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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

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Title: Popularising History: The Case of Gustav Preller.

by: Isabel Hofmeyr

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Popularising History : The Case of Gustav Preller

By Sunday October 16 1916 filming of *De Voortrekkers* was all set to roll. Preparations for this African Film Production venture had not been easy and all manner of objection from various quarters had threatened to scupper the project. The Department of Native Affairs for example had strenuously opposed the film "on the grounds of the undesirability of any activities calculated to bring black and white in this country into even mimic armed conflict".[1] Promises that black extras in 'warlike scenes' would brandish only 'specially designed collapsible wooden assegais' mollified department officials as did assurances from the 'oubaas' - General Botha - who had taken a personal interest in the film through his close association with its scriptwriter, Gustav Preller. It was another few words from the General that helped assuage various Transvaal Resident Magistrates, also unhappy with the film's casting requirements, this time concerning Boers. These local officials understandably felt a mite twitchy at the prospect of apparently armed commandos cantering about the countryside, fuelling rumours of another rebellion.[2]

Within the Afrikaans community itself powerful voices had condemned this Schlesinger-sponsored venture. Certain Nationalists denounced it as part

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1 T(ransvaal) A(rchives), Preller Collection, A 787/V(olume) 266/ F(ile) 259 - Schlesinger, I. W, (Voortrekker rolprent)/ I(tem)/P(age) 89, Department of Native Affairs to Preller, 8 July 1916. The Preller Collection has two types of volumes, those with files and those without. The files, called 'Historiese Inligtingslêers' contain his ongoing research and one file can fill several volumes. The pagination of the collection is not always consistent. Sometimes numbers refer to an item, at other times each page of each item is numbered.

2 *Ibid*, I 35, General Manager, African Film Productions Ltd. to Preller, 14 Sept. 1916; I 37, Preller to Minister of Justice, 19 Sept 1916

of a SAP plot to hijack the forthcoming Paardekraal/Dingaans Day celebrations for which the film was being made. Reports that these selfsame critics had earlier 'begged' unsuccessfully for roles or turned down parts because of poor pay took the edge off their criticisms.[3] The church as well added its voice to the controversy complaining that filming was to take place on the Sabbath, the only day that 3 000 ERPM mine workers would be available to wield their collapsible wooden assegais as Zulu warriors in the Battle of Blood River.[4]

Preparations for shooting near Germiston had been costly and time-consuming. Alongside an artificially constructed river, stood a laager of handmade wagons. On the Sunday that filming began, the Heidelberg, Elsburg and Germiston Boer commandos took their places in the laager, dressed in Preller-designed trekker costume and armed with an assortment of historical musketry filled variously with blank and live ammunition. Some distance away the ERPM workers had congregated but while they awaited orders from their 'indunas', the Boers took matters into their own hands and with shouts of 'Shoot the devils', opened fire on the mineworker 'impis'. The film crew apparently attempted to stop the shooting but not, one presumes, too energetically since they managed nonetheless to procure enough footage for all the film's battle scenes. In the face of this firing, some workers fled. The majority however continued to bear down on the laager which by some accounts included mine and compound officials dressed as Boers. When the fracas died down, one worker, 'Fanuk' had drowned, 122 were injured and 35 lay in hospital.[5]

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[3] T A/A 787/V 267/F 259/1 35, Preller to Bodenstein, 22/1/17; also V266/F 259/1 161-3, Letter drafted by Preller for Gen Botha to send to a complaining dominee, Paul Nel, n.d.

[4] *Ibid*, 1 60 and also V 266/F 259/1 43-4, Preller to African Film Productions Ltd., 28 Sept 1916

[5] Paragraph based on T A/A 787/V 270/F 259/1 67 *passim*

Filming continued and the movie - a fictional account of Retief's Trek - was duly released in December. Advance publicity made much of the 'lifelike' battle scenes. 'Die Oubaas' was apparently moved to tears by the production and 15 000 people a week queued to see the movie.[6]

The issues raised by this film are indeed compelling, but it is not the intention of this paper to explore them here, except indirectly. Rather the focus of this study is the portly figure of Gustav Preller, the film's scriptwriter. Any day of the week, he could be seen waddling purposefully about the film set and offices doing what he knew and liked best : popularising history. This 'demoticising' work formed a powerful theme in Preller's extensive opus and was to inform the broad range of tasks he assumed. When he was not scriptwriting, he busied himself working - often simultaneously - as a newspaper and magazine editor, author, literary critic, historian and key 'taalstryder' of the Second Language Movement which formalised modern day Afrikaans.

A complete assessment of Preller's life and work which like his girth was considerable, is not possible here, particularly since he has been the subject of almost no systematic research.[7] He does of course get mentioned in

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[6] *Ibid*, I 103

[7] The only full length works on Preller seem to be J S du Plessis, *Dr Gustav Preller as Historikus van die Groot Trek*, M A, UNISA, 1949 and J R Malan, *Preller as Kunstenaar*, M A, UNISA, 1924. Articles are more numerous but tend to be popular journalism. See for example, W van Heerden, 'Gustav S Preller', *Huisgenoot*, March 29 1931. More scholarly articles include S C Hattingh, 'Letterkundige Werk van G S Preller', *Helikon*, 4, 18, 1954, pp. 33-37; J S du Plessis, 'Gustav Schoeman Preller: 4 Okt 1875 - 6 Okt 1943 : Sy Geskiedbeskouing', *Historia*, 1, Oct., 1956, pp. 156-66; D J Opperman. 'Preller en sy Studiebronne', *Standpunte*, 7,2, Dec. 1952, pp. 117-9; for literary histories see G Dekker, *Afrikaanse Literatuur Geskiedenis*, Nasou, Kaapstad, n.d., pp. 38-40, 167-70; R Antonissen, *Die Afrikaanse Letterkunde van Aanvang tot Hede*, Chpt VII, Nasou, Kaapstad, n.d. For an overview of Preller's work see W M Toerien, *Gustav Schoeman Preller 'n Bibliografie*, University of Stellenbosch, 1969

standard texts on Afrikaans literary history and historiography which all pay homage to him as a 'founding father' of both disciplines. However virtually none of these discussions have anything to say about Preller as a populariser or popular historian. In this area, Preller was quite breathtakingly and spectacularly successful since it is largely his interpretation of the great trek and more importantly, his *visual* version of that social movement which has been widely received as the dominant one for the last seven odd decades. During this time these interpretations and images have settled in the minds of millions of South Africans and it is through these visual images that the trek has almost always been thought, imagined and experienced. One of Preller's many obituaries summarised his 'invention' of a trekker mythology succinctly :

> Toe sy *Piet Retief* verskyn het, was historiese figure soos Trichardt, Pretorius, Retief, Celliers en ander niks meer as name nie, terwyl die Trek aan ons voorgestel is as die uittog van 'n klomp bandelose korrelkoppe wat onder geen gesag wou buig nie en gehunker het na 'n "lekker lewe" - soos Walker dit genoem het - waar elkeen sy eie baas sou wees.
>
> (When his *Piet Retief* appeared, historical figures like Pretorius, Retief, Celliers and others were mere names, while the trek was presented to us as an exodus of a lawless band of (peevish, churlish fellows or 'natives' and 'hotnots') * who would submit to no authority and yearned only for the 'lekker lewe' - as Walker called it - where each would be his own master). * Which of these meanings the writer intended is not clear.[8]

Against this background, the lack of interest in Preller - clearly a, if not the key ideologue and inventor of twentieth century Afrikaner tradition - is surprising. Largely ignored by Afrikaans scholars, his absence from works

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[8] 'Gustav Schoeman Preller', *Huisgenoot*, 22 Okt 1943. This and all further translations are my own. The assertion that the dominant visual version of the trek derives from Preller is made deductively. From the extensive pictorial research that Preller did it was clear that there were no visual precedents on which he could draw. Most pictures that come after him bear a strong family resemblance to his original formulations. See for example, L J van Zyl, J H Rabe, *Die Groot Trek in Beeld*, no publication details, no date. (This is a comic book version of the Great Trek and draws heavily on Preller's written version, see for example p. 41). See as well *The Romance of the Great Trek*, Hans Rooseboom, ed., C N A, Pretoria, 1949.

like O'Meara and especially Moodie is also striking particularly since he left some 300 volumes of his papers in the Transvaal archives where they occupy 17 metres of shelf space.[9] This essay is largely based on a foray into these documents which are an astonishingly rich source for those interested in the cultural fabrication of nationalisms. In attempting to explore some of these issues through a collection like Preller's, one can of course answer only limited but nonetheless interesting questions. The bigger questions, particularly those touching on popular responses to nationalisms, in any event notoriously difficult to grapple with, cannot be answered adequately from such sources alone.[10] Consequently the questions that this paper raises are modest ones : rather than ask why Preller's work found popular favour, it asks *how* he popularised. For example what techniques, strategies, conventions, narrative formulas and social languages did he deploy in his work and from whence did he derive these cultural resources? A careful consideration of these issues may in the long term shed light on the bigger and more murky question of the popular reception of nationalism.

In 1942, a year before his death, Preller wrote an article for *Die Huisgenoot*, entitled, 'Die Lewe Het My Geleer - Die Onmag van die Voorbeeld' ('I Learned From Life- The Impotence of the Example'). The article began :

> 'Dinge wat die lewe ons leer is merendeels van 'n min of meer vertroulike ... persoonlike aard; en dis boondien moeilik om na te gaan in hoever dit ook vir ander belangwekkend kan wees. Maar, het dit ander miskien ook al getref hoe moeilik die lering van die herinnering is?

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[9] T A/15/ *Inventaris van die G S Preller Versameling*, J R J Uys, comp., Univ. of Pretoria 1973 , Inleiding.

[10] For an overview of some of these questions see G Eley, 'Nationalism and Social History', *Social History*, 6, 1981.

> (The things that life teaches us are mostly of an intimate, ... personal nature; and it is moreover difficult to gauge to what extent these things have meaning for others. But, has it ever struck you how difficult the lessons of memory are/ how difficult it is to learn from memory?)[11]

These are of course the sentiments of an old man but for that reason they are a concise alembic of Preller's thought which can perhaps be encapsulated in two phrases : personal experience and popular memory.[12] These two notions constitute the organising principles of all of his work. For Preller, personal experience was the very stuff of history which was an accumulation of individual, personal, intimate events, details and recollections. Each life assumed an idiosyncratic, unique shape and Preller constantly reiterated that it was his business to eschew the lives of great men and document ordinary lives instead. This populism was of course poured into a nationalist mould : counted together, all of these ordinary lives mounted up to form the nation which according to Preller assumed the biographical shape of a life itself.

All of this personal experience, the warp and weft of history, was stored in individual memories. When old people died, so too did their experience. In the light of this, the crucial question for Preller became firstly how could one save, record and 'bank' this experience and secondly, having stored it in some form, how could one get others to remember it and more importantly integrate and 'enact' it as as a theme of their own lives? At the very heart of Preller's work then is a cluster of questions around the issue of popular memory and how people recall, store and encode recollections and the events of everyday life.

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[11] 'Die Lewe Het My Geleer : Die Onmag van die Voorbeeld', *Huisgenoot*, September 1942, p.

[12] This account of Preller's thought is drawn from *Ibid*; *Historiese Opstelle*, van Schaik, Pretoria, 1925; T A/ A 787/V 147/F 21 - Dingaaansdag, I 319, ' 'n Geskiedenis-opvatting', *De Volkstem*, 11 April 1917.

Most of Preller's life became a search to find strategies of storing the past in forms whose shape and cadence would make some popular sense. He was to devise many techniques in this quest, but the source to which he most frequently returned was oral history and testimony which he collected voraciously. In so doing, he apprenticed himself to patterns of everyday narrative and reminiscence, learning there a method of telling and seeing, a narrative voice that could speak in familiar and reassuring ways to distant and as yet undiscovered audiences. Like other successful popular historians, he fed off a range of 'intimate cultural forms : letters, diaries, photograph albums and collections of things with past associations'.[13] These he translated into a range of cultural objects which reached people through a variety of media : books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, plays, debating circles, lectures, fetes and festivals, films, souvenirs, Christmas cards and so on. Taken together, all of these created a kind of popular haze around the topics on which Preller went to work. Possessed of a very particular cluster of visual and linguistic skills, Preller was uniquely poised to effect the complex combinations and syntheses that such work required. The craft strategies and techniques that Preller fabricated in turn had a lot to do with the path of his own life and it is to this topic that we now turn before we examine his work in more detail.

In 1875, Gustav Schoeman Preller was born into a family on the fringes of notable Transvaal society.[14] His father had farmed in the Pretoria and

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[13] Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory : Theory, Politics, Method", in *Making Histories*, Univ. of Birmingham, CCCS, ed R Johnson et al., London, 1982, p. 210

[14] Account of Preller's life based on Leon Rosseau, *The Dark Stream The Story of Eugene N Marais*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1982, pp.

Standerton districts and was from time to time favoured with some lesser government office. When he died in 1916, he was a small time farmer and Justice of the Peace in Amsterdam, partly supported by his son Gustav. Preller's schooling began late and ended early. At the age of twelve, he went to the Standerton school but in three years lost four teachers to the Witwatersrand gold fields. With the departure of the last teacher, the school closed and Preller found employment as a shop assistant. His brief schooling was always to remain a point of touchy pride for Preller who liked to portray himself as the autodidact, schooled in the grim university of life. An honorary doctorate from the University of Stellenbosch in 1930 did little to change this self-perception.

When the family moved to Pretoria in 1890, Preller articled himself to an attorney's firm but he abandoned this career in favour of becoming a clerk in the Department of Mines in the capital. He was promoted rapidly and in 1898 improved his social prospects by marrying Hannie Pretorius, the daughter of one of Pretoria's more prominent citizens. However all of this social incrementalism was cut short by the outbreak of war. Preller fought with the Pretoria commando and was captured near Ermelo and sent to India as a prisoner of war. He returned after a few months in 1902 to a changed world. The Department of Mines snubbed him while the British had commandeered his already looted Sunnyside house as an office. He was on the point of emigrating to Argentina when Eugene Marais persuaded him to take over the editorship of the newly reopened *Land en Volk*.

On this paper, Preller had the opportunity to experiment with ways of shaping and expressing his newly-found nationalist sentiments. Under

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165-79; J S Du Plessis, 1949, *op. cit.*, Chpt. 2; sections of T A/A 787/V 261/F 241 - Persoonlike Polemiek; Also V 237 -40/F 192 - Preller; D J Opperman, *op. cit.*; S C Hattingh, *op. cit.*; and obituaries in *Huisgenoot*, 22 Okt. 1943

Marais's tutelage, he niggled the Milner state in a style of 'ambiguous enmity' as the censors called it and spent his journalistic energy focusing on a series of issues like British land settlement schemes, close to the heart of Transvaal notable society. In 1903, largely because of his great admiration for Botha, Preller, now a promising newspaperman, accepted the editorship of *De Volkstem*, destined to become the official SAP organ. For much of his life, Preller, almost despite himself, remained a staunchly loyal Botha - and hence SAP - man and it was only after the 'Oubaas's' death in 1919 that he seriously began thinking of making the National party his political home. Always a man to hedge his bets, Preller eventually only changed sides in 1925 after the Pact victory was secure. With this political switch, came a change of editorships and he assumed control of the Nationalist party organ, *De Vaderland*. Three years earlier he had also resigned the editorship of *Die Brandwag*, a post he had occupied since the magazine's inception in 1910.

Alongside his journalistic work, he continued with his historical research on Transvaal and Natal Boer history. This work took various forms, and part of his energy went into collecting historical documents, diaries, letters and the like. In addition he also gathered life histories and oral testimony relating to various historical episodes of the Great Trek and Anglo-Boer War. Much of his work first appeared in his own journals, but from the early 1900s he began reprinting it in book form. These volumes can be divided into three rough categories : popular biography and life history; historical fiction and reissued historical documents. The most famous example of the first category is the book *Piet Retief* which first appeared in serial form in *De Volkstem* and then came out as a book which went into ten editions. Similar work includes a book on Andries Potgieter (1937) as well as work like *Onze Krijgs-Offecieren* (1904) an album of portraits and life histories of Transvaal generals and commandants. Another popular life history series that proved to be extremely successful was *Voortrekkermense*, a five part series of oral

testimony and historical documents that appeared between 1918 and 1939. His historical fiction comprises various short stories and his document publications include various diaries, most notably Louis Trichardt's and constitutional documents of the early Transvaal Boer state. Finally Preller also produced various plays, did a good deal of translation, and wrote extensive literary criticism and polemical pieces on the language debate. In 1936 he was appointed state historian, a post he filled until his death in 1943.

If a life can be said to have a shape, then in Preller's experience there is a distinctive pattern of smashed expectation that predisposed him to nationalism. His adoption of these ideas is of course neither surprising nor noteworthy, but the ways in which he exploited this resource are. Unlike many others who adopted the voice of nationalism, Preller brought to this adopted language a particular galaxy of skills, experiences and insights that enabled him to grasp its possibilities in new and surprising ways.

The first of these skills was an undoubted ability to write. As someone subsequently put it : 'Preller het die gawe ontvang wat die Vader in die Hemelryk aan baie min mense uitdeel. Hy kan skryf'.[15] (Preller received a talent that our Father in Heaven doles out to very few people. He could write.) As a journalist, Preller refined these writing skills and at the same time, developed a set of talents relating to newspapers, publications, their typography, design and layout. In this sphere he was soon to refine an extraordinary feel for the aesthetics of the printed page, something which perhaps helped him increase *De Volkstem's* circulation from 2 000 in 1903 to 20 000 six years later. Nothing irritated him more than shoddy appearances and when the management of *De Volkstem* shrank the newspaper's size by an inch to save £60 a year on paper, Preller wrote directly to the 'Oubaas'

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[15] T A/A 787/V 261/F 241 - Persoonlike Polemiek/1 54, "Gustav Preller", *Die Huisgenoot*, 29/5/31

to get the decision rescinded on aesthetic grounds.[16] From an early date he frequently made use of lavish illustration and particularly when it came to commemorative newspaper issues, Preller was capable of producing pages that more closely resemble today's *Sunday Times* than the staid three point world of Edwardian Transvaal journalism.[17] Whatever his medium whether it be film or illustrated lecture, Preller from an early date developed the craft of exploiting its possibilities to maximum effect.

This visual impulse was of course to be focused, deepened and immeasurably extended through his involvement with film making. He witnessed at first hand the magical power of film and positively revelled in the possibilities that it opened up. In the following passage his excitement is ill-disguised : 'die mense verbeel hulle glo, - so realisties is mijn voorstellings ... als hulle voor die rolprent sit, soos kinders dat dit 'n foto is van die werkelike gebeurtenisse, soos 't in 1838 voorgeval het'.[18] (The people apparently imagine - so realistic are my representations ... as they sit in front of the screen, like children, that they are seeing a real, photographic reproduction of the actual events as they happened in 1838). This craft of illusion delighted him as did the sense of personal wizardry that the movie gave him. In a letter to Schlesinger he said :

> I "confess" various historical inaccuracies : such as, that the man who played Retief was not really Retief, but someone else, that with one exception all of the waggons seen crossing the Orange River, do so for the first time in this picture, that the bent wire nail in die disselboom of the hindmost waggon is a nail that has been purchased in a Johannesburg shop ...

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[16] T A/A 787/V 242/F 192 - Preller/I 42-5, Preller to 'Hooggeachte Generaal', 22 Sept. 1909

[17] T A/A 787/V 147/F 21 - Dingaansdag/I 244 and 246. *De Volkstem*, Dec 12 1911

[18] T A/A 787/V 267/F 259 - Schlesinger I W .../ I 35, Preller to Bodenstein, 22/1/17

[19] *Ibid*, I 14, Preller to Schlesinger, 5/1/17

[19] After making the movie, he adopted magic lantern slides as a permanent feature of the many public lectures he gave. It is also entirely appropriate that the word 'rolprent' was a Preller invention.[20]

Bolstering his linguistic and visual skills, was an unerring narrative gift which from an early date expressed itself as an acute news sense, a 'gawe om die nietigste voorvalletjie so boeind te beskryf dat dit dadelik tot iets vernaams verhef word'. (gift to describe the most trifling incident so compellingly that it immediately became transformed into something important).[21] This ability to spot formulas and popular conventions was one that Preller exercised on his historical research. For example in explaining his movie scenario he said :

> ... die drie hoof-momente van die Voortrekkergeskiedenis, die drie wat m. i. die meest tragies is van alles : die moord op Piet Retief, die moord aan Blauwkrans en Moordespruit, die slag van Bloed Rivier. In die drie is reeds die gegewe wat nodig is vir 'n drama, al die tragiek wat, soos ik dit verstaan, nodig is om die aandag van jou publiek te verseker : die ongeterfde onreg, en die vergelding ... Maar bloot geskiedenis kon ik nie gee nie. Die intiem-menslike, die uitbeelding van persoonlike verdriet en geluk, dit sou ek self moes verskaf...
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> (... the three high points of Voortrekker history, the three that in my view are the most tragic of all : the massacre of Piet Retief, the murder of Blauwkrans and Moordespruit, the battle of Blood River. These three episodes contain all the facts necessary for a drama, as I see it, all the tragedy necessary to ensure the public's attention : unprovoked * injustice and retribution ... But I could not give mere history. The intimately-human intimate, the portrayal of personal suffering and happiness, these I would have to provide myself ...) * The meaning of this word is not entirely clear. I have taken it as a typing error which should read 'ongetergde'.[22]

Utilising this narrative 'instinct', Preller was to churn out volumes which synthesized historical data through the formulas of the news story and the popular novel.

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[20] For magic lantern see T A/A 787/V 147/F 21 - Dingaansdag/ I 139, *De Volkstem*, 11/3/17. On Preller neologisms see S C Hattingh, *op. cit.*, p. 35

[21] 'n Groot Joernalis', *Huisgenoot*, 22 Okt 1943

[22] T A/A 787/V 267/F 259 - Schlesinger ... /I 36, Preller to Bodenstein, 22/1/1917

The material on which Preller exercised these verbal, visual and narrative skills was mainly to be drawn from the Anglo-Boer war and Great Trek in the Transvaal and Natal. During the war he acted as a newspaper correspondent and this documentation continued when in 1903 he called for diaries, letters, papers and reminiscences from which he intended to write a history of the war from an Afrikaans perspective. Many of these documents were military papers subsequently deposited in the Transvaal archives, an institution he did much to systematise. However much of the material sent in response to the call comprised reminiscences of ordinary soldiers which today fill some 3 000 pages.[23] As narratives of a type of everyday experience, they are characterised by certain forms of organisation common to such a genre. These features include a stress on personal, eyewitness experience which constituted the most powerful 'truth' in the mind of the writer. Sentences like 'wat ik hier wel vertel is nie wat ek gehoor het nie maar wat ik self deur gemaak het' and 'het is eenvoudig maar het bestaat uit feiten' are common as prefatory remarks to testimony.[24] In addition, informants mostly arrange their evidence episodically and it was of course the most spectacular and exciting adventures which people recalled most vividly and considered worth writing down. Favourites include 'wonderlijke en nauwe ontkoming(e)', (wondrous and narrow escape(s)); the death of a comrade; and a 'genealogy' of battles fought and places been to.[25]

One might of course argue that these are reminiscences of exceptional circumstances which have little to do with more workaday experiential

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[23] T A/A 787/V 74 and 75 - Anglo-Boere Oorlogsherinneringe, ervaringe en korrespondensie, Ingekom by *Land en Volk* and *Vaderland* (respectively)

[24] *Ibid*, V 74, Testimony of P D Roux, P 430 and Testimony of J A Holtzhauzen, P 247

[25] *Ibid.*, Evidence of J N H Grobler, P 23, and V 75 - Testimony of G H Engelbrecht, P 230, and J H Snyman, P 311 and P H Uys, P 325

testimony. In fact the reverse is probably true since times of great upheaval and suffering mostly produce 'factually insistent' narratives : 'It is almost as if violent events ... demand their retelling, their *narration*, back into traditions and structures they defy'. (Emphasis original)[26] Central to such narration is the 'eyewitness scribe',[27] a figure incidentally whose shadow moves through most of Preller's work. This character is the person who wishes to record or narrate proof as a witness to hardships experienced and sufferings undergone. Within this framework, the narrative of personal experience becomes the most powerful form of testimony. War reminiscences then, far from contradicting the outlines of everyday autobiography, make them bolder.[28]

As a journalist and soldier - and quite probably in his youth - Preller had already no doubt heard many examples of this style of storytelling, being by all accounts a listener rather than a talker.[29] Be that as it may, by the beginning of the Anglo-Boer war he had begun appropriating the conventions governing everyday narration as a guiding principle in his ongoing life history work. From soliciting written life histories, he soon moved to collecting spoken ones, particularly of first generation voortrekkers who were rapidly passing away as Preller frequently pointed out.[30] He personally interviewed many old trekkers and when the task grew too large, he hired local 'fieldworkers' to do interviews at a guinea a time. At Preller's behest,

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[26] James E Young, 'Interpreting Literary Testimony : A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs'. *New Literary History*, 18, 2, 1987, p. 404.

[27] *Ibid*.

[28] For debates on such everyday autobiography see *Poetics*, 15, 1986 an issue on everyday narrative.

[29] A point made frequently in his obituaries, see *Huisgenoot*, 22 Okt 1943

[30] See comments by Marais in his article 'Gustav Preller', no publications details, T A/A 787/V 238/F 192/No item or page number

they also arranged photographers who were given express orders not to touch up the wrinkles on the head-and-shoulders-portraits they took.[31] The instructions which Preller sent make it clear that he had listened carefully to the earlier war reminiscences and had familiarised himself with the habitual structures of oral recall and reminiscence. The following suggestions sent to Eugene Marais on whom Preller leaned to do some interviewing are typical. First he urged patience and careful listening. Then he suggested asking about issues

> nader aan die lewe ... en wat dus vasterin die geheuge lê : ik bedoel meer bepaald persoonlike herinneringe, die klein dingetjies van die geskiedenis, anekdootjes, wat die lewe teken, persoonlike avontuurtjies en sulke sake, en dan, natuurlik ook die familie ... Bije enige groote gebeurtenis vraag ik : wat was die eerste wat u persoonlik daarvan gesien of gehoor het, en so hou 'n mens die gedagtegang op die persoonlike ... soos die huwelike, aanneme en sulke dinge, waarvan hulle in biesonderhede kan vertel, tot hoe dat hulle aangetrek was ...[32]
>
> (things close to life .. that lie more deeply embedded in memory : to be more specific, I mean personal reminiscences, the small things of history, anecdotes, which describe life, personal adventures and such like things, and then, naturally the family as well ... When discussing any big event I ask : what was the first that you personally saw and heard of it, and so you keep their thoughts on a personal track .. weddings, confirmations and such things of which they can give you details, even down to what they wore)

These principles of the personal, the episodic and anecdotal, were to become hallmarks of Preller's work and all of his voortrekker texts are dominated by an obsessive concern for the visual detail of what people wore, ate and drank. The introduction to the first in the *Voortrekkermense* series claims that it would enable readers

> om die Voortrekkers te leer ken soos hulle hulself gesien het, op die trek, in die laer, op die jag en in die huiselike kring; aan hul arbeid, hul godsdiens en vermake, in hul gewoontes en in die kleredrag van hul tijd. Buitendien verskaf 't uitsluitsel oor tal van belangwekkende historiese gebeurtenisse. Hoe die waarheid soms wonderliker kan wees

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[31] T A/A 787/V 170/F 54 - Historiese Persone, P 76-77

[32] T A/A 787/V 120/F 54 - Historiese Persons, P 128, Preller to Marais, 15/5/14

> dan die wildste vlugte van mens s'n verbeelding, word ten owervloede weer aangetoon deur die navolgende bladsije[33]
>
> (to get to know the Voortrekkers as they really saw themselves, on the trek, in the laager, on the hunt, in the household; at their labours, their religion and at leisure, in the clothing and custom of their time. Furthermore this book provides many other riveting historical events. The pages that follow illustrate again and again how truth is stranger than the wildest flights of the human imagination.)

This sense of turning history into episodic narrative constitutes a recurrent theme in this thinking. For example when asked to make a movie on the 1820 settlers, Preller observed : 'of course in the story of the 1820 settlers, there is no outstanding feature or dramatic incident on which to base one's story and therefore, it is necessary to write a fictional tale set in that period'.[34]

Not only was history emblematized in certain key episodes, but these episodes in turn could be strung on particular generic threads, the adventure story being one that Preller often favoured as the following passage suggests :

> Brandwag-lesers sal mij seker hartelik bedank vir 'n 'geskiedenis' van Delagoa-baai ... 'n kronologiese opsomming van die begin van die sestiende eeuw af tot vandag toe, van die skepe wat daar binnegeloop 't, die twiste met die inboorlinge, die bouwe van forte, en die ivoor-handel met die naturelle, of die slagoffers van die moeras-koors.
>
> (Brandwag readers will probably be most grateful for a 'history' of Delagoa-bay ... a chronological summary stretching from the sixteenth century to today, telling of the ships that sailed into the harbour, of wars and feuds with the indigenous people, the building of forts, and the ivory trade with the natives and of the victims of malaria.)[35]

In this typical passage, historical writing is premised on the themes of adventure fiction which Preller read voraciously as a child but then gave up in disgusted disappointment when he realised none of it was true. Much of

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[33] *Voortrekkermense, Deel I*, De Nationale Pers, Kaapstad, 1918, pp. 1-2.

[34] T A/A 787/V 267/F 259 - Schlesinger ... /I 119, Preller to Schlesinger, 24/6/19

[35] T A/A 787/V 147/F 21 - Dingaansdag, I 254, 'Transvaal s'n Agterdeur ...', *Die Brandwag*, 10/12/1913.

his later work can be read as an attempt to create apparently true adventure fiction.[36]

Like many other popularisers, both before and after him, Preller also fictionalised history by translating historical people into stereoptypical characters : 'adventurers, rogues, heroes and oddballs'.[37] Again historical writing is reduced to formulas of typological characters whose behaviour conforms most closely to that of adventure fiction heroes.

Having appropriated these popular literary forms, Preller also began to explore and 'colonize' the institutions of popular leisure. This 'entryism' was nowhere more apparent than in the saga of Dingaan's Day, another institution rediscovered in the nationalist climate of the post-war Transvaal. As with the 'Great Trek', Dingaan's Day had Preller as a significant 'inventing' author. The history of the day itself bears brief retelling.

In the 1840s and 50s, it was apparently sporadically and regionally observed mainly in the Transvaal and Natal. By the 1860s, when the Transvaal state declared it a public holiday, it had assumed the status of a popular festival and it was only in the heightened nationalism of the first Anglo-Boer war that its 'orthodox' meaning was fabricated. In 1881 it became amalgamated with celebrations at Paardekraal, the cairn building site associated with the beginning of the war. Thereafter Dingaan's Day was celebrated every five years. However the 1901 and 1906 commemorations never took place but by 1908 it had become a South African national day and was observed with some prominence in 1911. By 1916, in a post-rebellion world with a new Afrikaans

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[36] D J Opperman, 'Preller en sy Studiebronne', *op. cit.*, p. 117

[37] Phrase from Roy Rosenzweig, 'Marketing the Past : *American Heritage* and Popular History in the United States : 1954 - 84', *Radical History Review*, 32, March, 1985, p. 15. This article provides an interesting comparative perspective.

political geography, a variety of people were interested in resuscitating the politics of anniversaries, but it was the SAP that managed to gain control of the organisation for the Dingaan's Day festivities at Paardekraal.[38]

Prominent among the committee members was of course a certain portly figure who had already spent some time popularising the ceremony. In 1906 for example, his book *Piet Retief* had been linked to the anniversary and from time to time Preller's newspaper carried Dingaan's Day articles. By 1916 he was sending suggestions to local organising committees on how they could observe the festival often advocating that they link it to concentration camp victim commemorations and monuments. While he was doing all of this and making the Voortrekker movie, his newspaper kept a mild controversy going on Dingaan's Day dates, something which kept the issue in the public view.[39]

This euphoric Dingaan's Day climate affected many. Some senators for example were travelling by train to Cape Town and as is the wont of idle state officials they began speculating about monuments. Why they wondered, was there nothing sanctifying the spot where Retief and his men had died? One of their number Schumann knew exactly to whom they should write and like Henry Root, but lacking his sense of irony, they sent Preller £1 to start a monument campaign.[40] Several years later another man felt this newly made nostalgia sufficient to support his venture of selling erven for a town,

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[38] Paragraph based on Dingaan's Day material, T A/A 787/V 147-9/F 21 particularly I 229, 236, 239, 240, 258, 260, 321.

[39] *Ibid*, I 47, H F Schoon to *Volkstem*, 14/12/1911 and I 311

[40] T A/A 787/V 147/F 21 - Dingaansdag,/I 251-3, Schumann to Preller, 14/7/12

Herdenkingsdorp (Commemorationville), to be built on the Blood River battle site.[41]

By the time the festivities opened in 1916, there was needless to say considerable public interest and thousands flocked to Paardekraal or local festival venues. Many must have undoubtedly experienced it as something between a popular festival, nagmaal and that most underresearched popular cultural institution, the circus. Preller's movie which had been advertised in a spirit of 'sirkuslawaaierigheid' (circus clamour), with 'schreeuwerige aanplakbiljetten in beide talen' (screaming posters in both languages), was mostly shown in big tents.[42]

As with his use of popular narrative formulas, Preller adopted these institutions and remodelled them. It was noted for example that children spent their time at Dingaan's Day playing 'vreemde spulletjies' and singing 'vreemde liedjies' (foreign games and songs). Preller in *Volkstem* and *Brandwag* spearheaded a campaign to collect more suitably 'nationale' games and songs. He also suggested the appointment of 'spulletjies-kommissarissen' (games commissaires) at all festivities.[43] Preller as well wrote notes for General Botha's speech at Paardekraal and in it the theme of reconstituting popular custom and ritual was clearly stated. The speech began

> Bij vroegere feeste te Paardekraal ... was 't die gewoonte, om van die geskiedenis van die Voortrek en van Dingaansdag te laat vertel deur manne wat self aan die gebeurtenisse deel geneem het. Dit had sijn rede daarin, dat die grote gebeurtenisse in die lewe van ons volk destijds nog nie geboekstaaf was nie, en dat die verhale uit eie rijke ervaring 'n aankomenede jongere geslag juis moes help om die dinge te boek te stel. Gelukkig was daar destijds nog talrijke manne en vroue onder ons,

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[41] T A/A 787/V 238/F 192 - Preller/ I 46 - Report from *Afrikaner*, 16/1/20

[42] T A/A 787/V 270/F 259 - Schlesinger ... / I 78, Report in *Vaderland* 29/12/16, and V 147/F 20 - Dingaansdag/I 314, Bakker to Preller, Aug 13, 1917

[43] T A/A 787/V 147/F 21/ , Undated newspaper report, 'Dingaansdag'

> wat persoonlik deelgeneem het aan die gebeurtenisse waarvan hulle kan vertel. Dit is vandag nie meer die geval nie ...[44]
>
> (At previous Paardekraal festivals ... it was customary to have stories about the history of the Voortrek and Dingaansday told by men who had participated in these events. This came about because the significant events in the life of our nation had not yet been committed to writing and these stories of our rich experience were intended to help the next generation to record these events in books. Fortunately our number included many old men and women who had personal experience of the events they described. Today this is no longer the case).

At the festival itself, Preller was in evidence adding a demotic touch to proceedings with his magic lantern slide shows which must have come as some relief between items like Mej Annie Visser singing 'Iedere Nasie het se Land', Prof. Menge's violin solo entitled 'Fantasie der Afrikaners', a 'bidstond', (prayer meeting), a talk on 'Patriotisme uit een godsdienstige oogpunt beschouwd' (Patriotism from a religious point of view)and a 'hoofdienst' based on an appropriate stone-laying text, I Sam 7 12 (Then Samuel took a stone ...).[45]

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Preller continued to devise ways of mutating aspects of popular culture and his popular biographies and historical fiction continued to be bought in numbers sufficient to warrant new editions. Often as part of the books themselves but sometimes as independent ventures, Preller pursued another tack of popularising which had to do with the *realia* of history. This emphasis on the physical objects and details of the past was of course something that the film had forced Preller to think about. What after all did these 'voortrekkers' look like and what did they wear? He devoted considerable energy to this topic, scouring provincial archives for extant drawings, corresponding with other historians and collecting oral

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[44] *Ibid*, P 296, Preller to Botha, 5/12/1916

[45] *Ibid*, I 332, Programme of events at Paardekraal.

evidence.[46] The picture that he got from this evidence was not always rosy. Some oral informants held that voortrekkers wore 'eenvoudig kleredrag' which became more makeshift the further Boer communities moved from established markets. In the Transvaal 'koring-strooi' (straw) hats and 'gelooide skaap of blesbok vel' (tanned sheep and blesbuck hide) trousers were apparently common.[47]

This version of voortrekker dress was of course not the one Preller highlighted. Instead, with the help of museum curators, old people, and enthusiastic seamstresses, he concocted an aristocratic-cum-puritan look with brocade waistcoats for the men and spanking white kappies and aprons worn over dresses with a border of intricate 'naaisels' (tucks) for the women.[48]

In addition to this obsession with clothing detail, Preller worked with a galaxy of other objects. Around Retief for example he orchestrated a kind of 'relics-of-the-saints' campaign which turned things like his grave, his flask and his original Eastern Cape homestead into hallowed objects. The latter which Preller tracked down in the Albany district was popularised on a Christmas card.[49] Another object out of which Preller got a great deal of mileage was the Retief-Dingaan treaty, reputedly found on Retief's corpse. The publicity surrounding the document got underway in 1922 when Preller got wind of the fact that Cory intended disputing the document's

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[46] For evidence of this work see T A/A 787/V 210/F 139 - Kleredrag

[47] *Ibid*, Testimony of Hendrik J Henning, I 109

[48] For a more detailed description of this clothing see *Voortrekkermense Deel I, op. cit.*, p. 245. For details of enthusiastic seamstresses and others see Kleredrag file.

[49] On the search for the house see T A/A 787/V 137/F 1 - Piet Retief, I 140-3, 151-2; for the Christmas card see V139/F 1/1 16; for the grave see V 137/F 1/1 168-70, van Schalkwijk to Preller, 24/5/12; V 138/F 1/1 6, *Kerkbode*, 25/12/18. For flask see V 139/F 1/176-78

[50] T A/A 787/V 138/F 1 - Retief/I 22, Preller to Leyds, 3/7/22

authenticity.[50] No stranger to controversy himself, Preller geared up for the fight with some relish.[51] He first hired a hand-writing expert and started to carry articles on the treaty which left readers with a very clear mental image of the document on 'blue-woven foolscap' with 'dark stains of what may have been Retief's blood'.[52] The controversy was to drag on for four years and assumed quite extraordinary dimensions.

To begin with the original of the document had been lost but a number of facsimiles had been made at Kruger's behest in 1891 as a souvenir to accompany the reinterment of Pretorius in 1891. This only aided Preller's cause as various people in the Transvaal kept discovering 'original' treaties and their letters of course filled up a goodly number of column inches.[53] While all of this continued, a 100 year moratorium on the will of a Dutch cheese maker called Bantjes expired in Holland. In it, €10 000 000 was left to any heirs of the man's only errant son, whom the father like all good industrialists with ne'er-do-well sons, had sent to the colonies. The son of the cast-out heir was none other than Jan Gerrit Bantjes, the writer of the 'treaty'. His descendants rushed to Holland but were deviously pipped at the post by some other Dutch relatives who claimed descent via an illegitimate heir of the old cheese-maker and an Indian princess.[54] The papers were of course full of these incredible tales and Preller, by this time skilled at exploiting journalistic controversy, had made sure that the cheese-maker story was powerfully associated with the treaty affair.

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[51] For other controversies see his debate with Vere Stent, T A/A 787/ V 261/F 241. Preller had also helped to remove bullion from Pretoria during the Anglo-Boer war when the capital was about to fall. Some felt he had kept some for himself, V 237/ F 192- Preller/I 56, newspaper cutting, no date, no name.

[52] T A/A 787/V 138/F 1/ Weinthal to Preller, 4/9/23

[53] *Ibid*, I 50, Letter from Bethulie, 10/2/23; I 92-5, Reitz to Preller, 6/8/23.

[54] *Ibid*, I 31, unnamed newspaper reports.

This strategy of association was also one that Preller developed over time. Given that he had defined one of the central problems of popularising as that of memory, he began through strategies like association to define and sophisticate mnemonic as a resource. Every detail, story, picture and monument became for him a place where the memory of the past could be stored. It was an idea he often discussed. For example in relation to photographs he wrote, 'Dit was President Francois Burgers wat gesê het dat 'n man wat 'n portrette album aan die nageslag nalaat sijn vaderland 'n groter weldaad bewijs dan 'n staatsman wat die nasionale skuld verhoog'. (It was President Francois Burgers who said that a man who bequeaths a photograph album to posterity, benefits his fatherland more than a politician who increases the national debt).[55] Every place, every object, indeed every experience in the workaday world could have tracts of the past congealed or 'banked' in it. Elsewhere Preller phrased this idea as follows

> Die ervaring roep ons van kinds been af toe uit die lewens van al dies wat ons die naaste bestaan as ons maar net die ore gegee was om te hoor en die verstand te begryp. Die ervaring van duisende ander roep ons voortdurend toe uit wat ons die geskiedenis noem. Iedere koppie in ons land, iedere vlakte spreek tot ons daarvan. Iedere gedenkteken of monument wat ons self opgerig het, vertel ons luide daarvan. Ons taal en ons spreekwoorderykdom - wat iedereen die rype vrug is van soveel lewenservaring - vertel ons daarvan.[56]
>
> (Experience calls to us from childhood out of the lives of those closest to us if only we had ears to hear and understanding to comprehend. The experience of thousands of others calls to us out of that which we call history. Every koppie in our country, every plain speaks to us in these terms. Every monument which we ourselves have built, tells us of history. Our language, our lexicon and our proverbs - each one the product of so much life experience - tell us about the past.)

In thinking along these lines, Preller had of course hit on one of the well-tested principles of memory as many of its practitioners before him had

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[55] T A/A 787/V 277/F 297 - Suid Afrikaanse Monumente, I 153, *De Volkstem*, 27/12/1916

[56] "Die Lewe het my Geleer ...". *Huisgenoot*, 18 Sept, 1942

recognised : recall is best established through place and image.[57] In the long run however Preller was not exploring these mnemonic devices for their own sake. The object of this memory remained the nation. For Preller, to remember, and more to the point, to use memory creatively was always to recall something linked to a sense of nationhood. In the quotation above, to remember is to belong, to be welcomed into the 'broad horizontal comradeship'[58] of the nation whose membership stretches far back into time. If as Anderson has argued, nationalisms are often powerfully experienced in the realm of the imaginary and the creative, and indeed if this accounts in some small measure for their appeal, then it is in Preller's use of memory and creative recall that one must also start seeking reasons for his appeal.

There is however little evidence available on popular responses to Preller's work. Sales figures give us some sense of the scope of his following while reviews - which consistently praised the 'being there' quality of his work - give us some feeling for how his work was perceived.[59] However perhaps the most valuable source in this regard is the many letters that Preller received from his readers. The one theme that unites these letters is their stress on the emotional satisfaction and assurance that people had found in the Preller works they had read, seen or heard about. As one such

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[57] Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966, p.6

[58] Phrase from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983.

[59] For sales figures see I Hofmeyr, ' "Building a Nation from Words" : Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924', *The politics of class, race and nationalism in twentieth century South Africa*, S Marks and S Trapido, eds, London, Longman, 1987, p. 112. Some reviews include : Of *Voortrekkermense Deel I, De Volkstem*, 21 Aug. 1918; *Huisgenoot*, Nov 1918; of *Voortrekkermense Deel II, Huisgenoot*, Aug 1920, *Brandwag*, 25 Feb. 1921; of *Piet Retief* (1st ed), *De Goede Hoop*, April 1906, (2nd ed), *De Goede Hoop*, Des. 1911, (7th ed), *Brandwag*, 15 Feb. 1912 and of *Baanbrekers, Ons Vaderland*, 11/2/16

correspondent said, ' *Piet Retief* is 'n boek ver (vir) die hart van ons volk'.[60]

If one of the 'secrets' of nationalism's success is its appropriation, or reinterpretation of everyday life,[61] then Preller indeed became a master of such nationalist language and narration. As someone closely involved with Afrikaans, he was aware that it was a language largely restricted to the personal terrain of the household: ' 'n vertrouwelike, intieme taal van die groot familie-nasie, en die Engels is die harde kommersiale taal van die wereld'.[62] (a personal, intimate language of the huge family-nation, and English is the hard commercial tongue of the world). Using this intimate language, Preller rooted his work in the personal concerns of everyday life and in the conventions of popular language and narrative. All of this was in turn amplified through a whole range of media which enabled people to imagine themselves and 'their' past in astonishingly powerful ways. We get a small glimpse into this process from a letter sent to Preller by an admirer. The correspondent introduced himself as a typical 'seun' of the 'Vrystaat Vlakte - 'n paar velskoene, 'n fluweel broek, 'n bont hemp en 'n groot pap hoet'. Kootjie, for such was his name, continues

> sê tog asseblief vir daardie volksdichter van ons "Jan Celliers" as hij weer van die vlakte wil sing dan moet hij ook sing van die boereseun want hij, die vlakte en die skaap is een. En as daardie groot kunstenaar, uw vriend van Wouw miskien eendag die beeltenis van 'n boereseun in marmer of brons will weergee dan kan hij mij neem want mij vriende sê ek is te *boereseunagtig* en dus sal hij in mij krij wat hij soek. (Emphasis original)[63]

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[60] T A/A 787/V 137/F 1 - Retief; I 109-10, Andries J van Schalkwijk to Preller. For other letters see, V 239/F 192 - Preller, I 265-7, Westphal to Preller, 7/3/18; V 183/F 88 - Marais/ P 134, van Ginkel to Preller, 25/4/1916; P 132, S J van Wyk to Preller, April 5 1923; V 239/F 192/ Kootjie Serfontein to Preller, 7/9/14; V 201/F 120 - Makapanspoortmoord, P 58-9. Margaretha du Plessis, 14 Dec 1914.

[61] For a discussion of this idea see Hofmeyr, *op. cit*, p. 112

[62] T A/A 787/V 267/F 101/P 110, Letter to Nellie, 19/2/19

[63] T A/A 787/V 239/F 192, Kootjie Serfontein to Preller, 7/9/14

> (Please tell that volks poet of ours "Jan Celliers" that if he wants to celebrate the plains then he must also celebrate the boerseun because he, the plains and the sheep are one. And if that great artist, your friend van Wouw should perhaps wish to make a bronze or marble portrayal of a boerseun, then he can have me because my friends say I am terribly 'boereseunish' and hence he will find what he is looking for in me).

In this passage Kootjie thinks of himself in representative terms as a member of a collectivity of 'boereseuns'. This sense of identity is most sharply experienced through the poetry and sculpture, the 'objective correlatives' of Kootjie's diffuse sense of 'boereseunagtigheid'. These cultural products - amongst which Kootjie numbered Preller's texts - become simultaneously very public and very intimate symbols. Available through a variety of media, to a broad range of people, and coming to stand for a widely shared sense of identity, they equally become the referent of the personal and idiosyncratic meanings and interpretations that each person attaches to that larger identity. In this sense, Preller's work - and the nationalist entourage which accompanied it - approximated the role of the religious icon, both in the way it stored identity and in its powerful popular appeal.

Thus far we have examined how Preller set about his popularising. We have had little to say about the content of his works. In concluding this paper, I will briefly attempt to illustrate this by looking in detail at one of his stories, 'Baanbrekers' which deals with the socalled Makapansgat incident. In brief outline, this incident involves the Kekana clan of the Ndebele who, in 1854, took refuge from Boer commandos in some caves just north of present-day Potgietersrus. The Boers laid siege to the cave for two weeks while those inside died of thirst and Boer-created smoke. Hundreds attempted to rush outside to the nearby stream but fell to Boer fire. Overall estimates of fatalities range from one to four thousand.

The incident properly belongs to a longer story of growing Boer incursion into the north-western Transvaal between the 1840s and 1860s. During this period, Boer settlers attempted to impose their authority over the region's African communities and its considerable game and ivory resources. Their methods in this most remote of frontiers were mostly openly coercive and relied heavily on the punitive raid and pillage for cattle, women and children. The communities who felt the brunt of this coercion most directly were those who straddled the routes that Boer traders, hunters and travellers most frequently traversed. Around Potgietersrus is a brief break in an otherwise almost continuous mountain range and straddling this 'poort' that linked Pretoria with Schoemansdal, the Boer settlement and ivory centre, lived various Ndebele communities, most notably the Langa and Kekana under the respective leaderships of Mankopane and Mokopane ('Makapan'). Since the 1840s, they had been subject to Boer raids and to the grim demands of one Boer in particular - Hermanus Potgieter, widely noted as a chillingly ruthless slave raider of children.[64]

Throughout the 1850s the area was in a state of undeclared and symbolic war as the Ndebele rulers retaliated with messages of military mutilation on Boer subjects and cattle. It was not for nothing that Mankopane's praises called him 'castrator of the white man's cattle' - and the white man himself, as it

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[64] This paragraph and subsequent account based on J J de Waal, *Die Verhouding Tussen die Blankes en die Hoofmanne Mokopane en Mankopane in die omgewing van Potgietersrus (1836-1869)*, M A, UNISA, 1978; A O Jackson, *The Ndebele of Langa*, Ethnological Publications, No. 54, Republic of South Africa, Dept. of Co-operation and Development, Government Printers, Pretoria, n.d.; Jay Naidoo, *Some Problems of South African History*, Chpt 10, 'Was the Siege of Makapansgat a Massacre or a Trekker Victory?, Typescript, 1985, (Thanks to Peter Delius for this article); T A/A 787/ V 201/F 120 - Makapanspoortmoord; a range of eyewitness accounts in T A/Staats Sekretaris archives between R539/53 and R734/54; and Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido, 'Inboekselings and Oorlams ...', *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal*, B Bozzoli, ed, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1983.

subsequently turned out.[65] By September 1854, the two allied Ndebele leaders decided to force matters and hoping to turn the horse sickness and fever of the impending summer to their advantage, they severely mutilated and murdered 28 Boers in two separate incidents. Hardly surprisingly, one of the victims was Hermanus Potgieter whose death was by all accounts meticulously planned. The Boers responded with a commando that first moved against Mokopane and the Kekana who reacted as they had often done before when threatened by enemies : they took to the huge caves 16 km north of where they lived. Very few of them survived the siege that followed.

Mankopane and his followers fared better on a mountain stronghold that they had chosen for defensive purposes and the Boers were unable to inflict any severe retribution on them. The vicious conflict in the region continued to bubble and the Boers mounted a campaign against the Langa in 1858. This time Mankopane's followers suffered more but it was not until the 1870s that the Boers could claim anything like decisive authority over Ndebele communities in the region.

In Boer society, oral versions of these happenings continued to circulate and there were as well various brief written accounts.[66] However it was only in a post Anglo-Boer war situation that these stories assumed a crisper form. The region was one that had suffered very high concentration camp fatalities, and in such a climate, stories of an heroic past probably found many eager listeners. Not surprisingly, a monument to the 28 Boers murdered by 'Makapan' was unveiled near Potgietersrus in 1909.

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[65] Details from J J de Waal, *op. cit.*, p. 24 and A O Jackson, *op. cit*, p. 52.

[66] See for example, J M Orpen, *Reminiscences of Life in South Africa from 1846 to the Present Day*, Struik, Cape Town, 1964, pp. 254-6; T A/A 787/V 201/F 120/P 119-23, *De Volkstem*, 6/1/1890 and PP 124-7,*De Volkstem*, 17/2/1890.

By 1914 Preller, kept abreast of these developments by Marais who moved to the Waterberg in 1907, began work on his own version of the cave siege. Entitled 'Baanbrekers' (Pioneers) ,the story appeared in two parts in *Brandwag* and drew on archival documents, secondary sources and oral informants from the region, undoubtedly suggested by Marais.

A shrill, exculpatory piece, the text is a rebuttal of British and missionary allegations of Boer cruelty and slaving. However in attempting to establish the justice of the Boer cause, Preller translates and displaces his arguments on to a common sense set of ideas about hospitality. This formula was in fact nothing new. In *Piet Retief*, the central 'code' around which the book's moral arguments are arranged, concerns betrayed hospitality. Equally the ideas of 'ongeter(g)de onreg' and 'vergelding' (unprovoked injustice and retribution), formulations central to Preller's movie, inform 'Baanbrekers' too. There are as well other similarities. The atrocity scenes in both books are virtually identical with their battered baby skulls, dead women and drifting feathers from the ripped and stabbed mattresses. In other words, 'Baanbrekers' can be seen as an attempt to build a Transvaal Blood River mythology.

Like *Piet Retief*, this story can be read as a kind of emblematic history where events become parables which are constrained into rendering a series of very definite moral and political meanings. In this instance, the central meanings have to do with the justification of Boer conquest and seizure of land to which - so the story implies - they have a natural right.[67] This deeper meaning is translated into a narrative logic which relies on customary notions of hospitality to make its point, I would argue, popularly accessible.

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[67] This reading of the story is influenced by J M Coetzee, 'Lineal Consciousness in the Farm Novels of C M van den Heever', paper presented to the AUETSA conference, University of Cape Town, July 1985

In terms of this code, Boers in the story are consistently hospitable. Their winter migration to the lowveld, from which they are returning is passed off as a friendly social holiday, rather than anything as crude as a health necessity that such trips mainly were. Even Hermanus Potgieter whom the story owns as a difficult but rugged frontiersman, observes the codes of hospitality and fair exchange. When, at 'Makapan's' invitation, he visits the chief's homestead to hunt in the area, Potgieter takes a suit of clothing as a present for the ruler. Equally 'Makapan' keeps some of the Boer's cows for 'melkgebruik', another token of Potgieter's fair exchange. All the trade transactions in the stories emblematize this just dealing on the part of the Boers who trade wheat and mealies for game. In historical reality, the exchange must in fact have been the other way around. Given the shaky and uncertain position of Boer homesteads in the area, they were often unable to sow crops during the 1850s.[68] However in portraying the Boers as agriculturalists, the story naturalises their right to the land which they earn by honest agricultural labour, unlike the Ndebele who supposedly only hunt and gather wild honey. Similarly the settlers mark the land as their own with those microcosms of civilisation - the hedged garden. Furthermore they cut proprietorial swathes through the region with 'grootpaaie gebaan deur die Waterberg en Soutpansberg, waarlangs die Voortrekkerwaens op en neer gery 't'.[69] (highways sliced through Waterberg and Soutpansberg on which the Voortrekker waggons travelled backwards and forwards).

The Ndebele on the other hand transgress all conventions of hospitality. They invite Potgieter into their midst and then kill him. They offer deceitful exchanges : at one point an Ndebele man offers the Boers some wild honey with the object of waylaying them. Moreover their dealings are never open

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[68] J J de Waal, *op. cit.*, pp. 25 and 134

[69] 'Baanbrekers', Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad, 1931, pp. 115-6.

and fair, but rather dark, hidden, devious and disguised. For example they set sunken, concealed traps in the river and during the siege one man escapes dressed as a woman. Indeed they offend all known law and custom by becoming cannibals during the *difaqane*. In the story, this cannibalism 'accounts' for their apparently unprovoked killing of the 28 Boers which in turn justifies the Boer siege, subsequent reprisals and Boer possession of the land, symbolised by the establishment of Pietpotgietersrus in the region. In light of this Ndebele perfidy, Preller claims both moral and historical rights for the Boers by comparing the Makapansgat siege with other colonial atrocities particularly the cave blasting and smoking variety reports of which he assiduously garnered over the years.[70] The climax of the argument is a shrill genocidal call. If the Ndebele will cling to the dark, deep cave of their heathendom, then wiping them out is justified.

> Vir lyfsbehoud teen barbare en kannibale is geregverdig enige wyse van oorlogsvoere in die geval van 'n geringe blanke bevolking ... as Pretorius en Kruger veertig jaar gelede die ganse Amandebele en Bawenda daar in die noorde, en die Engelse die Zoeloes en Basoetoes in the suide kon uitgedelg 't, hoeveel verdriet en ellende en teespoed sou hul hulle eie volk dan nie bespaar 't nie ![71]
>
> (Against barbarians and cannibals, survival justifies any method of warfare in the case of a limited white population ... if forty years ago, Pretorius and Kruger in the north had eradicated the Ndebele and Venda and the English had done likewise to the Zulus and Basothos in the south - how much sorrow and suffering and adversity would they not have saved their own nation).

Viewed against even a small range of extant and subsequent historical data, Preller's piece clearly involves an extraordinary degree of inversion, displacement, and repression. It was of course the Boers who consistently transgressed codes of hospitality in the Transvaal as so many of the alternative versions of the story symbolically suggest. In one version for example, Hermanus Potgieter is killed for shooting a sacred python at the

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[70] See T A/A 787/V 201/F 120 - Makapanspoortmoord,I 176-84, newspaper cuttings and handwritten notes.

[71] 'Baanbrekers', *op.cit*, pp. 137-8

chief's homestead. In another, he kills Mankopane's son who teases him and hence earns his death.[72] The degree of inhospitable terror that Potgieter exercised must indeed have been awesome as so many stories suggest. One of these tells of Potgieter who would always stick a ramrod into an anthill when he came to a village. At this sign, villagers would bring out slaughtered goats. 'Potgieter said never a word but looked sternly at them and pointed to the ramrod. Then they went and fetched a couple of tusks of ivory and put them down, but the ramrod remained erect'. Getting no satisfaction, 'Potgieter and his men mount(ed) their horses, r(o)de round the hill and up to the kraal and (shot) some natives. Presently they came back driving the cattle to the camp and a number of captured children ... that was the requirement when the ramrod was stuck upright'.[73]

If as Clingman has said, 'an audience may in fact be the secret *author* of the address, in so far as the codes the individual is using originate from and are shared with a larger grouping',[74] then 'Baanbrekers' provides an example of a text 'written' by and derived from a popular constituency whose various voices the piece embodies. Some of these characteristic demotic traces include an appeal to customary notions of hospitality; the use of oral witness and experiential evidence; the conventions of popular colonial fiction with its marooned cluster of redoubtable white protagonists, even perhaps the haranguing tones of the sermon. However there is another strand of popular

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[72] These versions included in T A/A 787/V 201/F 120/I 102-9, Afrikaans translations of other 'Makapansgat' versions by writers like Noble, Cachet, Smit and Wangemann.

[73] J M Orpen, *Reminiscences of Life in South Africa, op.cit*, p. 250.

[74] S Clingman, 'Biography and Representation : Some Analogies from Fiction', paper presented to The History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, Feb. 1987, p. 13. Emphasis original.

experience at which this story tugs. Like much of Preller's other texts, this one appeals to a popular and widespread memory of violence and bloodshed. As one observer of Boer society noted : 'It may safely be said ... that there is hardly a Boer of the older generation who has not at one time or other of his being been responsible for a human life : while very large numbers of younger men carry the same responsibility ... He (the Boer) is above all things else a man of blood'.[75]

If this was the case, then Preller's story and his work generally met with wide acclaim precisely because it popularised violence. It was also this theme that at least one reviewer found noteworthy : 'effens romanagtig miskien, maar boeind en handig voer die skrijwer ons in die bloedige geskiedenis van die vermoording van 28 Boere'. (A bit novelistic perhaps, but the writer transports us skilfully and grippingly back into the bloody history of the murder of 28 Boers).[76] Virtually all of Preller's texts read as an inventory of 'gruweldade' which eventually calcify into a set of almost legendary codes : the battered baby skulls, the dead women, the drifting feathers, the skinning alive and so on. All of these shorthand images in turn acquire the status of implicit historical explanation and justification. For example when a local journalist decided to do a story on 'Makapansgat' in 1938, she went out interviewing people to see what they remembered. The memory, she discovered was still strong. One woman for example held forth splenetically :

> Is dit moontlik vir u om te begryp hoedat ons die kaffers verafsku terwyl dit hul eie vaders en grootvaders was wat daardie verskriklike geweldade by Moorddrift gepleeg het? My vader wat saam met generaal Potgieter was, het my vertel dat die kaffers die klein, hulpelose kindertjies uit

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[75] Anon, *"South Africa" Handbooks No 17*, 'Annals of South Africa' - (Sixth Series), (Reprinted from "South Africa"), T A/A 787/V 201/F 120, I 144.

[76] T A/A 787/V 261/F 241, *Vaderland*, 11/2/16

> hul moeders se arms geruk en hul hofies teen die wa wiele te pletter geslaan het'.[77]
>
> (Is it possible for you to grasp how we loathe the kaffirs when it was their very own fathers and grandfathers that committed those terrible atrocities at Moorddrift? My father who was together with General Potgieter, told me that the kaffirs tore small, helpless children from their mothers' arms and smashed their heads to bits against the wagon wheels)

In this account, the woman is grasping the past through a cluster of Preller type images which by 1938 had reached quite frenzied heights. The mythical version through which she experiences both the past and the present is derived from that popular haze of images that Preller's work had both helped to create and perpetuate.

In so far as Preller's texts and images set out to make people remember, they undoubtedly succeeded. However in their inversions, repressions, silences, ellipses and displacements, his works institutionalise forgetfulness, as much as recall. Given that amnesia is a common trait of much South African literature and history, Preller's work belongs to a well-established tradition. However within this absent-minded school, Preller and the historians who follow him closely, are exceptional largely because of the astonishing reversals that they have managed to institutionalise. In terms of these brazen inversions, the slavers have become the apparently enslaved; the transgressors, the transgressed against; the destroyers of hospitality, the hospitable and the perpetrators of violence, the perpetrated against.

While an explanation of how these formulations came to dominance encompass most major developments in twentieth century South African history, there is just one issue that I would like to raise in passing and that is the unconscious dimensions of these icons which must in some way account for their powerful appeal. The symbolism for example of a black community

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[77] Nancy Courtney Acutt, 'Makapan se Gruweldade', *Huisgenoot*, 6 Mei 1938