

## H. W. D. Manson

### Poet and Playwright, and his connections with Natal

THOUGH BORN in Tanganyika and educated in England, Grahamstown and Johannesburg, H. W. D. ("Cake") Manson spent the maturest and best years of his short life in the Capital of Natal. Before that time, he had held brief temporary lectureships (the first at Pietermaritzburg under Professor Durrant), resigning constantly to write a new play. Later when appointed to the permanent staff at Pietermaritzburg, he discovered that the University would give him leave without pay whenever he needed to write, and he would save up for those lean years. He seemed to regard himself as a Natalian more than anything else, and when history has done its often belated justice, he will be regarded as one of the glories of Natal, for he is, in my opinion, one of the outstanding English language poets of the twentieth century, and probably one of the best English playwrights (when one considers the quality, depth and variety of his work) for several centuries.

When at the age of seventeen he joined up, his regiment was the Natal Carbineers, and he always had a special loyalty to that body. It was at seventeen that he wrote his earliest surviving poem, on the flyleaf of a poetry-anthology that he carried with him throughout the War. The technique of this boyish work is still clumsy, but the essential man is already expressed in it. A footnote, in Manson's still unformed hand, reads: "Written on the day of the Spring Offensive. Caprara taken, and Mt. Sole too. To-morrow is our day. Objective, a ridge on the other side of Mt. Sole." The gist of the poem is that the lilacs are in bloom on this lovely Italian spring day: to-morrow he may be killed, and he would be sorry to die, but in the meantime he will enjoy this day to the full. The utter fearlessness of death, the deep delight in life expressed here, developed as he grew older, and enormously increased in human understanding, extreme sensibility, and that reverence of life and nature that was almost religious in its depth and joyousness. Yet for all his sunny gaiety he could also be (as someone says of Pat in his *Pat Mulholland's Day*):

Suddenly terrible,  
As full of grief as God himself sometimes.

Only ten of his poems are extant, and of these four are largely about Natal, showing a strong love and close intimacy with its landscape. The last three long stanzas of Prologue to *Pat Mulholland's Day* describe with exquisite beauty and precision the slow coming of dawn, obviously near a Natal stream, and the details of them make us feel that, though in the context of the Universe our earth is a ridiculously "tiny spinning ball" that may explode any day like millions before it, what matters to us is the *life*, even the infinitesimal life, on it—"running water and the croak of frogs". *Unposted Letter*, one of the most moving poems in all English literature, about two brothers, one with both his legs blown off and the other killed in the war, is largely pure Natal, and so are *Triple-Decker Sandwich*, and *London Letter to Jonathan and Kathie*, two very dear friends then at sea on

their first visit to England. This is mainly a most lovely, subtle and delicate description of the view, especially as dusk begins to gather, from Otto's Bluff, where Manson had lived for several years, latterly with his wife and baby. He loved the place. As he said to his wife one day, "But this *is* Paradise".

Manson's plays are all poetry, too, in the fullest sense. None are set in South Africa, except possibly *Pat Mulholland's Day*. They are, as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare's, "Not for an age, but for all time", for though mostly occurring in remote times and imaginary places they are all peculiarly relevant to to-day, and sometimes particularly to South Africa. They have all been published, and produced or broadcast, mostly in South Africa but also in Great Britain and Canada, except the very first, *The Fight at Finnsburgh*, which, being too long for production, is being published as a dramatic poem by the University of the Witwatersrand, where Manson wrote it as an ex-serviceman student. The Natal University Press has just finished publishing the three posthumous plays, as well as *The Festival*, which was out of print. We hope soon to get his poems published, with detachable extracts from the plays, and also, separately, the large fragment of his only novel.

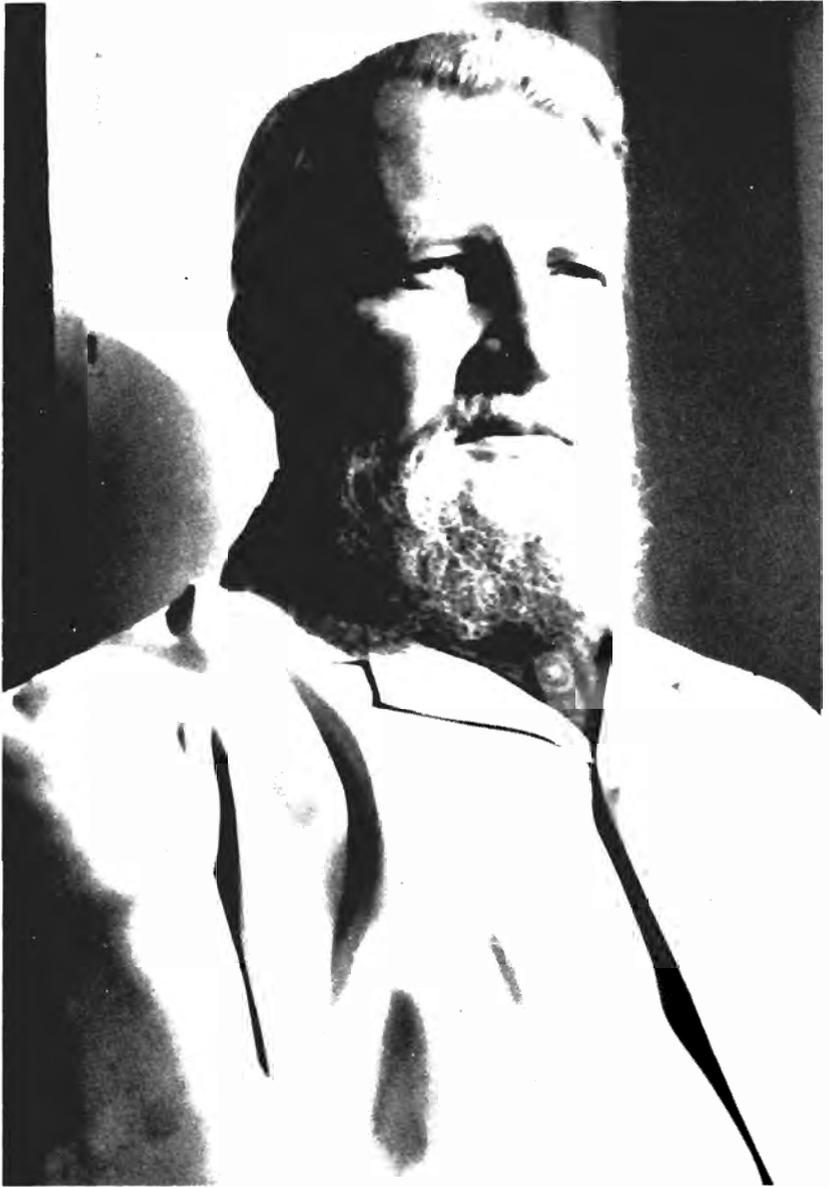
Being a close friend of Manson's was a hazardous matter. As Professor Harvey once said: "He was like a bomb that might go off in your hand". After some innocent remark, you would suddenly find yourself looking up, with considerable alarm, into the face of a furious lion (the tawny-gold hair and beard helped towards this effect), and rising without a word from the lunch-table, he would stride out of your house. You would tremble, and spend a restless night wondering if he would ever speak to you again. But next morning he would be back again, beaming like the sun, not a word needed or spoken on either side. For all his violent fiery temper and violent speech many people knew that there never was, and never may be, a more reliable friend and a kinder heart, nor a more deeply and patiently (though critically) understanding one. Another contrast was that though he told many unimportant lies (chiefly to amuse himself and entertain his friends) at the same time he had the courage to perceive and to tell the truth, however unpleasant and alarming, at a level of perception and significance far deeper than most people can conceive of.

He had all the gifts a playwright needs as well as the honesty very few have. These gifts made his daily conversation delightful, for suddenly, as he was talking, the room would be filled with half a dozen people you knew, or as many imaginary ones, each speaking in his own character, voice, idiom and accent; and quite often (if there were time) an amusing extempore play would emerge, plot and all.

His favourite pub was "the Imp.", where his beloved dachshund, Dunkel, would often make part of the company, for Manson had so developed him by sheer affection and interest that he seemed almost human. But alas! he died of old age some years before his master. When Manson was killed in a crash at the age of 43 (on 29th May, 1969) one of his erstwhile companions at the Imp. said to his brother: "Now everything will be ordinary again. We shall never again see him come in at the door, and know that now we are going to be lifted right out of ourselves for a few hours into a greater and more interesting world."

Vigorous exercise had helped to make him almost prodigiously strong, agile and quick in reaction, and it seems especially ironic that a body so powerful and a spirit so necessary to humanity and this age should have been blotted out in a moment or less.

PROFESSOR C. VAN HEYNINGEN, *Pietermaritzburg*



H. W. D. Manson  
*(photo by courtesy of Mrs. H. W. D. Manson)*

**Manson's works in chronological order as written:**

1. *The Fight at Finnsburgh* (being published by the Witwatersrand University Press).
2. *The Green Knight* (Human & Rousseau).
3. *The Noose-Knot Ballad* (Human & Rousseau).
4. *The Counsellors* (posthumously published by the Natal University Press).
5. *The Festival* (first published by Balkema—republished by the Natal University Press.).
6. *Captain Smith* (Human & Rousseau).
7. *The Magnolia Tree* (Nasionale Boekhandel).
8. *Pat Mulholland's Day* (Nasionale Boekhandel).
9. *Potluck* (posthumously published by Natal University Press).
10. *Magnus* (posthumously published by Natal University Press).
11. *Poems, and Passages from the Plays* (being prepared for the press).
12. *Karl Gunter Hoffmann* (large fragment of unfinished novel—being prepared for the press)