

The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm

by Nellie Fincher

Extracts introduced by Elwyn Jenkins

A rare children's book by Nellie Fincher published in 1910 graphically pictured the lives of girls on a farm in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands.

Nellie Fincher

ELLEN (Nellie) Fincher was born in England in 1872. She worked for many years as a member of the editorial staff of the *Natal Witness* in Pietermaritzburg. She married a teacher, William Wells-Wyld, son of a doctor, who came from Gloucester. They had no children. When William died in 1937 at the age of 73 they were living in Verulam, where they had a fully equipped schoolroom attached to their house that they had called Wyldhaven.¹ Nellie died on 28 July 1946, while living at the Normandy Hotel, Gardens, in Cape Town. She left her estate to a nephew and niece in Birmingham.

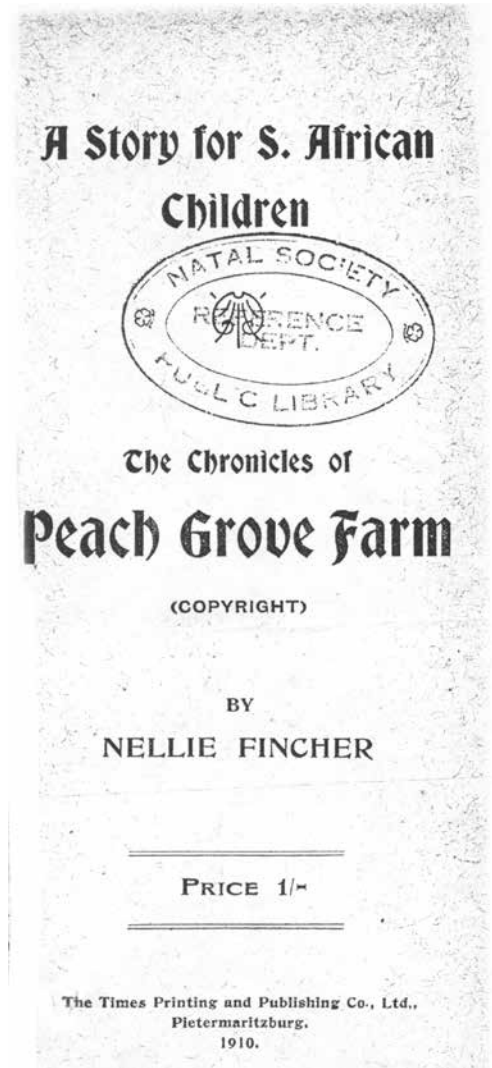
Nellie Fincher took a great interest in the treatment of indigenes and the work of missionaries. She spent four months in Zululand, staying with missionary friends at kwaMagwaza, where she interviewed Zulus. A letter in which she recounted an episode from this period was published in *Natalia* in 2011.² She also visited Lesotho, and wrote an article on her impressions for the *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine*.³ Fincher applied her knowledge to fiction, in a novel about a Zululand mission station, *Good Measure*, and in *Out of the Depths*, which features (without naming him) the Mariannhill monk, Father Francis

Pfanner. Several of her works have a racial theme, the best known being *The Heir of Brendiford*.

Fincher wrote two full-length adult novels, three collections of long short stories and one children's novel, which were published in a burst of energy between 1908 and 1910. Initially they were published in either Durban or Pietermaritzburg, but at least some of them were also published in London by Simpkin, Hamilton, Marshall, Kent & Co. She was assiduous in drawing the attention of Very Important People to her books. She sent copies to the King and a bishop, and the front matter to *Good Measure* relates how Natal Governor Matthew Nathan had written approvingly, asking for "several copies" of *The Heir of Brendiford*, "the publication of which will be in the interests of the colony" (*Good Measure*, n.p.). Her obituary in the *Cape Times* noted, "Her last book was autographed by General Smuts."⁴ The volume of *Good Measure* included reprints of favourable reviews of some of her books from the *Natal Mercury*, *Ilanga lase Natal* and other papers.

Introduction to *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm*

The library of the Natal Society Foundation in the Alan Paton Centre in Pietermaritzburg houses one of the last surviving copies of this intriguing and entertaining little book written by Nellie Fincher. *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm*, published in Pietermaritzburg in 1910, is a story about the four young sisters of the Spalding family in the Natal Midlands. Sub-titled *A Story for S. African Children*, it is one of the earliest books in English to have been published in South Africa that were written explicitly for child readers



by a South African author. Stories in English about young South African children, especially girls, had started appearing in 1889 with the publication of *The Wood-cutters of the Perie Bush: A South African Story*, by Mrs Mary Carey-Hobson.⁵ Most were published in the UK, and not all the authors were born South Africans or resident in the country. Of the dozen or so published up to 1911, *Peach Grove* is, by modern standards, one of the best: it eschews



“Right away at the far corner is the wagon road that leads to Maritzburg.”

flowery language and sentimentality and moves beyond robust narrative to explore the distinct personalities and intellectual and emotional lives of her protagonists. In its subject matter, design and lively style it deserves to stand alongside four other classic works about South African girlhood written at the turn of the twentieth century (some of which were published much later): “The Child’s Day”, which is the prelude to *From Man to Man; or, Perhaps Only* by Olive Schreiner,⁶ *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner,⁷ *Platkops Children* by Pauline Smith⁸ and *The Diary of Iris Vaughan* by Iris Vaughan.⁹ In subtle humour and gentle social comedy she stands unrivalled. (For a fuller discussion, see Elwyn Jenkins, *Seedlings*¹⁰ and “Little houses”¹¹).

Peach Grove is a full-length story of 23 chapters. It falls within two traditions of children’s literature: doll

stories and child-authored magazines. Stories of playing with dolls and doll’s houses are a venerable genre in children’s books,¹² and it is possible that Fincher was aware of some of them when she conceived the idea of her book, which concerns a homemade doll’s house and play farm called “Peach Grove Farm”.

The book purports to have been written by the four sisters, each of whom writes a chapter in turn. The girls also write a newspaper, *Dolly’s Doings*, and sometimes the contents of the paper are incorporated into *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm*. The girls launch *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm* as a record of events concerning their doll’s house and farm, but in fact it is a record of a year in their own lives as well, and that is where its great interest lies for the modern reader. Situated on a farm somewhere outside Pietermaritzburg, the girls lead isolated

lives; they are taught by a governess and leave their home only to attend church or visit distant neighbours. In their play farm they replicate the lives and activities of the real inhabitants of the Spaldings' farm, coming to terms with the harsh realities of pioneer life and the moral lessons it teaches.

The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm

Our farm is a large one, and right away at the far corner is the wagon road that leads to Maritzburg. On the other side of the river is the mountain we call the "Edge of the World", standing up grim and tall. Margaret, Mabel, Dolly and I (Natalie) have never been farther than the station.

The four young sisters in *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm*, aged between 8 and 13, led surprisingly isolated lives on a farm outside Pietermaritzburg a hundred years ago. While it is a fictional story, the details are clearly drawn from the author's intimate acquaintance with settler life on farms in the Midlands. The book was not illustrated, and the precise location of the farm is not given, but today the lush scenery of the Midlands and old buildings of the period can help us picture what the lives of children like the Peach Grove girls would have been like.

In *The Chronicles*, the four girls take turns to relate their activities over a year. Indoors, their governess, Miss Emery, and their mother teach the girls the refinements of culture and behaviour required of young ladies, while out of doors they run wild, galloping their horses and exploring.

Reflecting this split existence, they make a play farm with its homestead in the peach orchard: *The homestead*

of Peach Grove Farm is built of three paraffin boxes placed one upon another, and leaning up against the nondescript palings of the orchard. At night time, or when one or other of us is not playing there, a sugar sack hangs down in front, and the homestead does not look very hospitable or romantic.

Inside the doll's house, the dolls lead genteel social lives. *The Rev. Tom Noddy (who is a bit cracked) is calling on the ladies at the Homestead. I saw him leaning against the dining-room wall, and the ladies sitting round on the new red chairs.*

Outside, the girls become play farmers. *It was Natalie who thought of bringing our nursery blocks out under the peach trees and calling them cattle. We piled up the loose stones to make a low wall for our kraal, and then I ran to Mother to ask her for a biscuit box to make a dipping tank. Mother gave me a narrow box, and we put it into the hole in the ground, and filled it with water. Then we made Jim, our herdsman, drive the cattle into the tank. The muti contained in the dipping wash was so strong that it peeled off the skin of the cattle. We are quite assured, from a reliable source (Uncle Jim), that the ticks must have departed to the great unknown; also the East Coast fever with them.*

Natural disasters hit both the real farm and Peach Grove Farm. *A hot dry wind had scorched up the few flowers that were left in the garden, and burnt up the young green grass that had begun to sprout on the steep hill in front of our house.... That night it rained unexpectedly. When I got up in the morning and looked out of the window at the general wetness of things my heart was sad for Jim, the herd boy. I knew he would be spoilt.*



“The sun like a blaze of glory was gorgeous, and so beautiful that it made one sad somehow.”



“Uncle Jim drove Mother to church, and all the rest of us rode. Victor’s pony and mine would race across the flats, because the horses did not know it was Sunday, and it seemed a pity to remind them.”



“Father’s plantations stretched away across the landscape as though painted in olive green on a grass-green background.”



“Once Natalie got up on Father’s horse Sultan, and he ran away with her.”

He had been standing at his post all night.... Poor Jim was lying face downwards in the grass. His face was washed white when I picked him up, and his sawdust body was sodden. We pretended he was ill, and put him up on the garden wall to dry, or, in other words, we sent him home to his kraal for "fagaash".

On a later occasion, their scribe reports, *Jim, our herd boy, is sick. He had a bad accident last night. The storm descended, the floods came and beat upon him, and he had a sunstroke; no, I mean he was struck by lightning.* The emergency forces them to take exceptional action that is potentially disruptive to the social order of the farm and homestead: they roll him in a "blanket" and put him in the bathroom to sleep. *We can wash out the bathroom when he is better,* remarks their scribe.

A further natural disaster occurs when their roan pony takes a drink from "Lake Zinco", in which the ladies are sailing. Their newspaper reports: *Lake Zinco was disturbed by a tidal wave.... At the same time, the barbed wire fence around the paddock was broken down, and the standards were smashed by a gigantic beast, which ran wildly among the cattle, scattering them in all directions, and smashing some into small splinters.*

All the king's horses, and all the king's men,

Can't put those cattle together again.

But it is, after all, still a game. Their scribe records, *This paragraph in "The Doings" caused its readers to scream with delight.*

When not attending lessons or busy with their doll's house and farm, the girls are tomboys. *I hate to be bothered with my clothes, as do my sisters. We are not fashionable girls like those*

staring girls, whom today we saw again at church. When the "staring girls" come to visit, Natalie entices the real-life cattle towards them with salt. In a few seconds the whole herd was upon us, sniffing, snoshing, tossing horns, and stamping the ground. Their scribe for the week records, rather unconvincingly, We were so sorry, for the Dawsons cried dreadfully, and their pretty frocks were torn and dirtied, and their buckle shoes cut and scratched.

The girls all ride. *Laddie is the roan pony. He is rough to ride, and full of tricks, but when we have him he hangs his head meekly and lets two of us on his back at a time, and is quite well behaved.* However, Natalie goes too far: *Once Natalie got up on Father's horse Sultan, and he ran away with her. He dashed away at full gallop, and Natalie twisted her hands into his mane (he had no bridle or saddle) and pressed him hard with her knees and feet. He was thinking about rolling, she knew, because he began to paw the ground and sniff at the dust. In a second, Natalie said, she put over her other leg on his neck, let go the mane, and sprang clear of him. He rolled over with an angry snort, with his hoofs flying in all directions.*

Parts of the farm are still wild. On their walks and rides they witness nature in the raw: *There was a big shadow flung on the grass at our feet, and floating along up in the sky was a huge vulture. We do hate them! Once Father gave us a dear little foal, and he got sick and died. Our eyes were red and everything when we got to the place where he had died, and found that the nasty vultures were eating him. We shouted to frighten them, picked up our flowers, then got on our horses and galloped home.*



“In a few seconds the whole herd was upon us, sniffing, snoshing, tossing horns, and stamping the ground.”

No wonder the girls incorporate a cemetery in their play farm, but even there nature is beyond their control – butcher birds and ants steal the insect corpses before they can be buried, and the stag beetle they thought was dead digs himself out. The facts of death have to be related to the Christian teachings their mother and governess instil in them. They compare the ants that take bits of dead beetle away to vultures. *“I don’t think the vultures are so bad as we thought them. They are doing God’s work too,”* observes one. They also discuss whether ticks have souls.

The cosy English stories their governess reads them, with their prim morality, contrast starkly with the realities of colonial life. Miss Emery takes them on a Sunday morning picnic after church before two o’clock dinner. *She was reading us a beautiful*

story called “Felicity’s Garden”. It was about a little girl who had a garden, and whenever she made herself good when she wanted to be naughty beautiful flowers grew in her garden. When she was naughty, or forgot and did not care about being good, weeds grew. Their dog Brutus disturbs an animal. At first we thought it was a tabby cat like our “Tibbie” and we wanted to call Brutus off, but when we spoke kindly to it, it just put back its ears, showed its teeth, and sprang at us. Then we knew it was a wild beast. We all stood excited on the bank, too surprised and excited to realise at the time that that cat must have been the one who had been stealing our fowls. Brutus attacks it and after a fight the wild cat disappears in the stream, but a second one rushes out. A neighbour arrives with a gun and a retriever dog. “Oh, shoot, please! Do shoot this

horrid beast!" we exclaimed. The dog takes its head in his mouth and shakes it until it is dead. "They are terribly destructive to poultry," the man said, "and very fierce when driven to bay. Umph! That's one the less," and he shouldered his gun.

The deadly outdoors even invade their indoor routine of education in ladylike refinements. Near the verandah they encounter a snake: *The snake's hood had a reddish tinge, and he was about five feet long. The noise he made as he dragged his body over the stones and grit was as if someone was pulling a heavy rope or a chain.... We stood spellbound. Later, Mabel had to practise first. She opened the door leading onto the verandah, and let the fresh air into the drawing room. She opened the 101 Exercise Book, and played from the beginning. When she got to a pretty exercise in a waltz time she heard a rustling outside, and leaned sideways out of the door to look. She said her heart jumped into her mouth, for the snake had come out from his hiding place and was coming gently and happily towards the French*

door of the drawing room. She calls her mother, who took Mabel's place at the piano, and struck up a brilliant waltz, and said to Mabel, "Go into the kitchen and tell the boys to come and kill the snake!" When the deed is done, We couldn't bury him in our cemetery, because he was a murderer, and a thief as well, for he stole the milk. We put a piece of wood to mark the spot:

*"Here lies
MEPHIS COBRA.*

He was fond of sweet sounds."

The official reading curriculum provided by Miss Emery is not all as insipid as the tale of "Felicity's Garden". *Yesterday we found ourselves in line with the author of that classic "Humpty Dumpty"; soon we shall find our thoughts running parallel and being interwoven with those of Shakespeare, Bacon and Scott.*

One evening while bathing the girls argue about where their loyalties lie. (Only the youngest was born in South Africa.) *We asked Father what he was when we went into the drawing-room for a few minutes before dinner: We*



"It was so still and quiet, and there was a Sunday feeling in the air. We took the path by the magic pool."

were clean and shiny with neat hair, clean nails, and dressed in our best manners – I mean when we go into the drawing-room we must be pleasant and polite, or the next evening Mother does not let us appear.

We stood round Father ready to attack him if he should say he was anything that we were not. Margaret was our spokeswoman. "Father," she said half-shyly. "What are you? I am English, Mabel is Natalian, Natalie is Scotch, and Dolly is Irish." Father looked from one to another of us and his eyes twinkled. "I am an Imperialist," he said slowly. "So am I," said Uncles Jim and Robert, and Mother and Miss Emery assented.

"What is an Imperialist, Father?" Margaret asked.

"One who loves England, and all the other parts of the world that belong to her, and who seeks always to do them good."

While getting ready to bath one night, they stage an impromptu dramatisation of "Boadicea, an Ode", by William Cowper. The episode, which illustrates their feminist and patriotic convictions, veers between high drama and farce, ending with one of them toppling over backwards into the bath. Natalie began it. She put a towel around her head when she was ready for the bath, shook her head until her hair stood out like a bush, and said, making herself like a stone image, "I'm an ancient Briton. See!" ... "Where's the spreading oak? I said. "There is not an oak, but there is an acorn on top of the chest of drawers. I'll hold it over your head, Natalie, and stretch out my arms, so." I climbed on the chair, and held the acorn over the Druid's head, and she went on, in a quavering voice:

Princess, if our aged eyes
Weep upon thy matchless wrongs,
'Tis because resentment ties
All the terrors of our tongues.

Natalie can say burning words beautifully. She almost shouted as she went on and her eyes flashed.

Rome shall perish, write that word,
In the blood that she has spilt;
Perish, hopeless and abhorred,
Deep in ruin, as in guilt.

Mabel made a beautiful Boadicea, and struck her breast, and clasped her hands, because she "felt the bard's prophetic words in her bosom glow". She pretended beautifully. But Natalie interrupted, in an everyday voice, rather crossly, "You don't know where your bosom is, Mabel; it's near your heart, not below the waist. Do things properly." ... And she went on,

Thus the bard's prophetic words,
Pregnant with celestial fire....

At the sound of the wet denouement, Mother rushes in from the drawing-room in her pretty lace dinner blouse. All the "romance", as Natalie calls it, the burning words, the beautiful queen, and the grand old Druid, were gone, to say nothing of the oak tree. Nothing was left of the pretence but a mess on the floor, and a wet, shivering Mabel.

At their "Breaking-up Entertainment" at the end of the year, to which friends and relatives have been invited, Natalie gives a solo recitation of "Boadicea". She said the burning words beautifully, but we remembered about the death of an historic character in the nursery, and that made us laugh. Their prizes reflect the year's work: A beautiful volume of Shakespeare; a beautifully-fitted workbasket; "Buckland's Curiosities of Natural History", bound in calf;



“Uncle Robert was sitting on the verandah smoking while he watched Miss Emery doing crochet work.”

and the “Pilgrim’s Progress” with beautiful pictures.

There have been times during the year when their schoolwork has served as a cover for the courting of Miss Emery by Uncle Robert – *I know Uncle Robert was leaning over my shoulder on one side, and Miss Emery on the other* – but while the reader can see what is going on, the girls remain oblivious until the formal announcement of their engagement. Indeed, much of the humour in the story comes from the reader’s superior understanding of matters in which the girls are innocent.

A close call for Miss Emery occurs on a walk when they take it in turns to ride Laddie to their picnic spot. Margaret records that she took along with her the book of Tennyson’s poems that she had been given for her birthday. *I could not resist opening it and taking peeps at the nice things inside. I found “The Brook”. “Listen, sisters,” said I, “isn’t this pretty?*

*For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever.*

Couldn’t we learn that for our poetry, Miss Emery?” ... “Margaret!” Miss Emery exclaimed in a startled voice,

“Close that book at once and pick up the reins. That horse might bolt at any moment!”

Uncle Robert also has an awkward moment when the girls are talking to the happy pair about their impending marriage. *“Uncle Robert,” said I, “I cannot understand how people fall in love. Before Miss Emery came you said you were very sorry for us, and that you would take our part against the dragon who was coming to keep us in order. Now you want to marry Miss Emery.” ... Miss Emery looked straight at Uncle Robert, and said, “Did you call me a dragon, and say you would help my pupils rebel?” Uncle Robert looked like a naughty big boy., and we crowded round him. “Yes,” he said, as if he wished he had not. “Say you are sorry, and you won’t do so any more,” I said anxiously in what was meant to be a whisper, only everyone could hear. Miss Emery’s lips twitched, as if she were trying not to laugh. I know that look, and that although she will pretend to be very angry, she will not punish very much. “I am very sorry,” Uncle Robert said in a good boy’s voice, “and I won’t call you a dragon any more.”*

The education that the girls receive from their mother informs their lives, for she teaches them values of truth, honesty and generosity. Two pages are filled with a monologue by Natalie (whose ambition it is to become a writer) in which she searches her heart. It begins, *I am Natalie, and I am very miserable. It is my own fault, and I am going to write it down in the Chronicles, so that I may never forget. I told a lie. No, there was no excuse. Mother asked me if I had cleaned my teeth, and I had not. I said, "Yes, Mother," but all the time I could see in my mind the tooth brush resting on the top of my glass full of water in the nursery, and I lied.... Please God make me real! Real! Please God I would rather be real than clever, or let me die young and not write anything.... Now I can't help crying. There is nobody to see. "Please God forgive me and keep me from telling lies any more, for Jesus' sake. Amen." I know I don't always say my prayers properly; I just think them in little bits. Dear me, I wish I had not forgotten my handkerchief.*

Their uncle brings Victor, a Maritzburg College boy, to visit. *He was taller than Margaret, with a ruddy, pleasant face, and he took off his hat when he saw us; and we huddled together, and felt uncertain what to do. I think it is terrible to be as shy as we are, but I suppose seeing so few people makes us afraid and stupid when we do see them.*

Victor, like the Dawsons, is taken for a walk. *We found ourselves in a bit of marshy land that was alive with snakes. One ran over my instep, and another slithered round Victor's leg as it made off. Victor stood on one leg*

as long as he could, and the look on his face made us laugh, although we were somewhat startled and disgusted. We often see snakes, but Victor does not in Maritzburg, and that is why he noticed them more particularly. I think they were little grass snakes, and that there were a number of nests in the hot, low land near the river. Victor brazenly it out and becomes their friend, which explains the charitable account of his reaction that their scribe records.

The final violence on Peach Grove Farm is a conflagration in which the homestead is accidentally set alight by a candle and burns down with the dolls in it. The girls put together some paraffin boxes again and sympathetic adults buy them replacement dolls and fittings, but the mood of the story is changing. The new dolls' clothing from Paris is tawdry and falls apart. Victor is the only one allowed to light the fire in their new toy stove, but his naughty little brother turns their play into a farce when he shoots the little pudding they have cooked onto the ceiling. As the year draws to an end it is evident that the intense dolls' play has worn out.

Changes are in the air that hint that the girls' isolation is also coming to an end. *Miss Emery is going to be married to our Uncle Robert. It is the first wedding in the family, and it is very serious. People are coming from miles around, and there is going to be a dance in the evening, and we are going to stay up until ten, and put ourselves to bed, and have promised Mother to be good and to blow out the candle quietly without any fuss, and we are getting a peep over the edge of the world.*

NOTES

- 1 Pietermaritzburg Archives, Wells-Wyld, Dunbar William, NAB/MSCE/ Vol. 0/01/25730/1937/1.
- 2 Nellie Fincher, "A visit to uSitaku", *Natalia* 41, Dec. 2011, pp. 5-9.
- 3 Nellie Fincher, "Basutoland: a modern utopia", *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine*, Dec. 1918, pp. 811-816.
- 4 *Cape Times*, "Death of Natal authoress", 31 July 1946, p.1.
- 5 Mary Carey-Hobson, *The Wood-cutters of the Perie Bush: A South African Story* (London, Religious Tract Society, 1889).
- 6 Olive Schreiner, "The Child's Day", in *From Man to Man; or, Perhaps Only* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1926).
- 7 Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (London, Chapman and Hall, 1883).
- 8 Pauline Smith, *Platkops Children* (Cape Town, Balkema, 1935).
- 9 Iris Vaughan, *The Diary of Iris Vaughan* (Cape Town, CNA, 1958).
- 10 Elwyn Jenkins, *Seedlings: English Children's Reading and Writers in South Africa* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2012) pp. 58-69.
- 11 Elwyn Jenkins, "Little houses and other children's play spaces in 'The Child's Day' by Olive Schreiner and *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm* by Nellie Fincher", *English Academy Review*, 30(2), October 2013, pp. 42-52.
- 12 Frances Armstrong, "Doll stories", in Victor Watson (ed) *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 214-215.

NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES BY
NELLIE FINCHER

- Local Colouring*. 1908. [Short stories and sketches. No publication details available.]
- "*Schelms*": *A Natal Sketch*. "Schelms" (1-28); "A Brave Heart" (29-41); "One of These Little Ones: A Study of a Child" (42-59) (Durban, Robinson, 1909).
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- Echoes from Natal: Out of the Depths*. "Out of the Depths" (1-18); "The Suffragists and Daniel" (19-32); "The Heathen" (33-40); "Jim Fish" (41-54) (Durban, Robinson, 1910).
- Good Measure: A Novel of South African Interest* (Pietermaritzburg, The Times Printing and Publishing Company, 1910).

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Photographs taken in the Midlands by Stephen Pryke.
- A nineteenth-century Midlands farmhouse sketched by Valerie Woodley. (Valerie Woodley, *On the High Flats of Natal: Early Pioneers in the Highflats/Ixopo Area of Southern Natal*, Highflats: Maxann Books, 1984).