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Heroism, Tragedy, and the Failure of Historicity

in Anna de Villiers' *Die Wit Kraai*

Since the 1890s the heroism of individual Voortrekkers and of these emigrating Boers generally has been a hallmark of fictional reconstructions of the Great Trek, especially those written in Dutch and Afrikaans, and indeed it has also left its mark on those which English-speaking writers have contributed to this sub-genre. This generalisation is particularly applicable to works intended for the cultural and moral edification of young Afrikaners, as I have emphasised in earlier studies (Hale 1999a, Hale 1999b). During the first four decades of the twentieth century, the authors of such books relied heavily on the heroic image of the Voortrekkers which such trail-blazing Afrikaner nationalists as Gustav Preller meticulously constructed in the wake of the emotionally burdensome defeat in the Second Anglo-Boer War. In this strand of the Afrikaans ethnic tradition, such leaders of the Great Trek as Andries Pretorius, Gerrit Maritz, and Piet Retief were lionised to serve as types to be emulated by their descendants in the Union of South Africa. Literarily raised from the grave, they were to continue to lead Afrikaners in the ongoing competition with their English-speaking compatriots, as indeed they had done a century earlier. This role was particularly

well entrenched in the case of those like Retief and Maritz who had fallen at the hands of Zulu foes.

More challenging, however, was the task of enthroning in the pantheon of Voortrekker leaders those whose place in history was ambiguous. Hendrik Potgieter, for instance, was widely known to have been autocratic and frequently at odds with other trek chieftains. In the present article I shall consider how Anna de Villiers, an Afrikaans female *littérateur* who was steeped in Afrikaner nationalism, tackled the challenge in her novel of 1938, *Die Wit Kraai*, of constructing the tragedy of Hans de Lange, a once-respected Voortrekker scout who, after settling in Natal and becoming a well-established farmer, became one of the first Europeans in southern Africa to be executed for murdering an indigenous African. This novel is above all else a study of historical relations between ethnic groups and particularly of how its protagonist relates to his fellow Afrikaners, the British colonial administration, and African indigenes. Accordingly, much of the concentration is necessarily on De Villiers' portrayal of these segments of the demographic kaleidoscope, paying special attention to the place of the heroic myth -

and its limits - in her representation of Voortrekkers and, concomitantly, the employment of other peoples as foils. No one-dimensional saint cast in what by the late 1930s was the conventional hagiographic mould of Voortrekker heroes, her Hans de Lange is a fairly well-drawn character with a complex personality. During the course of the narrative he is heroic, anti-heroic, sagacious, ruthless at times, for years a commendable *pater familias* but later an insensitive and aloof husband. A second focal point of this article is the historicity of De Villiers' treatment of the legal ramifications of De Lange's final months, particularly the failure of *Die Wit Kraai* as a reliable historical novel.

An Afrikaans Female Perspective

De Villiers wrote from the perspective of an Afrikaans woman who spent most of her life amongst Afrikaners and devoted much of her career to pursuits and causes intimately linked to the nurturing of Afrikaner nationalism. Born in 1900 near Kuilsrivier in what was then the Stellenbosch district, she was the eldest of six children and had countless relatives in the De Villiers and Bester families (her mother was a Bester), both of which were firmly rooted in the history of the Cape. Anna De Villiers matriculated at the Bloemhof Girls' High School in Stellenbosch in 1918 and received her Bachelor of Arts at that town's university three years later. During the early 1920s she taught briefly at Oudtshoorn and earned a Master of Arts at her *alma mater* in 1924. The young linguist then served briefly on the staff of *Die Afrikaanse Woordeboek*. During a brief stint as a translator at the Department of Statistics in Pretoria, she

began to write a dissertation on "Die Hollandse Taalbeweging in Suid-Afrika", for which the University of Stellenbosch conferred on her the degree *Doctor Litterarum* in 1934. The topic reflected vividly her ethnic and linguistic interests. De Villiers spent several years lecturing in Afrikaans at the Pretoria Technical College and, though for only a year, in history at the University of Pretoria. In 1940 she returned to the Cape as principal of the Huguenot University College in Wellington, a post she occupied until that institution closed its doors a decade later. De Villiers then succeeded in following for well over a decade her keen interest in lexicography as an editor of the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* in Stellenbosch. Intimately related to these professional activities, she was deeply involved in such organisations as the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, the Suid-Afrikaanse Taalbond, the Afrikaanse Skrywerskring, and the Afrikaans Language Monument Committee.

As an unmarried woman without children, De Villiers found time to pursue her interwoven literary and ethno-cultural interests. While teaching at the Pretoria Technical College, she wrote the first of her several books about Afrikaans history, a quasi-autobiographical historical novel titled *Sterker as die Noodlot*, which was published in 1930. *Die Wit Kraai* was her second fictional work. De Villiers' third published novel, *Hercule de Près*, appeared in 1947 and dealt with her early Huguenot forebears in the Cape. She also ventured into nonfictional reconstructions of historical topics, chiefly the Great Trek and South African women's history, sometimes merging these two themes.

A Fictional Reconstruction of the Great Trek

In some respects *Die Wit Kraai* resembled other novels about the Great Trek which had begun to appear in the late nineteenth century and were being published with increasing frequency during the 1930s as the centenary of that migration approached and was observed. De Villiers related her tale from a conventional omniscient narrator point of view. The almost completely linear narrative of the text spans approximately 250 pages and is divided into fourteen chapters. The first and considerably longer of the two parts of the novel deals with the period from the mid-1830s, when the De Lange family is still farming and fighting off raids by Xhosa tribesmen in the Eastern Cape, until the defeat of the Zulus by the Boers at the Battle of Blood River in December 1838. The second carries De Lange's tale as a farmer in Natal from 1846 until his death on the gallows in 1861. There is nothing complicated about the plot of *Die Wit Kraai*, and very little in it will seem novel to anyone who is familiar with antecedent fictional reconstructions of this historic migration, as its author unquestionably was. Like most other novels about the Great Trek, it briefly relates the woes which frontier Boers in the Eastern Cape were experiencing during the mid-1830s, and in this respect De Villiers, again true to convention, uses farmhouse dialogue to voice (though here in extremely skeletal form) the grievances which they had against the British colonial administration, particularly with regard to woefully inadequate compensation for the abolition of slavery and the inefficacy of military protection from the Xhosa. The De Langes join the trek to the north and soon come under the secular leadership of Gerrit Maritz

and Piet Retief and the Christian ministry of Erasmus Smit. Undeterred by cursorily described Matabele attacks on their wagon train, they press on towards the "Promised Land" of Natal and eventually cross the Drakensberg. Along the way Hans de Lange repeatedly evinces his skills as a scout and, while the official leaders are away confronting the "Kaffers" (natives), as an efficient *an hoc* commander of the camp. Negotiations with King Dingaan at the Zulu royal kraal result in the ceding of an enormous tract of land to the Voortrekkers, who, after briefly interacting in a co-operative manner with the few British settlers at Port Natal and defeating in the Battle of Blood River the supposedly last Zulu resistance to their colonisation venture, begin to lay out farms and establish a republican government at Pietermaritzburg. At this point De Villiers goes beyond the chronological framework of most earlier novels of the Great Trek. The vexing British, refusing to allow these pioneers to live undisturbed and realise their vision of self-determination, annex the Republic of Natalia and impose on the Boers imperial ways similar to those which had harried them out of the Cape Colony. De Lange and many of his neighbours consequently trek again, secure from Dingaan's successor King Mpande another expanse of land, and constitute on it the Klip River Republic, but, in what strikes the settlers as a painful repetition of history, the British are hard on their heels and incorporate that short-lived country into Her Majesty's recently founded colony of Natal. In this politically unsatisfactory setting the ageing De Lange, increasingly withdrawn from his wife, allows his smouldering anger to flare up when Ncatya, one of his Zulu employees, is reported by a female colleague to have broken into an outbuilding. Accompanied by

a troupe of his other workers, De Lange sets out to take the accused to a magistrate in Ladysmith but becomes involved in a fight with him *en route* and kills him with a firearm. In the ensuing legal hearing and murder trial, the Zulu witnesses contradict one another, but the unsympathetic jury ignores the implausibilities of their testimonies and returns a verdict of guilty, though with mitigating circumstances. The British colonial judge nevertheless imposes a sentence of death by hanging, which is eventually carried out, despite the unwillingness of local settlers to co-operate with the executioner, the breaking of the rope used on the impromptu gallows, and De Lange's impassioned pleas to the governor in Pietermaritzburg for clemency.

Apart from the post-1838 events, much of the plot and narrative of *Die Wit Kraai* are utterly typical of the antecedent historical fiction of the Great Trek. Even some of the dimensions which De Villiers has added to her basic story line to create greater interest and add mythic significance mirror similar efforts of previous authors. Her creation of a romantic subplot involving the courting and eventual marriage of one of De Lange's daughters, reflects a conventional structural technique which De Villiers may well have read in several of Johan Frederik van Oordt's immensely popular historical novels, such as his reconstruction of the Great Trek in *David Malan*. Similarly, there is nothing unique in her repeated allusions to the Biblical account of the Exodus as a prefigurative typing, or the identification of some of the Voortrekkers with the Hebrews as they entered a new country under divine guidance. The literary employment of this interpretation of Afrikaner history was also virtually *de rigueur* by the late 1930s, having reached an early zenith in one of the

first novels about the Great Trek, *De Voortrekkers, of Het Dagboek van Izak van der Merwe*, which the two Dutch Reformed dominees Nico Hofmeyr and his brother-in-law John Daniel Kestell had published in 1896. There is nothing novel in the use of the heroic myth of the Voortrekkers as such or the concomitant and stereotypical references to the Zulus and other African characters as bloodthirsty and morally depraved foils, although this typing is absolutely central to nuances in the character development of the protagonist (which are themselves crucial) and merits consideration. To a great extent, the significance of *Die Wit Kraai* in the history of Afrikaans literature must be judged on the basis of De Villiers' pivotal treatment of De Lange and his legal woes.

A Qualified Attitude towards the Heroic Myth of the Voortrekkers

The first few decades of De Villiers' life coincided with the period of rapid development of Afrikaner nationalism and the unfolding of the heroic myth of the Voortrekkers. When she was a schoolgirl and university student, Gustav Preller was taking the lead in attempting to revive the Afrikaner *volk's* spirits after the defeat in the Second Anglo-Boer War by, *inter alia*, writing a seemingly endless series of quasi-hagiographic books about individual Voortrekkers as well as intimately related volumes about Boer officers and the Great Trek in general. Beginning at least as early as the 1890s, historical novels and nonfictional works in Dutch and Afrikaans, some of them intended for young readers, rolled from the presses to reinforce this image of exemplary heroism. Such authors as Van Oordt, Hofmeyr and Kestell, Miemie

Rothmann, and Pieter Erasmus van der Merwe played instrumental parts in creating the fictional components of this literary campaign, which gained increased momentum as the centenary of the Great Trek approached in 1938. With few exceptions, these authors presented their nineteenth-century heroes as incapable of wrongdoing, juxtaposing them with the oppressive colonial British and the ostensibly bloodthirsty "barbarians" who resisted the incursions of the Voortrekkers into traditional homelands.

Notwithstanding her lifelong involvement in the institutions of Afrikaner nationalism, De Villiers held a qualified attitude towards the heroic myth which it had spawned and which underlay much of the historical fiction about the Great Trek. In one of her subsequent books about that migration, she emphasised matter-of-factly, "Dit is belangrik om te onthou dat al die Voortrekkers nie heldefigure was nie; nee, hulle was gewone individue met al die eienskappe soos wat 'n mens dit in elke ander gemeenskap vind, veral onder die plattelandse bevolking" (It's important to remember that not all the Voortrekkers were heroic figures; no, they were ordinary people with all the characteristics that one finds in any other community, especially among a farming population). On the one hand, De Villiers could point to such laudatory characteristics as "godsdienssin, dapperheid, deursettingsvermoë en gedult wat van talle van hulle ware helde gemaak het" (piety, courage, perseverance and patience, which made a lot of them true heroes). At the same time, she acknowledged that one could find amongst the Voortrekkers "minder aangename trekke, soos heerssug onder sommige leiers, wat aanleiding gegee het tot 'n gebrek aan

samewerking en tot noodlottige gebeurtenisse soos dit die geval was met Hendrik Potgieter en Piet Uys op die Vlugkommando in 1839" (less pleasant traits, such as lust for power in some leaders, which gave rise to a lack of co-operation and to fatalities, as was the case with Hendrik Potgieter and Piet Uys on the 1839 Raid.). Furthermore, De Villiers conceded, "Daar was die twissiekies, soos blyk uit die gedurige weiering van sommige om eerw. Erasmus Smit as leraar te aanvaar self nadat hy deur goewerneur Piet Retief as amptelike predikant van die trekgemeenskap aangestel is" (There were quarrels, as we see from the continuing refusal of some of them to accept the Rev. Erasmus Smit as minister even after he was appointed official preacher to the Voortrekkers by Governor Piet Retief). Turning from the realm of religion to private habits, she added to her syllabus of Voortrekker sins a qualified generalisation that "daar was selfs mense wat misbruik van sterk drank gemaak het, hoewel dit selde voorgekom het" (there were even people who abused strong drink, although that did not happen often), without specifying on what this allegation was based, but flatly denied illegal conduct on the part of the Voortrekkers "Sekerlik was daar geen misdadigers nie" (there were certainly no criminals among them) (De Villiers 1975: unpaginated Inleiding).

Despite this subsequent qualification, De Villiers' Voortrekkers in *Die Wit Kraai*, which was written during a period of intensifying Afrikaner nationalism, incorporate much of what by the late 1930s had become conventional heroic attributes in fiction about the Great Trek. Throughout most of her narrative, she embeds signs of valour and other virtues of the emigrating

Boers in general and particularly - though with noteworthy exceptions to which we shall return briefly - in their principal leaders. They are a freedom-loving people who left the Cape not as adventurers - as some of their Anglophone contemporaries in that colony contended - but in order to escape from British imperialist oppression and maladministration. Indeed, their thirst for liberty is so great that they are willing to risk immense perils to obtain it. De Lange's son-in-law Izak van Niekerk ponders this at an early stage of the Great Trek: "Vryheid bied hulle aan die trekgemeenskap. Vryheid en . . . die dood? Is vryheid dan ook aan bande gelê? Dan is ook vryheid g'n absolute vryheid nie? Swerwend, weg van hul voorvaderlike erfenis, om die vryheid te vind wat hulle in hul geboorteland ontsê is, het die Trekkers nou vryheid, maar 'n vryheid agterhaal deur die dood" (The Voortrekker community offers them freedom. Freedom and - death? Is freedom also in chains, then? Is freedom then not absolute? Wandering far from their forefathers' heritage, to find the freedom denied them in the land of their birth, the Voortrekkers now have freedom, but a freedom hunted by death)(49). Bravery is consequently a vital component of the collective Voortrekker character. These pioneers are undaunted, or nearly so, by man and beast alike. De Villiers even includes a scene in which Izak wrestles and slays a lioness to underscore the point (25-27). The greater valour of the Voortrekkers, however, is revealed in their dealings with indigenous Africans. De Villiers does not dwell on the confrontations of Piet Retief's party with King Dingaan of Zululand, choosing instead to highlight Voortrekker bravery by allowing both black and white characters to voice their respect for it. One elderly Zulu relates "hoe dapper Retief en sy manskappe

hulle met hul knipmesse geweer en twintig Zoeloes afgemaak het voordat hul self doodgemartel is" (how bravely Retief and his men kept them at bay with their pocket-knives and killed twenty Zulus before he himself was martyred)(137). When Andries Pretorius and his contingent arrive at the abandoned royal kraal and discover the remains of the massacre, this Voortrekker leader proclaims to his men that they "staan vandag voor die oop graf van helde wat hul lewe veil gehad het vir hul volk; ons staan by die ontsielde oorblyfsels van manne, vlees van ons vlees en bloed van ons bloed, wat met hul lewens geboet het vir ons vryheid" (stand today by the open grave of heroes who sacrificed their lives for their people; we stand by the lifeless remains of men, flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood, who paid with their lives for our freedom)(138). Some of these liberty-loving people have sufficient initiative to launch their own "Kliprivier-republiek" (171). They are above all else a proud people, and when the governor of Natal asks De Lange's wife why her recalcitrant husband has not defended himself in court, she replies, "As u ons Boeremense ken, sal u weet dat ons trots is en my man voel in sy eer gekrenk omdat hy soos 'n gewone misdadiger behandel word" (When you get to know us Boers, you will learn we are proud, and my husband feels deeply offended that he is being treated like a common criminal)(238). Their ethnic pride incorporates a vital dimension of group solidarity, and they rally as one behind De Lange in his hour of need (227, 247-249).

In fairness to De Villiers, it must be stressed that her image of the Voortrekkers in *Die Wit Kraai* is far from hagiographic. Repeatedly she tempers her narrative with incidents which underscore anti-heroic

elements in the general Afrikaans demeanour. There is considerable strife over the validity of Erasmus Smit's ministry (30-33), and his spouse, Susanne Smit, is both a gossip and boastful (22-23). Indeed, although the Voortrekker women in general are intrepid souls, they also bicker a great deal (72), and even the element of bravery which is a consistent theme in *Die Wit Kraai* has its limits. Under threat of nocturnal attack, "Almal is moeg en uitgeput, maar 'n geheime vrees hou almal wakker" (Everyone is weary and exhausted, but a secret fear keeps everyone awake)(90). De Villiers does not veil her dislike of Hendrik Potgieter, particularly his autocratic and egotistical behaviour, and one of her characters voices a similar attitude towards him after the disaster at Italeni: "Potgieter het ons darem lelik in die steek gelaat" (That's why Potgieter wickedly left us in the lurch)(112).

The Indigenous African Foil

Like most other novelists who wrote about the Great Trek, De Villiers employed stereotypical images of indigenous Africans as foils to accentuate her generally positive depiction of the Voortrekkers and to make their heroism stand out in bold relief. The tone of vilification is initially set as early as the third page, when De Lange tells his son Adriaan that "mens kan nie weet of die Kaffers lieg nie" (you can't tell if the natives are lying). The conviction that blacks are untrustworthy reverberates throughout the text. Adriaan has learnt his lesson and shortly thereafter tells his friend Izak van Niekerk that "al sê wie ook die Kaffers is ons goedgesind, hulle bly Kaffers" (no matter who says the natives are favourably disposed towards us, they're still

natives)(20). Experiences in Natal and Zululand confirm this article of the Voortrekkers' faith. Before the first encounter with Dingaan, De Lange cautions, "Maar vertrou g'n Kaffer nie" (but don't trust a native)(153), a conviction which his friend Zach Pretorius shares: "Ek vertrou g'n swartvel meer nie" (I'll never trust a black again), he tells De Lange after these two meet Mpande (155).

An even more pervasive *Leitmotiv* in the stereotyping of the indigenes is De Villiers' recurring reliance on familiar images of them as primitive and bestial. She goes on and on *ad nauseam* in describing in unrelentingly condescending terms the Africans with whom the De Langes and their ethnic fellows come into contact. Fourteen pages into the narrative, one reads that the emigrating Boers bring their rural Christian virtues into "'n wildernis vol dreigende wilde diere, barbaarse mense en onbekende landsomstandighede" (a wilderness full of menacing wild animals, barbarous people and unknown terrain). Their fears and prejudices soon seem to have been well-founded when they discover villages that have been devastated in internecine African strife. De Villiers casts her presentation of the warring African factions in the mould of popular social Darwinist terminology: "Die oeroue drang van die primitiewe mens tot alleenheerskappy huis nog in die gemoed van die wilde. Die oorlewing van die sterkste geld ook hier, onvermydelik, genadelos" (The ancient primitive will to absolute power still lives in the character of the savage. The survival of the fittest also applies here, inevitably, relentlessly). Apparently not content with this superficial analysis, she adds a theological veneer to it: "Die puinhope is simbool van sataniese lis,

goddelose broedermoord, wrede wraaksug — oerkragte van die menslikegees gebotvier op die swakste” (The ruins are a symbol of Satanic cunning, godless fratricide, a ferocious desire for revenge - the primeval power of the human spirit's domination of the weakest)(53). Bestial black-on-black violence remains a minor theme in the narrative. Andries Pretorius and his commando discover more signs of it in Zululand: “Die heuwels weergalm van die wilde oorlogsrumoer en bloedstollende skrydkrete van die twee regimente moordlustige barbare wat met dierlike wreedheid alles in werking stel om hul eie stamgenote uit te roei. Verwarring. Slagting. Die dood” (The hills echo with the wild clamour of war and bloodcurdling battle cries of the two regiments of murderous barbarians who with animal ferocity use every means to exterminate their own race. Confusion. Slaughter. Death) (156-157).

Of more immediate relevance to the Voortrekkers, of course, is the threat of Zulu violence to *them*. De Villiers rides this horse as well, through the well-trodden valley of the shadow of death. Her description of what De Lange finds at the site of a massacre of emigrating Boers is as sanguinary as it is unoriginal: “Bloed oral waar Hans Dons sy oë draai ... vars rooi bloed. Die aarde is beplek daarmee ... oral slaan swartrooi kolle uit ... oral drup daar bloed van die waens af, uit die beddegoed uit, onder die tentrepe uit ... die gras is nat ... bedou met vars bloed” (Blood everywhere Hans Dons turns his eye ... fresh red blood. The earth is stained with it ... everywhere there are reddish-black patches ... everywhere their blood drips from the wagons, out of the bedding, out under the tent ropes ... the grass is wet ... bedewed with fresh blood)(80). While later awaiting

an attack on their wagon train, the trek to which the De Langes belong hear “die barbaarse dreunsange van die bloeddorstige wildes” (the barbaric chant of the bloodthirsty savages) (122). Faced with the constant threat of violence from the Zulus after settling in Natal, the Voortrekkers believe they must maintain a posture of superiority as part of their ongoing defence. This, De Villiers explains, accounts in part for the abrupt way in which the latter treat their employees. As De Lange tells Spies, “hoe korter jy ’n Kaffer vat, koning of gewone swartvel, hoe meer dink hy van jou” (the more abrupt you are with a native, whether a king or an ordinary black, the more highly he thinks of you)(173). The protagonist finds inadvisable the willingness of certain British settlers, such as John Dunn, to take Zulu spouses, as miscegenation contributes to a breaking down of the wall separating Europeans in southern Africa from the barbarian indigenes. Moreover, his local ecclesiastical status has become entwined in this hierarchy of ethnic power. How can he possibly wed a Zulu girl whom Mpande has given him as a present, he wonders. “Hy, Johannes de Lange, ’n ouderling van die kerk! Die hele besigheid is ongehoord” (He, Johannes de Lange, an elder of the church! The whole business is unheard-of) (180).

Colonial British Villains

No less than the Zulus and other Nguni peoples, the British colonial officials who appear in *Die Wit Kraai* serve as stereotypical negative referents whose interaction with the Voortrekkers and other Boers underscores the heroic characteristics of the latter. There is nothing unique in De Villiers' depiction of the British. A few

examples of her portrayal of this segment of the southern African population will illustrate both their place in this novel's shallow ethnic typing and De Villiers' captivity to attitudes prevalent in Afrikaans circles of her formative decades.

In the second chapter De Villiers begins to establish a negative image of the British, employing what by the late 1930s were well-known stereotypes to underscore Boer resentment of them. When the De Langes discuss their grievances which precipitate their decision to join the Great Trek (itself a typical scene in both Afrikaans and English fiction about the migration), Catrina vents her wrath about the hurdles that make it virtually impossible to receive compensation for their emancipated slaves. "Die bloedsuiers!" she exclaims. "Kastig agente vir slawe-komespsasie, maar hulle is niks beter as bosluise op 'n perd nie" (The bloodsuckers! Bogus agents for slave compensation, but they're no better than ticks on a horse). Reinforcing the point, De Lange's own horse has been confiscated by the British (11). Repeatedly De Villiers returns to images that emphasise British imperialist oppression of the Afrikaners. The Voortrekkers leave the Cape "om sodoene die Engelse juk van hul skouers te skuif" (so as to take the English yoke off their shoulders)(14), but after reaching Natal and acquiring land through costly confrontations with the Zulus they resent the incursions of parasitic British settlers who threaten to enjoy at least some of the fruits of the Boers' struggle. "Sal al die bloed dan verniet gestort wees?" (shall all that blood have been shed for nothing?) Andries Pretorius wonders (143). There is apparently no effective resistance to the proliferation of British colonial presence. The annexation of their short-lived Klip River Republic

convinces De Lange, "Dis vir my so snaaks dat die rooi nasie ons nie wil los nie" (It seems to me that the red nation will not leave us alone). One of his mates, Abraham Spies, suggests that the roots of British incursions into supposedly Boer territory lie in "Hebsug, neef Hans, en landhonger" (Greed, cousin Hans, and hunger for land), prompting De Lange to retort with a query: "Maar, neef Abraham, het hulle dan g'n skaamte nie?" (But, cousin Abraham, have they no shame?) (188).

The colonial British intrude not only on the Boers' independence and terrain, but also on their folkways, especially with regard to race relations. Discussing with his wife the practice of white settlers taking indigenous spouses, De Lange generalises that "die Engelse in die Baai het vroeër omtrent almal so 'n vrou gekry en niemand het daar ooit iets van gesê" (just about all the English in the Bay used to take such a wife and nobody ever said anything about it) (182). Affecting the Boers much more immediately and comprehensively, however, was the imposition of supposedly colour-blind British justice. In the scene in which De Lange hears that a Zulu has burgled one of his buildings but doubts that the courts will deal severely with the accused African, De Villiers describes her protagonist's reaction as one in which he has a sense of *déjà vu*: "Maar die gelykstelling van die Kaffers met die Boere, net soos in die ou Kolonie — dit is die vernedering wat die Engelse die Boere aandoen, sonder dat hulle dit skyn te besef" (But the equation of the natives with the Boers, just like in the old [Cape] colony - that is the humiliation that the English inflict on the Boers, without seeming to realize it) (212). De Lange perceives a perpetual cleft between these two European ethnic groups, in part because

of a lack of empathy for the Boers and his own inability to comprehend British ways. He and his wife resent his being arrested by "Kaffers," and he tells her bluntly, "Vrou, jy ken mos die Engelse. Geen mens kan ooit sê waarom hulle die dinge doen wat hulle doen nie" (Wife, you know the English. Nobody can ever tell why they do the things they do) (224). Under arraignment and awaiting trial for murder, De Lange seeks to justify his use of violence by telling himself that the English simply do not understand that he had reason to shoot Ncatya (229).

The Execution of History

Although *Die Wit Kraai* is historical fiction, when assayed with the touchstone of contemporary sources in Natal certain aspects of De Villiers' imaginative plot prove to be more fictitious than historical. To be sure, literary critics have long held differing views about the nature of novelists' responsibility when reconstructing the past. In this case, it should be borne in mind that De Villiers, like several other Afrikaans and English-speaking *littérateurs* of her day, consciously sought to present fictional reconstructions of the Great Trek as an historical event while South Africa was preparing to celebrate the centenary of that migration. Furthermore, in her "Voorwoord" she pointed out that "Hans de Lange het feitlik 'n legendariese figuur onder die Afrikanervolk geword" (Hans de Lange has in fact become a legendary figure among the Afrikaners) and conceded that "daar het so baie verhale om hom ontwikkel dat dit moeilik is om die ware grens tussen die werklikheid en die legende te bepaal" (so many stories have grown up around him that it is hard to draw the line between reality and legend) (unpaginated). Seeking

to cope with this, De Villiers stated that she conducted research at the Natal Archives Depot, although she did not specify which materials she consulted there or relate anything else about her investigation.

De Villiers had little formal training as an historian. This *lacuna* in her preparation, coupled with the relative paucity of trustworthy source material dealing specifically with De Lange and particularly his legal difficulties, virtually doomed from the outset much of her attempt to write solid historical fiction. The central thrust of and pivotal facts in De Villiers' reconstruction of De Lange's trial and execution fail the test of historicity. She has created a tragic hero significantly different from the one who emerges from nineteenth-century documentation, a fictional character whose relationship to his fellow Afrikaners had little in common with that of the man who supposedly inspired him. To be sure, in some respects her inability to ferret out basic facts did not significantly compromise *Die Wit Kraai*. For example, De Villiers wrote that in 1853 Catrina De Lange noticed that her husband was finally showing signs of ageing and that his previously copper-coloured beard was finally turning white (209). In one of the few recorded contemporary comments about De Lange's physical appearance, however, the British trader Charles Barter observed in 1851 of this "old fellow", who was then not quite fifty-one: "His moustache and whiskers were united, and both were snow-white, and his countenance was more expressive and less stolid than that of most of his countrymen, while his frame was that of a tall powerful man" (Barter 1852: 73-74).

This is arguably of little significance, but the same can hardly be said of De Villiers' severely flawed reconstruction of the murder

case which sent De Lange to the gallows. Her chronological framework for the legal proceedings is unnecessarily imaginative and simply does not reflect facts which were readily available had she done appropriate research. One reads in *Die Wit Kraai*, for example, that the trial began on 27 February 1861 (231), but in fact it got underway on 20 February and was completed two days later. More seriously, De Villiers, reflecting her interpretation of the De Lange case as an instance of injustice at the hands of the British, insists that there was a change of venue from Ladysmith to Pietermaritzburg, because it was decided that owing to local Boer admiration of the accused in the former locale, it would have been impossible to impanel an impartial jury there (230). There was in fact a change of venue, but it was precisely the reverse of what De Villiers believed. The trial, initially set for the colonial capital, was transferred to Ladysmith at the request of defence counsel Krogh. It was on his home turf that De Lange was tried and found guilty of murder. The most serious gaffe, however, and the one most damaging to De Villiers' case, is her assertion that De Lange was the victim of insensitive British colonial justice and his own pride in refusing to mount a defence. In fact, nearly all of the men who convicted him were fellow Afrikaners. A list of the nine jurors who arrived at the verdict by a vote of eight to one indicates that only two were British settlers: William Lazenby, J.R.M. Watson, Jakobus Labuschagne, Johannes Labuschagne, Gerrit Potgieter, Frederik Potgieter, Berent Jakobus Nell, Coenraad Lucas Pieters, and Adolph Krogman (Pace 1972: 46).

The verdict which these men returned may have harmonised with local public opinion about the case. If one can rely on letters

from Afrikaners and English-speakers alike that were printed in the *Natal Witness*, a weekly newspaper of the time in Pietermaritzburg, De Lange was virtually disowned by his Afrikaans neighbours in Klip River County after he was arrested for murdering one of his employees. To be sure, violent treatment of Zulus by European settlers in Natal was a publicly debated topic at the time. While De Lange was awaiting trial in January 1861, a fellow colonist, Richard Smithwick, was sentenced to one month in gaol "on such spare diet as is consistent with his health, for every alternate week" for shooting a "Kafir" who subsequently recovered. There is no reason to believe that the colony's courts were particularly lenient along racial lines. According to a published account of this particular case, Smithwick "was in the habit of giving way to his temper, and . . . this was not the first offence he had committed".³ Some reformers pleaded in the press for more humane treatment of African employees. "I do not mean to say that the complaints of native laziness, impertinence, &c., are unfounded. It would be strange, indeed, if 150,000 savages could at once be metamorphosed into a steady labouring population", wrote one well-intentioned observer in Klip River County who shared the common colonial perception of indigenous Africans at that time. He urged readers to pay greater attention to their food, housing and other living conditions, in harmony with their fundamental Christian convictions, as a *conditio sine qua non* for improving relations with employees.⁴

Writing to the *Witness* at the beginning of March, i.e. after the trial but before the execution, an anonymous resident of Ladysmith identified only as "Memo" insisted that virtually everyone in the region

was pleased with the verdict of guilty. He emphasised that there had not been an ethnic line of demarcation involved among the members of the jury, "two of whom only were Englishmen, and the rest his countrymen, and many of them his relatives and connections". Nevertheless, responses to the finding had been emotionally charged. "Every man of the jury seemed to have more than enough to do to repress his tears". This writer described De Lange's own reaction in terms which differed immensely from De Villiers' presentation of his supposed equanimity, stating that when the foreman of the jury announced its verdict "it was also painful to hear the old man, De Lange, exclaim, in Dutch, 'Not Guilty,' five times repeated". Furthermore, far from rejecting the judicial system because of its treatment of this convict, Boers in the Klip River district lauded the British colonial judge's conduct of the case: "The judge, notwithstanding the peculiar circumstances under which he visited this place for the first time, has gained the greatest popularity. Not a Boer who would not, as they express it themselves, walk to him on bare knees". The predominantly Afrikaans jury had earned this writer's unqualified respect by not shielding their ethnic fellow from effective prosecution: "Here he was the relation, friend, or acquaintance of nearly every man who sat. At all events they knew him well by name and reputation. Added to this, the jury sat for the first time to try one of themselves, and sentenced him to a disgraceful death. All honour, then, say I, to the jury, and the race they represent".⁵

Conclusion

The heroic myth surrounding De Lange remained firmly entrenched in the minds of

Afrikaner nationalists after the publication of *Die Wit Kraai*, and the historical errors which De Villiers confirmed in her reconstruction of his trial and execution continued their career in the annals of their modern movement. In 1941 C.J.S. Lombard could write in *Die Brandwag* that "bekende feite" about "hierdie Afrikanerheld" (known facts about this Afrikaner hero) included his being sentenced to death in Pietermaritzburg, that the rope which the hangman employed broke twice, and that the crowd witnessing the morbid event unanimously called for his release on the basis of that supposed sign. In full harmony with the enduring heroic motif, Lombard announced that the recently appointed "De Lange-Herbegravniskommissie" (the De Lange Reburial Commission) was arranging to have his remains interred on 16 December of that year near the Blood Rivier Voortrekker Monument that was to be unveiled on that hallowed day (Lombard 1941: 17).

The significance of the cleft between documentable historical facts and De Villiers' defensive and evidently ahistorical portrayal of De Lange and his treatment at the hands of the colonial judiciary in Natal may well vary in the eyes of different readers. Many presumably regard such fictional reconstructions as primarily an artistic matter and accordingly have a high level of toleration for poetic licence in the subgenre of the historical novel. But should readers who are concerned about the historicity of fictional representation be perturbed at De Villiers' apparent distortion of the De Lange case? Undoubtedly some have simply dismissed it as an expression of authorial freedom exercised by a relatively inexperienced novelist whose grounding in historical

research fell far short of her lexicographic skills. The matter becomes particularly problematical from a historiographical perspective, however, because some late twentieth-century literary theoreticians have postulated that historical fiction is a valid source, one which opens a revealing window on events of the past. Michael Green of the University of Natal, for example, has contended this with regard to Oliver Walker's novels about the polygamous British colonist in Natal, John Dunn, *Proud Zulu* and *Zulu Royal Feather*.⁶ It is hardly necessary to emphasise that *Die Wit Kraai* does not enhance Green's case. On the contrary, De Villiers' construction of De Lange and his fate underscores the desirability of examining a representative sample of contemporary sources about the matter and, even then, taking them *cum grano salis*. As history, *Die Wit Kraai* is largely a failure which conceals or distorts far more than it reveals about its subject. Its real value probably lies in what it says about Anna de Villiers' ethnic group loyalty and Afrikaners' attitudes towards their English-speaking compatriots during the politically tense 1930s.

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NOTES

¹ The *Voortrekkers* (pioneers) were the Boers (farmers) who left the Cape Colony after the British became its rulers in 1814. A major cause of dissent was the abolition of slavery. In the Great Trek (migration) of 1834-9, Boers moved into Basutoland (modern Lesotho), the Orange Free State, and then the Transvaal, but one branch moved into Natal; they are the people described in Anna de Villiers' novel.

² The second Boer War lasted from 1900 to 1902. It was hard fought, but the English defeated the Boers' bid for independence.

The English call this simply "the Boer War," forgetting the first one (1881), which they lost.

³ "Criminal Sessions," *Natal Witness*, 25 January 1861, p.2.

⁴ *Natal Witness*, 4 January 1861, pp.2-3.

⁵ *Natal Witness*, 8 March 1861, p.5.

⁶ Michael Green: "History in Fiction: Oliver Walker and John Dunn," *English in Africa*, XV, no.1 (May 1988), pp.29-53.