possible to argue that "Portraits in the Nude" owes much to the knowledge and experiences of Afrikaner farming-life gained by Plomer's father. In Plomer's case, his experiences in the Eastern Cape served primarly to emphasize his sense of "Englishness", dislocation, and loneliness.

Intellectually, Plomer drew comfort from the knowledge that both Thomas Pringle and Olive Schreiner had written about the karoo, under similar conditions of solitude and "intellectual exile". [116] Plomer greatly admired their passion for truth and justice, their "liberal vision" and their commitment to portraying a local environment. [117] Plomer regarded both Pringle and Schreiner as "revolutionaries" and nonconformists in a mediocre and racist colonial society - what Schreiner called a nation of

"lower middle class Philistines" [118] - and identified strongly with them. He describes Pringle as

> that rare thing, a good man. He was the first white poet of his briefly adopted country ... He fought against injustice, but deluded himself in believing that "the dragon Slavery" having been destroyed, "its odious brood, the prejudices of caste and colour, must ere long also expire." The odious brood is still very much alive. [119]

Schreiner had died at the Cape a few months before Plomer's arrival in the Stormberg and had been buried not very far away, and Plomer met people who had known her. Her commitment to a local environment had a profound impact on the adolescent Plomer, who read The Story of An African Farm at Marsh Moor, and "knew her as one who had given lasting shape to forms of life hitherto unperceived or unrecorded ..." [120] Plomer's admiration for Schreiner is expressed in the following passage from his autobiography:

> A creative artist at odds with her environment, she had one thing in common with my father - she was a highly temperamental asthmatic ... she protested against war, predatory imperialism, the oppression of minorities, racial and social injustice, political chicanery, and private spitefulness ... It was a life of restless struggle - physical, intellectual, emotional, social and literary ... animated by a hopeless passion for truth and justice. [121]

Schreiner exemplified for Plomer his conceptualisation of

a "politico-aesthete", representing for him a role model at the time he began writing Turbott Wolfe and became involved in Voorslag.

Reading Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm while at Marsh Moor may have inspired as well as comforted Plomer. Schreiner's portrayal of the ludicrous and exploitative colonial adventurer, Bonaparte Blenkins, may at the time have served as a useful precedent, as did her theme of the young, nonconformist, spiritual intellect, struggling for stimulation and escape, exemplified by Waldo. Plomer comments about Pringle that as "a place to abide in, Africa defeated him as it later defeated Olive Schreiner," [122] a fate echoed by Plomer's own eventual withdrawal from Africa and by the defeat of Wolfe in Turbott Wolfe.

Perhaps the two most profound impressions made by Pringle and Schreiner on the youthful Plomer were their liberalism and their portrayal of a local world. Plomer was becoming increasingly aware of contemporary political debates which centered around the crucial "colour question", and many of the liberal responses to this all- informing issue directly informed his work. In Pringle and Schreiner he had found a precedent which combined a liberal ideology with "aesthetics", the "political" poet or novelist. [123] In Plomer's case this came to fruition in Turbott Wolfe.

Plomer's growing engagement with a South African environment can be traced in some of his earliest surviving poems, [124] but it is in Turbott Wolfe that Plomer for the first time reveals the extent and range of his engagement.

It is clear that Plomer's early background and formal education inevitably influenced his sense of his "Englishness" and that his writing about South Africa must to an extent bear the stamp of an Englishman's view of the country. In South Africa, Plomer was also confronted by the difficulties of writing in a racially fractured society, where he was, moreover, part of a social stratum that cut him off from "other classes" as well as those who were not "British". For Plomer, it was to be a battle to break through the barriers and taboos of a hegemonic society, and the extent to which he managed to succeed in this contributed to the "South Africanism" of his first novel.

As far as Turbott Wolfe's engagement with a local world is concerned, Plomer's experiences at Marsh Moor, although frustrating and limiting, provide fascinating insights into his work. Writing to Johannes Meintjies on January 24th 1965, the year when Turbott Wolfe was eventually reprinted, Plomer comments that:

> Molteno had lately been much in my mind, because there are characters, scenes and incidents from it in my first book, Turbott W, of which I have been reading the proofs anew ... [125]

Seven years later, having received a book about the Stormberg region from Maintjies, Plomer writes in a letter dated January 11th 1972:

> I like to think of myself being in a miniature way, a regional writer of the Stormberg. I can't pretend that I was blissfully happy at Marsh Moor - I was too lonely and too segregated from Afrikaans speaking Stormbergers - but, do you know, this book gives me a pang of heimwee both for the Stormberg and for my lost youth. [126]

Plomer's perception of himself as a "regional writer of the Stormberg" is based on works which include "Down on the Farm" and "Portraits in the Nude" (first published in Voorslag (1926) in serial form). [127]

But his comments about the link between Turbott Wolfe and the Molteno district are of particular interest. As Stephen Gray has pointed out:

> It would be fair to say that almost all the critics who deal with the circumstances of the writing of Turbott Wolfe assume it to be, in some disguised way, an account of Plomer's own experience as a trader in Zululand, as documented in such clear detail in Double Lives and elsewhere, and in the revised but hardly altered Autobiography. [128]

The extent to which Plomer did in fact draw on his experiences in Zululand will be explored in the following section, but it is clear that Molteno and Marsh Moor provided Plomer with material for Turbott Wolfe. Readers who assume that the geography and landscape of Turbott Wolfe should mirror that of Zululand, are usually startled to find references to sheep farming, snow and "icy mountain air" in the novel. In the light of Plomer's letter to Meintjies (January 24th 1965) quoted above, it becomes clear that the landscape of Turbott Wolfe is divided between the sub-tropical verdure of Ovuzane, with its banana groves and indigenous forest (based on Zululand), and a harsh mountainous region which is based on the Stormberg region of the Eastern Cape:

> It was bitterly cold. It was just beginning to snow. This was an Africa, I reflected, quite different from Ovuzane. Here I was in another world. Snow, which I had only seen from Ovuzane on distant mountain tops, now began to twirl out of a blind sky to my very feet. It was cold ...
>
> By eleven o' clock the snow had been thawed so rapidly by the African sun that only a few patches lay about the soaking yellow sward, and in the rocky hollows of the foothills. The jagged mountains were snow white still, but the farm road was muddy, and the vleis were loud with living waters. [129]

Wolfe continues:

> When I got back to Ovuzane - said Turbott Wolfe

> - it seemed that I was in another world. The air was warm, the country was fruitful. [130]

Indeed, the novel's landscape combines two very different worlds. The white town of Aucampstroom, which lies "on a bleak plateau, colder and higher by far than my own low-lying home at Ovuzane", [131] is not as some critics have assumed, a description of the Zululand town of Eshowe. In fact, "'Aucampstroom' is much closer to being Molteno in the Eastern Cape ..." [132] The name "Aucamp" is a common one in the Molteno district, and Barend Aucamp was a neighbour and friend of the Popes at Marsh Moor. [133] It is possible that this is where Plomer derived the name "Aucampstroom". From his autobiography it also becomes clear that Plomer began working on the idea of Turbott Wolfe in 1921, at the age of 17, while living at Marsh Moor. [134]

The relationship between some of the characters in Turbott Wolfe and people Plomer knew in the Molteno district, referred to in Plomer's letter to Meintjies, is revealed in Stephen Gray's crucial discovery of some of Plomer's "notes, fragments, essays, sketches and cartoons" [135] from 1921, on the farm Marsh Moor, which is still owned by the Pope family. For example, the original of Frank d'Elvadere, "the voluptuous pioneer", can partly be found in a man named Macdougall, who was well known in the Mol-

teno district. [136] In Turbott Wolfe d'Elvadere is described in this way:

> The manners of Francis d'Elvadere ... had something about them as ducal as his ancestry. He was an enormous man, with weeping moustaches of a shining reddish copper colour standing magnificently off his rosy face ... D'Elvadere I found to be thoroughly the pioneer, but a voluptuous pioneer, a very different type from the voortrekker. In the far off days of gold rushes he had rushed to the gold with everybody else ... He told of Goldenville, that vast city, when it was a mining camp ... of the great Nigel Blades, empire-builder, the founder of our fortunes in Bladesia. [137]

A reconteur and colonial adventurer, when asked about his views on "miscegenation" d'Elvadere replies: "But my views are biased ... I cannot claim that no black woman has ever shared my bed - ." [138] D'Elvadere leaves the district suddenly after breaking racial taboos and offending a local farmer.

Macdougall is described in Plomer's autobiography as a "grand old Scotch wanderer" [139] whom Plomer had met at Marsh Moor:

> Born a gentleman in Scotland, round about 1855 or 1860, he had come to Africa when young, and had led an easygoing, drifting, improvident life, much like my father's in his early African days ... A fine figure of a man, with a flowing golden moustache and a ruddy face, a cheerful sceptic with entertaining anecdotes of his earlier days, when the country was freer and wilder and full of odd characters ... He left abruptly

after giving offence by failing to show, in a particular instance, colour prejudice. [140]

At Marsh Moor Plomer, finding himself increasingly isolated and alienated, drew comfort from writing, reading and drawing satirical cartoons of the locals. His vivid cartoon of Macdougall captures the eccentricity of a man Plomer came to regard as a "benevolent uncle", and who undoubtedly inspired the creation of Plomer's character Frank d'Elvadere. Macdougall may also have partly inspired a satirical poem written by Plomer, titled "The Explorer":

Romantic subject of the Great White Queen,
See him advancing, whiskered and serene,
With helmet, spectacles, and flask of brandy,
(That useful stimulant, he always keeps it handy).
Unmoved by cannibals, indifferent to disease,
His black frock-coat rocs sadly in the tropic breeze.

He never shows emotion, least of all surprise.
Here nothing meets his fat and hopeful eyes.
But big game, small game, fur and fin and feather,
And now he dreams of daisies, Scotland and the Flag.
The nimble corncake in his native heather,
The handy corkscrew in his leather bag. [141]

A second cartoon portrays a blowsy, overdressed woman singing lustily at a piano; her song, "You called me Baby-Doll a year ago", occurs in Turbott Wolfe, sung by the repulsive Cossie van Honk. Cossie is both a prostitute and a midwife, known locally as "Aucampstroom's Wife". [142] On Wolfe's last night in Lembuland, making

his way to the station, he hears the tinkling of a piano in a house he passes:

> Away to the right there were lighted windows, two or three, masked with black fir-trees, and hardly justified by a muffled hideous laughter at a piano which is, I guess, being played by Cossie van Honk. I recognize the midwife's touch. She is assisting the piano to deliver itself of:
>
> You called me Baby Doll a year ago .. [143]

Despite these striking similarities between real and fictional characters, it seems likely that in his portrayal of colonial characters in Turbott Wolfe Plomer was expressly interested in *encapsulating colonial "types"* rather than merely creating portraits of people he knew. Thus the eccentric Macdougall was not an isolated figure; in his autobiography Plomer comments that colonial society included "some remarkable white men living independent of their own kind, of apartheid, and sometimes of the law." [144] In D'Elvadere Plomer has captured the "typicality" of certain colonial adventurers, and his striking, satirical caricatures of other colonials similarly attempt to capture "typical" although exaggerated characteristics. The Fotheringhays, for example, exemplify familiar colonial stereotypes. On his arrival in Molteno, Plomer had been entertained by a clergyman and his wife - not unlike the fictional Fotheringhays - "whose ideas, manners

his way to the station, he hears the tinkling of a piano in a house he passes:

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and tastes had been formed round about 1870." [145] Plomer's portrayal of the Fotheringhays is based partly on the existence of such "types" whom he came across on numerous occ· 'ons.

A third satirical cartoon drawn by Plomer while apprenticed a. Marsh Moor, entitled "The Settler Se'.tles", reveals some of Plomer's attitudes towards colonials and the process of settlement. Plomer's contempt for the "mediocrity" of white colonial society is shown to have developed into a somewhat crude understanding of racial capitalism and the submerged economic processes which underpin the "rags-to-riches" tale of a colonial settler.

In Johannesburg Plomer had become acutely aware of the existence of thousands of faceless Africans working in gold mines below the surface of the city. In his cartoon strip depicting the settler farmer, the image is reiterated in his portrayal of "the minimum of labour", equally faceless workers who create the settler's wealth. Interestingly, Plomer's perception of white colonials as generally mediocre and essentially exploitative remained virtually unchanged, while his youthful criticism of colonialism and the imperial spirit was later tempered by his belief that in the right hands imperialism was not necessarily a bad thing. [146] The attitudes of the youthful Plomer, at the

time he began working on the idea of his first novel, give some idea of the origins of the "political vision" which informs Turbott Wolfe, and also of his bitter satirisation of the colonial ethos.



The original of Turbott Wolfe and of Frank d'Elvadere is to be found partly in the character known as Mac (Macdougall), the journeyman tinker and farrier who worked at Marsh Moor for several months during Plomer's training there.

"The Voluptuous Pioneer"
This cartoon was found by Stephen Gray
at Marsh Moor.



"You Called Me Baby-Doll a Year Ago ..."
Cartoon found by Stephen Gray at Marsh Moor.



"The Settler Settles"
Cartoon found by Stephen Gray at Marsh Moor.

Section III: A Trader in Zululand

> Zululand! What visions, mystic and alluring, does the name conjure up! Zululand! Land of warriors, hordes of massive dark-skinned humanity with shield and spear; land of kraals and impis where the war dance is a more or less everyday affair. A land where barbarism still reigns supreme ... (Zululand Annual) [147]

At Marsh Moor it soon became evident that Plomer did not have the makings of a farmer, and it was with a sense of relief and intense excitement that he heard that his father had been offered the opportunity to trade in Zululand after being retrenched from the civil service. As David Brown puts it, it was Plomer's "experiences of their "kaffir store" in Zululand which provided him with much of his material for the setting of Turbott Wolfe." [148] However, Stephen Gray has argued that a comparison between the factual account of Plomer's time in Zululand (documented in his autobiography) and the fictional account of Wolfe's experiences as a trader in "Lembuland" in Turbott Wolfe, reveals that they "are not very similar at all, in tone, in impact or in circumstance." He continues:

> Wolfe in fact jumbles the factual and recognizable with the fictional and unexpected rather systematically. For the reader in South Africa who knows his history and geography, the effect of this truly odd mixture is disconcerting - Swedes for Portuguese in Mozambique, Norwegians for Anglo-Americans in Natal, Lutheran Catholics, all very disorientating. [149]

One severely disorientated critic went so far as to describe Turbott Wolfe as a novel about East Africa. [150] However, while it is true that the novel is not merely a fictionalised account of Plomer's experiences in Zululand, it is possible that Gray underestimates the crucial influence of Plomer's Zululand environment on the writing of Turbott Wolfe. The intention of this section is to explore this influence, not only on the portrayal of some of the characters and events in Turbott Wolfe, but also on the ideas that inform the novel.

Several critics have noted the similarities between Plomer's protagonist Wolfe and his portrayal of his "younger self" in his autobiography and elsewhere. [151] Both appear as youthful, talented, artistic and rebellious outsiders in a mediocre and sometimes hostile environment, struggling for intellectual and spiritual fulfilment; both become caught up in the dominant political issues of the day, centred on the "colour question", but remain essentially English at heart. But Plomer's pointed use of a framing narrator in Turbott Wolfe, ironically named "William Plomer", should warn readers that Wolfe is not intended to be a veiled portrait of the author, although Plomer drew on his own experiences and environment in his portrayal of Wolfe.

The most obvious link between Plomer's Zululand experiences and Turbott Wolfe is that like Plomer, his protagonist Wolfe is suddenly and unexpectedly offered the chance to go and trade in an exotic environment, a "Native reserve" "neither too civilized nor too remote". [152] Plomer recalls in his autobiography that his father, lacking the capital to retire in England after his retrenchment, "had been thinking of his early adventures in trading with Africans, when he had seen Europeans - including quite unbusinesslike English gentlemen - making their own living at it." [153] The setting of the prospective trade store conjured up for Plomer a romantic picture of an exotic environment which he remembered from holidays in Natal:

> The first and most startling fact was that the place was described as "one of the oldest trading sites in Zululand." Zululand! That was a word to quicken my interest, and raising my eyes from the letter to the bare and ochreous mountain ever against the house at Marsh Moor I seemed to see a softer, warmer landscape of sub-tropical verdure springing from a more generous soil than that of what Pringle had called "Stormberg's rugged fells." Entumeni, said the letter, was in a fairly densely populated Native Reserve. And the Zulus, I said to myself, are a distinguished nation. [154]

The Ntumeni trading store was established in 1883 [155] and the Plomers acquired a 99 years' lease of which fifteen years had run. Situated some distance from Eshowe,

near what is today Kwazulu, the store and the house in which the Plomers lived are at present owned by Mr and Mrs Bailenden. [156] In the 1920s the store was surrounded by indigenous forest, and the idea of being in a wild "unspoilt" Africa, in daily contact with the Zulu people, added to Plomer's excitement:

> The words which haunted me were "Zululand", "Zulus", and "natural forest" ... Sanguine, curious, impulsive, what did I expect? [157]

Plomer looked forward to seeing the place with all the expectation of a colonial adventurer setting out to explore "darkest Africa", and the trip to Zululand is recalled in romantic terms:

> We travelled north up the Natal coast from Durban by train through the cane fields. The platforms of the little stations were thronged with Indians, and sometimes through a clearing in an orange grove or mango orchard could be seen some white temple, small and ornate. After we had crossed the swirling Tugela the landscape became flatter, more open and less populous; then the train wound up the serpentine line through the fertile hills and a tunnel of "natural forest" to Eshowe, the capital of Zululand ... The name is onomatopoeic, to evoke the sound of a wind among leaves. A conspiracy of leaves, whispering, sighing and muttering, surrounded the hotel where we spent the night. In the morning they were seen to be as dense as in a tropical scene by the Douanier Rousseau. The verandahs were caves of ferns, creepers and flowering plants ... [158]

The Reverend A.W. Lee, who became the Archdeacon of Eshowe

in about 1918, [159] described the Eshowe environs in the 1920s in this way:

> The little town, which had grown out of a military camp, struggled its way between, and frequently into, the two natural forests of Dhinza and Eshowe. Its surroundings were thus primitively sylvan and strikingly beautiful. The eye of the resident roamed over serried masses of trees and flowering shrubs of semi-tropical aspect. Monkeys abounded, and it was not an uncommon occurrence to see a bush-buck strolling along the less frequented streets.
>
> There was golf, there was tennis and cricket, there was a lovely natural bathing-pool supplied from a stream which rose in the cool recesses of the forest ... [160]

The landscape around Eshowe fulfilled all Plomer's romantic expectations. Arriving eventually at Ntumeni - "the place of thorns" - the shabby and unprofitable trade store and the house were seen to be less romantic than Plomer had imagined. But he was nonetheless "bewitched" by his new environment. It was here at Ntumeni, aged nineteen, that Plomer began writing his first novel, Turbott Wolfe. [161] James Plomer describes Ntumeni as follows:

> This was one of the first trading stores in Zululand. Two brothers (unmarried) owned [it] *from before the Bambatha rebellion.* The house is the original much improved by us, even more so by Bishop and his family since.
>
> The store you saw is entirely new *since our day* and on a different site, and with a great deal more space. It suits the present business demands much better. Earlier years this was literaly a trading business in many areas -

> sun-dried hides, bones for fertilizer factories, and mealies bought for cash and spent in the store. This required storage buildings and grain tanks. In those times sugar-cane would not grow at this altitude as it does now. The post office was at the Norwegian Lutheran Mission nearby - as described in Turbott Wolfe. [162]

In section II it was argued that the landscape described in Turbott Wolfe is divided between Plomer's experience of the Stormberg region and of Zululand. The setting of Ovuzane, the trading store in Turbott Wolfe, is clearly based on Plomer's perception of the sub-tropical verdure of the Ntumeni area, with its forests, banana plantations and mango groves. Similarly, Plomer drew inspiration for the portrayal of some of his characters from both the Eastern Cape and Zululand. Like Ovuzane, the Ntumeni store was to an extent isolated from "white society":

> We had heard that there was a mission station a while or so away, and that a few white farmers had settled here and there outside the Reserve. [163]

Nevertheless, the Plomers inevitably became part of the local white community in the Eshowe district. Plomer and his mother had always felt a characteristic contempt for English colonials in South Africa, and Plomer had disliked many of the whites he came across at Marsh Moor. From the descriptions in his autobiography it appears that the Plomers' neighbours at Ntumeni were in some instances a

great deal worse:

> Of most of our other white neighbours (none of them very near) it cannot be said that their outlook was liberal, their treatment of the blacks good, or their behaviour to one another polished. Some of them cheated and oppressed the blacks as a matter of course ...
>
> Some of them disliked us a lot, and their dislike was mixed with envy; but if they disliked us, some of them detested one another. The worst of them would assassinate each other's livestock, remove their neighbour's landmarks, and take away the characters of their supposed friends. One man drove a long way to visit another merely to fling a dead dog in his face. [164]

This last anecdote was confirmed by Ms. Estelle Gerricke, a resident of Eshowe. [165] But if some of the white neighbours were unpleasant, both Ms. Gerricke and Mrs. Ballenden (current owner of the Ntumeni store) recall that the Plomers made themselves unpopular by their "superior" attitude and snobbishness; [166] it is no surprise that the Plomers were referred to as the "Royal Family" by the local whites. [167] The Plomer's aloofness and contempt for some of their neighbours clearly informed the portrayal of some of the colonials of Turbott Wolfe, and their acquaintances were limited to the Eshowe magistrate, the Anglican parson and a few others. This parson, referred to in Plomer's autobiography, [168] is the same Reverend Lee, quoted above, who later wrote several memoirs about his missionary experiences in Natal and

Zululand. [169]

While a student at Burgh Missionary Training College, the British-born Lee met a fellow student, "a real live Zulu in the person of one Philip Mkize, who had been sent there from Zululand":

> We talked much together ... His descriptions of life in Zululand, rough, adventurous, and varied, led me finally to make up my mind ... [170]

An interview with Lee's son, currently a sugar farmer in the Eshowe district, revealed that the Plomers and Lees saw each other regularly, and that it was with shock and outrage that Lee had recognized in Turbott Wolfe a portrayal of Eshowe society. [171] Worst of all, Lee believed that he and his wife had been caricatured as the "Fotheringhays" in the novel, and was deeply offended. Lee was a regular contributor of book reviews to the local newspaper, The Zululand Times, writing under the pseudonym "Scrutator". In The Zululand Times (Thursday, April 1st, 1926) Lee was able to vent his anger and disgust at "Mr Plomer's Book":

> Issued by the Hogarth Press, we have looked forward for some time to the pleasure of reading and reviewing this book, the first work of a resident in Zululand. To say that we are disappointed in it is to make use of the art of understatement in a manner more polite than truth-

fu[illegible] ..

> ... To collect, as is done within its covers, all the nasty talk of the countryside, all the sneers at ordinary decency of life, the scoffs at religion, the inverted racialism which derides the European and exalts the "raw" Native, and then to disclaim responsibility for the opinions expressed, is not cricket. This is the process which Mr Plomer appears to have thought it worth his while to carry out in his book. Everyone knows that there are putrid specimens of Europeans in S. Africa. All are aware that some missionaries are a disgrace to their calling. But no one has, until now, thought it worth his while to rake together such stuff as is printed in this book, and then, in a prefatory note, to say that the opinions of the characters in the book are not necessarily those of the author. Isn't that rather a cheap and obvious way of escaping the odium of being a scandal-monger? It is an old dodge. "Let me tell you what I've heard about so-and-so," says the whisperer. "It is really shocking. But don't tell anyone that I believe it." [172]

Section II of this chapter argues that Plomer was perhaps more interested in portraying colonial "types" rather than drawing accurate portraits of real people. However, in the light of "Scrutator's" comments, it appears that Plomer's contempt for some of the local whites had contributed to the veiled inclusion of local Eshowe gossip. Lee's belief that he had been satirized in Turbott Wolfe also indicates the extent to which some of his characters were inspired by Eshowe locals.

A case in point is Plomer's portrayal of the Norwegian missionary Nordalsgaard and his "god-like" predecessor, Klodquist. Contrary to Stephen Gray's assertion that the

presence of Norwegians in Turbott Wolfe is historically inaccurate and confusing, the Church of Norway Mission played an important role in the Eshowe district. Reverend Lee himself admits that the Anglican and Norwegian missionaries were in direct competition when it came to winning "African souls" for Christianity:

> There was no gainsaying the fact, however, that our showing in [the "Native Reserves"] was not a very successful one. The Church of Norway Mission had early established itself therein from its strong centre of KwaMondi, quite close to Eshowe, and one of the oldest stations in Zululand. [173]

The Ntumeni Mission, a short distance from the Plomer's trading store, was one of the most successful Norwegian mission stations. Plomer describes the missionary in charge of the station in his autobiography:

> Our nearest and most congenial neighbour was a stately old Lutheran missionary, a Norwegian, and what used to be called "a gentleman of the old school." A distinguished survivor from Victorian times, educated, courtly, and benevolent, and clad always in a frock coat, he made one realize how strangely exotic, how almost Martian, the early missionaries must have seemed to Africans. A widower, he was helped in his labours by two or three Norwegian spinsters or widows, who looked as if they had walking-on parts in some lost, unfinished play by Ibsen and by cheerful and contented-looking African converts. [174]

Similarly, Nordalsgaard, whom Wolfe describes as "the only

white man of quality I had so far come across in Lembuland", [175] is a "gentleman of the old school" in charge of a nearby mission, assisted by his stout housekeeper, Rosa Grundso:

> Nordalsgaard was a Norwegian, a survival of an ancient type of missionary, a Lutheran-Catholic, unmercenary, a scholar and a gentleman, looking to his work only to reward him with the affection of ... the African.
>
> ... For nearly forty years he had been at Hlanzeni, successor to the almost legendary Bishop Klodquist, a prodigious patriarch, a neo-Viking, an incredible pioneer, a hirsute aristocrat. [176]

Nordalsgaard is overshadowed by his predecessor:

> I do not suppose that Nordalsgaard was ever so great as Klodquist. Like the bishop he was an autocrat, but unlike the bishop he was not a dictator. Nordalsgaard cut a figure, but after Klodquist not a fabulous one. He was loved, but not worshipped. Where his predecessor had been a god, Nordalsgaard was a demigod. Nevertheless ... Nordalsgaard had an immense influence with the Natives. [177]

The originals of Klodquist and Nordalsgaard can partly be found in the legendary Norwegian Lutheran missionary, Bishop Schreuder, and his successor, Reverend Hans Astrup.

Bishop Schreuder, widely known as the "Apostle of the Zulus", arrived at Port Natal in 1844, and is credited



"... how strangely exotic, how almost Martian, the early missionaries must have seemed ..."
Bishop Astrup of the Church of Norway Mission,
a relative of Hans Astrup.

with establishing the first mission station in Zululand. [178] The story of the establishment of the Impanga Mission station (*Empangeni*) is typical of the near-legends that surround Schreuder. King Mpande (Cetshwayo), having fallen ill and unable to find a cure, summoned Schreuder in August 1850:

> Schreuder set off for the Zulu King's kraal, feeling that this was a duty that God had laid upon him ... the king quickly improved in health and as thanks to Schreuder he gave him admittance to his kingdom. [179]

In 1852 Schreuder established the Ntumeni Mission station which became the headquarters of the Norwegian Mission Society for Natal, Zululand and Madagascar. Schreuder was renowned throughout the area as an active, highly esteemed and formidable man, winning converts, establishing schools, translating catechisms and sections of the Bible into Zulu, and founding his own mission, the Church of Norway Mission (Schreuder Mission) in 1873. [180] Today some of Bishop Schreuder's possessions enjoy pride of place at the Zululand Museum at Eshowe and he is referred to as one of the most prominent local historical figures. Schreuder worked at Ntumeni until his death in 1882, and his reputation overshadows those of his successors. Plomer, living at Ntumeni in the 1920s, not far from the mission station and church that Schreuder built and where

he visited regularly, must have been aware of Schreuder's history; this knowledge must certainly have influenced his portrayal of the remarkable Bishop Klodquist. The Hlanzeni Mission Station of Turbott Wolfe is clearly based on the Ntumeni Mission station (now incorporated into Kwazulu) which in the 1920s flourished as an educational institution.[181]

Schreuder's successor at Ntumeni was the Reverend Hans Astrup "whose wonderful activities as preacher and teacher meant a further expansion and consolidation of Bishop Schreuder's lifetime work at Ntumeni." [182] The Astrup family played an important role at Ntumeni in the first half of this century. The identity of the Norwegian missionary referred to in Plomer's autobiography is revealed by Plomer's brother, James Plomer:

> Socially [the Plomers] had nothing to do with the white locals most of whom were not a particularly impressive group. Those they did see a good deal of were the Astrups (Missionary) followed by Ylvisaker a delightful American ... [183]

Hans Astrup was by this time an elderly but still active man who, like Nordalsgaard, had spent almost forty years involved in missionary work. The original of Nordalsgaard can be found partly in Astrup.

By contrast with most of the white neighbours Plomer came across, the African customers whom Plomer met daily at the Ntumeni store are recalled with admiration in his autobiography:

> The physical beauty of the Zulus was conspicuous. Many of them went about all but naked, and their presence was to me deeply and agreeably disturbing. Well-developed young girls would long remain chatting and chaffing each other by removing their scanty coverings in order to reflect their buttocks in a pier-glass near the door, but some were more modest. The young bucks, descendants of Chaka's braves, ornamented with a few beads and little else, and moving with superb grace and upright carriage, were often models of bodily perfection. They used to remind me of Herman Melville's comparison of the beautiful Marquesan islanders with the inhabitants of New York ... [184]

The contrast between the friendly and often physically magnificent Zulus and some of the local whites could not fail to make an impression on Plomer and this perception is highlighted in Turbott Wolfe, as is Plomer's lasting affinity to the idea of the "Noble Savage". Wolfe also expresses his concern for the disappearance of the "Noble Savage" and "primitive" Africa in the wake of the corrupting encroachment of western civilization. [185] This central concern is echoed in Plomer's description of the various customers at the Ntumeni trading store. While Plomer admired the "primitive" Zulus, he disapproved of some of the "Christianized Zulus":

Author Adler Michelle
Name of thesis The Literary, Personal, And Socio-political Background Of William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe. 1988

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
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