

Trekkersburg, Piemburg, Covenantsburg, Harmersburg:

Apartheid-era Pietermaritzburg reflected in fiction

by Christopher Merrett

There is surprisingly little written about Pietermaritzburg under apartheid from the election triumph of the National Party in 1948, through the 1960 State of Emergency and to the Soweto Uprising of 1976. Reports in the *Corporation Yearbook* became increasingly reticent with the passage of time, alongside a lack of academic writing on this period, which was one of relative quiescence and white dominance on the political front. There is, for example, scant written evidence of the upheaval created by the Group Areas Act (GAA), which affected thousands of members of the Asian community in particular. The pass laws ensured that aside from Sobantu, Africans were increasingly concentrated

in the townships of Imbali and Ashdown as well as the greater Edendale valley. At the same time, steady industrialisation brought a small flood of skilled white immigrants, many from Britain, to Pietermaritzburg; while the burgeoning bureaucracy of apartheid and the city's status as provincial capital created an influx of Afrikaans-speaking state employees. In spite of superficial similarities, the Pietermaritzburg of the 1960s and 1970s was a very different city from that of, say, just twenty years before.¹ But the 1980s saw considerable change in the documented record as violence escalated and the human rights situation deteriorated. This inspired a rash of reports from local and national monitoring groups, which produced a remarkable

depth of data and analysis that fed into academic research and writing.

Nevertheless, official documentation and academic publications have left considerable gaps. To attempt to plug these, fiction can be employed. This article hinges on the work of James McClure because he was the most prolific of the writers who used Pietermaritzburg as background, described it memorably and accurately, and created a fictional detective partnership that has an international reputation. The output of the other four writers under consideration adds weight to both McClure's descriptions and the argument about the historical value of fiction.²

James McClure, Kramer and Zondi

James Howe McClure, born in Johannesburg in 1939, was educated at Scottsville School, Cowan House and Maritzburg College in Pietermaritzburg. He spent the first half of the 1960s in the city working first as a photographer (with Tom Sharpe whose writing is described later); then as a teacher at Cowan House; and finally for the *Natal Witness* (and the Durban papers *Natal Mercury* and *Daily News*) as a reporter, in particular on the crime beat. This gave him access to the police, as well as their unwanted attention, and unusual familiarity for a white person with the townships. He was at Pietermaritzburg police station on 5 August 1962 when someone reported that Nelson Mandela had been arrested near Howick. Neither McClure nor the charge officer had a clue what this was about. By 1965 he felt he 'had seen too much' and with his family he left for Britain never to return permanently; one of many whites who felt that everyone who lived in South Africa was compromised and tainted

by apartheid. While emotionally tied to South Africa, he claims he never wanted to go back.³

McClure died on 17 June 2006 in Oxford aged 66 of a respiratory illness. He had worked for thirty years on the *Oxford Mail* and *Oxford Times*, and was eventually editor of both, but became better known as the much-acclaimed author of eight detective novels set in a South African town named Trekkersburg, a thinly veiled Pietermaritzburg, that feature one of the best-known detective partnerships of all time: Detective Lieutenant Tromp Kramer and (Bantu) Detective Mickey Zondi of the Murder and Robbery Squad.⁴

Awards and applause were regularly earned in Britain, but his series was met largely with indifference in McClure's country of birth and 'disappeared [there] with hardly a trace'.⁵ However, Richard Peck claims that 'leftist political circles in Johannesburg and ... the South African Police in Pietermaritzburg' were fans of his work.⁶ Apparently, a retired policeman ran Stacey's in Longmarket (now Langalibalele) Street and McClure's books were stocked in numbers there. They have been reprinted a number of times on both sides of the Atlantic, but are still largely unknown in South Africa. The reasons for this are obscure as McClure is regarded by Mike Nicol as the founder of South African crime fiction against whom all subsequent writers of the genre are compared. While his novels were regarded as 'potentially seditious', they attracted relatively little attention from the government's busy censorship board. One title was banned because it infringed the Prisons Act by describing conditions, in particular capital punishment. Another was proscribed because of the advertising

blurb on its front cover. Nicol notes that there were few local reviews, except in the Durban newspapers. And booksellers were notoriously chary on financial grounds of stocking titles that might fall foul of the censors.⁷

Writing about the police, McClure was able to describe an alternative Pietermaritzburg showing that apartheid South Africa had its internal contradictions: 'You never saw blacks sitting in the front of cars – except in the police force ... you had this bonding [and] a lot of Afrikaners took a pride in speaking Zulu, it was almost effeminate ... not to be able to speak Zulu.'⁸ While Kramer insults Zondi, especially for the sake of form in front of other whites, police and civilians, there is also evidence of great mutual respect and humour. Nevertheless, Kramer uses virtually every racist epithet known to South Africans even though he is intended as a largely sympathetic figure to the reader. And McClure 'identif[ies] with Zondi. I only realised that when somebody pointed it out to me.'⁹ Zondi is gifted with a photographic memory ascribed to the lack of rural mission school textbooks; while a year as a 'houseboy' qualified him as a knowledgeable anthropologist of whites.¹⁰ He is also impertinent and arrogant, and prone to violence. Kramer clearly feels genuine concern and a liking for Zondi, but prevailing convention requires him to conceal this. Duncan Campbell argues that the characters of the two policemen 'subtly brought the reality of apartheid-era South Africa to an international audience.'¹¹ Another carefully drawn character is Christiaan Strydom, the district surgeon. But McClure was not a politicised writer: he was well-versed in the setting of his detective fiction, reflected the complexities of apartheid South Africa's society,

and expected his readers to come to their own conclusions.¹²

Trekkersburg: the place

Kramer was less than complimentary about Trekkersburg, although he is hardly a sophisticate. The backdrop is unmistakably Pietermaritzburg in the sixties and seventies: McClure had a fine eye for urban topography and a pen to match. The city is situated on the Umgungundhlovu River with the hospital located on its banks.¹³ The streets are 'calculated to take no more than three ox-wagons abreast;¹⁴ and many have imperial-sounding names: Ladysmith, Buchan and Gillespie, for instance. Members of the Albert [Victoria] Club, an eternal officers' mess, looked over its half-moon spectacles' berating 'counter jumpers, Jews and Nationalist Party wallahs ... The whole world was going to hell'.¹⁵ Behind the courthouse are the Lanes, without apparent plan and now just 'grubby passageways between offices with empty, forbidding hallways', although there is a café.¹⁶ Ballard's [Harwin's] Arcade is another significant landmark.

The hotels are the Albert, Bayswater, Royal and BATTERY (a residential establishment) along with the Old Comrades Club. Outside the City Hall are De Wet Street and the Parade, statues of Queen Victoria and Theophilus Shepstone, and Market Square with its flower stalls. Behind the museum are the undertakers Abbott and Strydom. The police station was 'built in the days of the old mounted police and the architect had apparently made whimsical allowance for a platoon to gallop through with lances elevated.'¹⁷ The CID office is in Boomplaats Street. There is also modern development, for instance the 18-storey Mutual Insurance Company

building under construction.¹⁸ Close to the city centre, Trichaard [Zeederberg] Street is the ‘sole non-white zone which meant it did the job of ten streets elsewhere in the town’.¹⁹ Nearby are the Biddulph Street bus terminus, a place of criminal activity and much useful information, and the beerhall.

Upper middle-class white suburbs in the mist belt display strong British connections and ‘there had to be more square yards of good grass per head in Caledon than in the rest of the city put together’.²⁰ Greenside and Morninghill similarly overlook Trekkersburg with road names like Arcadia Avenue and Benjamin Drive. Armstrong Avenue in Morninghill features flame trees, burglar alarm signs, and houses possessing ‘park-like grounds, with lawns, terraces, formal flowerbeds, neat hedges and a tennis court’.²¹ Jan Smuts Close is notable for ‘lush tropical vegetation and an air of earnest middle-class pretension’.²² On these northern hillsides rooftops are visible above hedges and bamboo thickets, while hibiscus and hydrangeas mark driveway entrances. There are cannas in islands on suburban roads.²³ The architectural variety ranges from Cape Dutch to Spanish via Californian and ‘restaurant Tudor’. By contrast, the servants’ quarters on each property have cement floors, barred windows and whitewashed brick walls.²⁴ Some of these *khayas* have been converted into bachelor flats ‘[s]ince the Act which kept most Bantu out of the town overnight’.²⁵ Nearby Turner’s [Town] Hill has a long winding road, the site of car crashes. Apart from the Country Club, there is a Wilderness Park and a bird sanctuary with egrets and a giant, 109-year-old tortoise called Pedro.

Skaapvlei suburb, with its Sunderland Avenue and Osler Way, is more difficult

to identify but its location next to the racecourse and near the national road suggests Scottsville. Also adjacent to the racecourse is the even more obscure suburb of Six Valleys.²⁶ The university is on a slope above the city, a ‘mess and a muddle of buildings’ in grounds with too many trees. True to reality, the main building has a domed clock tower.²⁷ Not far away are a drive-in cinema and an aluminium factory near Sweethaven Road [Cleland/Mkondeni].

The top end of town contains Monument and Claassens streets where drugs are pushed. The railway worker suburb predictably includes Schoeman and Retief roads and is an aberrant factor in elections. It consists of pairs of semi-detached, identical bungalows with corrugated iron roofs, three bedrooms and a *khaya* on quarter acre plots with a vegetable patch for maize and pumpkins: as ‘unremarkable as rows of passenger coaches in a marshalling yard’.²⁸ The railway line and workshops are fringed by a high security fence. Indeed, Mason’s Mill in the late 1960s was the largest Garrett engine depot in the world, staffed by the railway workers of Napierville.²⁹ At the bottom end of Railway Street is a somewhat unlikely park with a Victorian bandstand, but its racially defined benches are authentic enough. The nearby brickworks are marked by ‘gritty air’.³⁰

In general, Trekkersburg is a city of ‘jacaranda avenues and corrugated iron roofs and orange brick’.³¹ There are several downmarket white areas, for example Kitchener Row in a dilapidated part of town, of ‘dreary orange-brick dwellings ... turn-of-the-century, jerry-built architecture, with its pointed cornices, pretentious Doric columns along the verandas and steeply pitched tin roofs’. A similar picture is painted

of the oldest part of town 'where the Victorian houses had faded tin roofs, fancy cast-iron railings surrounding their balconies and dim verandas, high hedges with narrow gates opening onto mossy paths of red tile.' Some houses had been modernised. Ladysmith Terrace consists of old red-brick bungalows with iron roofs and fancy woodwork 'in a twisting road by the Town Stream [Dorpspruit]'. Some parts of the city have been converted into flatland: for instance, Azalea Mansions and the more upmarket Charlton Heights.³² But Palm Grove Mansions, a small block of low-rental flats near the station, is described as 'a little like an extension of the marshalling yard' due to its constantly shifting residential population.³³

Beyond the airfield on the southern side of the city there are gentle hills scattered with houses with corrugated-iron roofs, water tanks and verandas. This area includes an abandoned experimental farm where the hybrids had failed and the buildings been bulldozed.³⁴ Out on the Tierkop Road on the other side of the city are smallholdings where Colonel du Plessis grows flowers. And not far away is the sewage farm. Monument Hill is harder to place but could be Hathorns Hill since it features the crematorium. A figment of McClure's imagination is a co-operative farm with workers sharing the profits.

At Kwela Village [Sobantu], McClure describes two-roomed concrete houses the size of four table tennis tables with earth floors. The 800 houses are identical, 'all as neatly placed as ... bureaucratic rubbers', but Zondi's features a path defined by 'upturned condensed-milk cans' that eventually rust away.³⁵ Inside, the shelves are protected by newspaper and lines are etched in the damp earth floor to simu-

late boards. The splintery rafters are visible under the corrugated asbestos roof and the red brick walls are unplastered.³⁶ Kwela is surrounded by a high fence with an entrance gate guarded by constables with kerries. There are no street signs, its roads are potholed, and the primary school operates on the shift system. Electricity powers only some street lights, plus the house and office of the township superintendent, so homes are lit by candles.³⁷ However, by the early 1980s Zondi and his family have moved to a new township called Hamilton [Imbali], 12 kilometres from town. His house now has a ceiling to its three rooms, a cement floor with a carpet, separate beds, and an outside toilet with a door. There is hope that electricity may arrive soon.³⁸

McClure's Edendale and its hospital are ironically named Peacevale (or alternatively Peacehaven) through which there is a good road 'for the deployment of military vehicles in the event of civil disturbance'.³⁹ The hospital is 'gigantic, larger than anything for whites in the Trekkersburg district', with thousands of beds, but its out-patient department is overflowing and hopeless cases are simply dumped outside.⁴⁰ Somewhat optimistically, by the late 1970s Peacevale has a bank.⁴¹ The area's margins are populated by 'lopsided homes'.⁴² Presciently, in view of the city's post-apartheid history, there is corruption over construction contracts for a new unnamed African township.⁴³

Before World War II Pietermaritzburg's whites complained about the increase in the inhabitants of Asian origin and by the 1960s they had become the biggest fraction of the population. Yet McClure largely neglects the Asians of Trekkersburg, simply recording that Gladstoneville is a 'sprawling shanty

town set aside for Asiatics on the north-western edge of Trekkersburg', an amalgam of Raisethorpe and Northdale. Its houses have no street numbers. The Hindu temple is in Harber Road, presumably in town.⁴⁴

Trekkersburg's people

McClure's English-speaking whites are unambiguously drawn: posh types in the more prosperous suburbs who 'call England "home" in conversations, even when they've never been there'.⁴⁵ Characters like Colonel Peter Jarvis have a military background and no doubt is left about their narrow attitudes and prejudices in what might be construed as stereotyping.⁴⁶ More recent British immigrants of lower social standing, such as the appropriately named Ralph Brighton and Tommy Styles, staff the fire and ambulance station.⁴⁷ White women dry their underwear in their bathrooms lest it excite the African gardener; but often talk about private matters in front of servants on the (unwarranted) assumption that they understand little English.⁴⁸

The city's African servants are generally treated with disdain, although as nannies they carry great responsibility for white children. They are the automatic suspects after any criminal activity and spend their limited daylight spare time on suburban pavements socialising. At night they are subject to a 10.30 pm curfew. After one murder they are depicted in a group whispering and giggling. Male servants have a town wife and a country wife. Those on the margins of the economy have various ploys including turning jackets inside out to assume a rustic anonymity, a tactic occasionally favoured by Zondi.

The coloured community is represented by Theresa le Roux who was re-

classified after her father was hospitalised, but passed for white as a supposed music teacher and real-life prostitute by wearing blue contact lenses. Even an autopsy failed to reveal her apartheid racial identity and she was exposed, among other factors, by a photograph of her brother Lenny Francis. Passing for white involved elaborate precautions to erase evidence of the past and Lenny's mother is caught out when she enters a coloured public toilet.⁴⁹ Helen Kapstein highlights the neurosis of apartheid, with everything (and everybody) in their ordained place; and the emphasis on eugenics in which the State claimed to be able to detect 'racial essence' through hair, bone structure and fingernails.⁵⁰

McClure was considerably less successful in his portrayal of the Asian community, which is largely absent from his Trekkersburg, although Zondi speaks disparagingly of 'Sammy', 'Coolie Mary', 'churras' and 'curry-guts'.⁵¹ Asians are rather weakly portrayed as divided into 'Sammy units and Mary units to facilitate friendly relationships'. Typically, Asian men appear as waiters and Ramchunder at the Royal Hotel is generically addressed as Sammy.⁵² His colleague Paul Ramphaul, the 'most excellent of all Indian barmen', knows the favourite drink of each regular patron.⁵³ At the lower end of Trekkersburg are modern flats inhabited by 'prosperous Indian families' with herbalists and sangomas (witchdoctors) down below on Leonard Street. Cafes are generally run by Asians – and Greeks, Italians and Portuguese.⁵⁴ Ramjut Pillay, Asiatic Postman Second Class (post wallah), is so blatantly stereotyped that his characterisation is near-racist. He lives down a dirt road, 3 kilometres from the tar, in Apricot Road, Gladstoneville.⁵⁵

Signs of the times in Trekkersburg

McClure goes to great pains to ensure authenticity and ambience: his Trekkersburg even has NTK car number plates. The daily paper is the *Gazette* [*Witness*] but there is also an evening paper called the *Daily Post* ‘not worth putting in the cat’s sand box’. Nevertheless, beneath the many façades of normality is the highly violent society he had experienced at first hand as a journalist. At the police station extra bolts and padlocks have been placed on cell doors since the ‘Goldberg escape’.⁵⁶ A white railway clerk languishes in the cells for contravening the Immorality Act.⁵⁷

Overseas magazines are sold at newsagents with excisions made by censors’ scissors; and the Dutch Reformed Church synod has demanded that Sunday papers, and ‘living in sin’, be outlawed.⁵⁸ Naomi Stride, one of McClure’s murder victims, is a writer whose books have been banned; and publication of most matters pertaining to prisons is proscribed.⁵⁹ The Roman Catholic Church is seen as an ever-present danger and suspected of taking an unhealthy interest in forced removals: police phone bugging is rife, even on a mission station.⁶⁰ Black convicts weed a school playing field.⁶¹

McClure largely avoids the national context, but there is one exception, in which he invokes the case of the death of the detainee Ahmed Timol in the story of the former special branch policeman Zuidmeyer whose son commits suicide by jumping from a window in the city centre.⁶²

Tom Sharpe’s Piemburg

Tom Sharpe’s literary purpose was very different: to parody and satirise the apartheid-era police and the impe-

rial remnants of Pietermaritzburg; and he does this in anarchic, often savage fashion. His first book, *Riotous Assembly* memorialises ‘all those members of the South African Police Force whose lives are dedicated to the preservation of Western Civilization in Southern Africa.’

Sharpe had been in the Royal Marines and arrived from Britain in 1951 at the age of 23. He was variously employed as a social worker for the Pietermaritzburg Native Affairs Department, as a teacher at Highbury, and by a Longmarket (Langalibalele) Street photography shop. He frequented Congress circles in Pietermaritzburg, although he had at first been suspected as a police security branch spy. Eventually he was trusted enough to ferry Albert Luthuli to Durban on his motorcycle. He was deported from South Africa for sedition in 1961 after his anti-apartheid play, ‘The South African’, was staged in London. He found South Africa easy to write about: ‘Perhaps ... because he had more than a bit of madness in him.’ He was a complex character of many parts including fascist inclinations, although he was horrified by the Holocaust. He died in 2013.⁶³

His Piemburg lies in the foothills of the Drakensberg beneath a flat-topped hill, which he names Empire [World’s] View, but it is bizarrely also the capital of Zululand. It has ‘few of the marks of a capital city ... a tiny town that seems to have died and been embalmed. For Piemburg is by popular accounts quite dead.’ By the early 1970s it is a ‘tiny metropolis’ of ‘seedy grandeur’.

But his scathing satire and geographic licence do not invalidate his books’ descriptive content: ‘Red iron roofs and wrought iron balconies bespeak a distant age’ and the streets are lined with

jacarandas, lush gardens and dark verandas. However, negative sentiment is unrelenting: 'Everything grows immediately and just as immediately stands still. Time and the climate both combine to growth and growth's suspension.' Significantly, by the time he wrote his prequel McClure seems to have become similarly disenchanting: 'God knows what our forefathers thought they were doing, fighting the bloody English for it! Three weeks in Trekkersburg should become ... the new sentence for aggravated child molestation,' reflects Tromp Kramer. He also refers to it as 'The city that lived with its legs crossed.'⁶⁴

Sharpe relates Piemburg's heyday to the imperial garrison at Fort Rapier [Napier]. It produced civic buildings sporting 'a rash of colonnade and red Victorian brick' and a governor's mansion of 'imperial splendour'. The railway station with its 'metal fretwork' was a 'staging post for Viceregal trains'. The Imperial Hotel had been a place of palm court orchestras and Sam Browne belts; while Piemburg boasted its botanical gardens and bandstands, Garrison Theatre, bazaars and garden parties. All of these evoked 'melancholic memories of the shires'. In general, Sharpe hardly bothers to disguise his urban geography: the Mounted Police barracks (in Alexandra Road), City Hall and nearby Supreme Court, with Fort Rapier now a mental hospital, 'outwardly unaltered'. The Alexandria Club is presumably the Victoria.

Sharpe's observation that Piemburg bore the indelible imprint of the Victorian lower middle class with its obsessive hierarchy and snobbery is highly perceptive. He writes of the allure of grandeur for 'wives from south London ... married [to] husbands whose mediocrity won for them the reward of

being posted to this distant sliver of the Empire.' With the end of the garrison in 1914, 'Piemburg fell asleep' dreaming of 'brief days of glory' and time stood still in a 'drip of snobbery', which included the distinction of being the last city in South Africa to fly the Union Jack.⁶⁵ The mediocrity was venomous and involved total disregard for the city's Asian, coloured, Zulu and Pondo inhabitants.

By the 1960s the police force is staffed almost entirely by Afrikaners: Kommandant van Heerden, Luitenant Verkramp, by definition head of the security branch, and the psychopathic Konstabel Els. Their zeal extends to raiding the Piemburg Amateur Dramatic Society's reading of G.B. Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, seizing *Black Beauty* from the public library, banning a showing of *African Queen* at the cinema, and proscribing an article on weather forecasting entitled 'Red sky at night'. The Masonic Hall is also raided; and an archaeologist who suggested that iron workings existed in the Transvaal before 1652 is arrested. All of this contributes to the never-ending fight against Marxism, liberalism, humanism, Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism. Heroes' Day revives old enmities between Boer and Briton with separate celebrations held at Voortrekker Stadium and Settlers Park. The Sons of England dedicate yet another bench at the latter. In the early 1970s Van Heerden is still making speeches about the molestation of nuns in the Congo, which occurred over a decade before.

Michael Power's Harmersburg

Another writer from Pietermaritzburg preceded both McClure and Sharpe. Michael Power set his novel *A Gathering of Golden Angels* (1963) in

Pietermaritzburg disguised as Harmersburg; an understated, but powerful story.⁶⁶ It concerns the unexpected homecoming of a young member of the Starles, an upper middle-class family with a network of business interests (tanning, printing and sugar milling) centred on property. They keep out of public life and live in an imposing mansion in one of the northern suburbs later described by McClure. The house features a colonnaded veranda, many rooms, lavish gardens, a swimming pool and tennis court, and an orchard. 'Two garden boys [crouch] on the lawn picking tiny weeds out of the grass.' But living in the mist belt has its disadvantages: 'delicate patterns of mildew settled on one's shoes in the cupboards and clothes took on a sour smell'.⁶⁷ A relative's house in the original part of the town is 'encircled by verandas on both floors and the stables were now converted to garages and servants' quarters'. One old lady employs eight servants, five of them domestic.⁶⁸

Power's descriptions of Harmersburg, a town of 100 000 people, are somewhat anodyne: wide and empty streets, sprawling gardens, servants out shopping, pavements carpeted with jacaranda flowers in early summer. But, 'almost any town of the same size had a more impressive main street than this one. There is hardly one striking building', the modern additions functional and ugly. Earlier buildings are 'long single-storied old colonial ones with pillars over the pavements and rows of cement bobbles and plaster urns on their roofs'. The park features 'a bandstand with conductor's platform and the stools for players ... left in place as a reminder of the colony's early days.' The central figure, Haydon, who would have been born in the very early 1940s, recalls

his childhood when the city ended at the river, although there were one or two more distant suburbs. These had mushroomed with the return of soldiers from World War II and the arrival of more immigrants, although old families still dominate.⁶⁹

They are clearly anti-semitic. In the words of a university student, 'There're quite a crowd of Jews here. You notice it only because there're so few Jews in this town ... the old British families have put up barricades'.⁷⁰ And these same reactionaries have no sympathy when a white woman and an Asian man are charged under the Immorality Act.⁷¹ The Starles are confident and complacent in their wealth and, like most other whites, loudly intolerant of anything remotely liberal: 'once you trespassed outside the boundaries of the accepted racial pattern, even in the most passive way, you became suspect ... people in your own racial group turn[ed] away from you. Often they became openly hostile. In some subtle way you were no longer one of them, now you were distrusted and even despised. Intentions were seldom examined; the outward act was regarded as final evidence.'⁷²

Significantly, Power addresses the issue of land speculation. A new African township for 20 000 people is planned 'on the western outskirts' and the owner of the brickworks, a councillor, is anxious to acquire an old quarry from the Starles: local suppliers will be accorded preference in the award of tenders. The Starles require, in turn, 200 acres of land suitable for dairy farming adjacent to their home. The deal fails to go through, mainly because of dogged conservatism. And the councillor-cum-developer manages to source bricks from a quarry over 30 kilometres away: 'not so convenient

and the bricks won't be so good. But why worry about standards?—they're only for nigger houses.' The developer reflects on the fact that when he was young most Africans lived in mud huts, but that now they were being offered brick houses with gardens and tarred streets, power and water. This was seen primarily as an opportunity for white business.⁷³

Thabo Masemola's Covenantsburg

Thabo Masemola's *Mixed Signals* is set in Covenantsburg and Edenvale [Edendale] during the 1980s at the height of the apartheid government's repression and he refers to trials under the Terrorism Act. The city he describes as a Liberal Party stronghold is served by its main newspaper the *Sentinel* [*Witness*] and another, the *Provincial Post*. But the main locus of his story is Edenvale and Adams township [probably Ashdown]. His detective duo follows the McClure formula: Bantu Detective Constable Protus Sishi (known to his detractors as Van der Sishi) and Sergeant Koos Greef.

Another key figure is the radical lawyer Roger Msimang. His office in town is in Retief Street, occupying a 'small decrepit building in the Asian trading area.' It is near the bus station; and the pavements are crowded by beggars and children, and covered by hawkers' fruit, vegetables and fake medicines. Signs in Zulu indicate the clientele, but the surrounding blocks of flats with washing on their balconies, and the cinemas, are occupied by Asians. There is also a mosque.⁷⁴ The white part of town is notable for Churchill Square and the nearby Voortrekker memorial, consisting of a church and museum, an oasis of tranquillity and jacarandas described as the 'most sacred place in the Republic'.

There is also the Natal Society Museum. All the stores are closed on a Saturday afternoon. On Soweto Day, 16 June, each year Squash Manatha conducts a one-man placard protest stand outside the City Hall.⁷⁵

Masemola's writing is particularly valuable for the picture it paints of Edenvale.⁷⁶ It is described as a luxurious valley of grass, shrubbery, and gum and pine trees that contains an 'African ghetto', but has experienced no unrest. One hundred thousand people live in a 'mass of rickety mud houses ... [with] ... a sprinkling of neatly kept brick houses'. Through Edenvale flows the Umsunduzi River, which joins the Umngeni.⁷⁷ There are few telephones, except for the doctor's. Edenvale is described by Greef as 'secretive', but it is well populated by large advertising hoardings. Tyres adorn chimneys to deflect the lightning sent by ill-wishers and roofs are painted red to ward off tornadoes. 'Some houses leaned precariously, as if ready to succumb to the elements, or collapse from mere exhaustion.' Ten households share a 'rusty tin outhouse' equipped with a cardboard door held by wire. In summer the roads are blocked by mud.⁷⁸

Edenvale's main formal employer is Dick's [Sutherlands] Tannery and another landmark is the African Apostolic Christian Gospel Church. Next to the beerhall, surrounded by weeds, is the Edenvale YMCA. Active in the area is Ibutho [Inkatha], a conservative political organisation supported by the defence force.⁷⁹ Near Adams township are abandoned houses once occupied by Asians and a neglected graveyard: 'Even the final resting place was a wasteland of segregation.'⁸⁰ Adams has a signboard forbidding entry to races

other than African and its streets are 'garbage-strewn'.⁸¹

Verne Harris's Pietermaritzburg

Verne Harris uses an undisguised city as the backdrop to his first novel *Where They Play the Blues*, which covers the early days of the mid-1980s national State of Emergency and ends with the murder by Inkatha of the activist Blues Magawana in July 1987 just as the region descends into a long phase of violence. His funeral takes place under emergency regulations: 'the boers ... have a way of crushing precious things under their boots,' says Blues' father.⁸²

Pietermaritzburg is characterised by a 'mixture of Victorian red-brick houses and the solid, deeply-verandahed houses which had been built in the 1950s', the older of which had been carefully restored under municipal conservation regulations. The City Hall has a 'benign, burnt-orange presence'. The southern and northern ends of the city, Asian and white respectively, are essentially the same: 'old buildings and modest commercial enterprise.' Its street pattern bears the indelible imprint of the Voortrekkers who had descended from World's View. But the Union Jack still flies from the flagpole of a 'men's [Victoria] club'. The central cemetery is a peaceful spot containing several Voortrekker graves, although also an attraction for vagrants. On another edge of the city are the Victoria Road marshalling yards with their pre-1970s memories of steam engines. The white working-class suburb is Westgate, 'all those little boxes, each with a patch of grass and a dog.' To the south-east of the city are the remnants of the Roy Hesketh motor racing circuit beyond

which is 'rolling farmland stretching to Table Mountain'.⁸³

The African township of Edendale, whose Methodist mission origins are still evident, occupies a 'smoke-filled' valley in which the quality of housing deteriorates with distance from the city. St Mark's primary school, formerly Roman Catholic and now run by the Kwa-Zulu government, has 500 pupils, five classrooms and six teachers, the headmaster's office, a hall, and a storeroom which doubles as the library. Only the head's office possesses window panes. Ashdown High has been unofficially renamed Comrade Mandela School. Of Imbali, Gudrun Goodchild has this to say: 'rows of little houses ... She wondered what it was about them that made them characterful. Was it the dignity of their inhabitants in making homes of the box-like structures without resisting their irreversible uniformity? So different from the artificial refinement of white suburbia, where every attempt to individualise a property merely reinforced the mediocrity which informed the whole.' Slangspruit is a slum settlement of 10 000 people in shelters of corrugated iron, plastic, wood and cardboard with brick structures a rarity, excluded from the borough in 1980 but undeveloped by any other state agency.⁸⁴

On the other side of the city Sobantu had lost its community council as a result of protest action and many activists fled under threat from vigilantes. However, violence is relatively restrained by national standards, although there are conflicts around transport and in schools. A whites-only general election is in progress and marked by a two-day stayaway by residents from the townships. One of the book's main characters speculates inaccurately that

after liberation the city will be renamed Umgungundhlovu.⁸⁵

Harris's second novel takes readers back to the 1950s when Pietermaritzburg was awaiting the implementation of the GAA; and then revisits the city briefly in 1990 as apartheid starts to unravel. This book is explicitly set in the world of jazz and Pietermaritzburg is described again in straightforward terms: the City Hall, Alexandra Park, and Queen Victoria's statue 'beneficent before the colonial legislative buildings'. But more obscure locations such as the Lotus Hall, Twiggy's pie cart, the small garden 'tucked behind the Deeds Office' and the Salvation Army hall ('an absurdly pompous building') also appear. Given the emphasis on jazz, clubs and hotels feature prominently: the Ansonia, Blue Moon and Bombay Corner 'on the edge of Indian town', and outside Pietermaritzburg, the hotel at Thornville.⁸⁶ The Cygnet Theatre is also a jazz venue. This was the era of the Liberal Party, but the author makes little of its impact. Better developed are memories of the Durban Road prisoner-of-war camp of the previous decade and the influence of Italians on the city, including their church; and of the military transit and hospital camps at Hay Paddock and Oribi.⁸⁷

The decade of the 1950s awaits the sword of Damocles that would be wielded in terms of the GAA.⁸⁸ Meanwhile colonial practices persist, for example a night curfew for Africans: in the words of Ray Gamede, 'The police can get very angry with natives in town late at night.' One of the drivers of the GAA, the perceived issue of 'penetration', is illustrated by black ownership, Asian and African, of about twenty houses at the river end of New Scotland Road near the mixed-race area of Pentrich.

During the 1950s there is still misplaced hope that the GAA would somehow bypass Pietermaritzburg, but this is very short-lived.⁸⁹

Sobantu would survive the GAA. It is described as 'unlit ... no tar ... [and roads of] water-filled pot holes and areas of thick mud.' Edendale has one tarred main road running along the valley. Gamede lives in a brick house on a 'substantial plot', but it lacks electricity or phone. The dwellings of tenants built in brick, stone, mud, wood and corrugated iron, 'encroach on what was once a large vegetable garden.'⁹⁰

Conclusions

None of the five authors considered in this article, with the possible exception of Power, set out to write a book about Pietermaritzburg as a place. McClure and Masemola produced detective stories for which they required a genuine, familiar background; Sharpe needed a plausible setting for his satire; Harris wrote novels about inter-personal relationships, one in the context of the jazz scene and the other at a later time of startling political change; and Power seems primarily to have been concerned to expose the prejudices of the society in which he grew up. What they all provide to the urban and social historian is not unimportant to them, but in a sense incidental. Yet it is of considerable value. Richard Peck writes of McClure's detective novels: 'the history lesson is never intrusive [but] makes it the more effective.'⁹¹ Readers unfamiliar with Pietermaritzburg of the 1960s and 1970s would gain a remarkably accurate portrait of the city, albeit coloured by literary licence, none of which detracts from the overall impression. Similarly, Masemola and Harris weave authentic accounts of

Edendale in the 1980s, an area that until the 1960s had been multiracial in its make-up, and other townships. Sharpe's Piemburg might be dismissed as satire heaped upon satire, but for the fact that it corroborates the portrait painted by McClure, with the addition of its own distinctive turn of phrase. Power hardly bothers to disguise his Harmersburg and exercises little licence, reinforcing all the other writers discussed. All of them contribute to an historical sense of place.

On the other hand, portrayal of people in fiction is the prerogative of writers' imagination, but broad sociological trends do emerge, especially about the relationships between defined groups of people and their entrenched attitudes, a particularly significant factor in South Africa. Given the radical changes that have taken place in post-apartheid society such insights are of more than passing historical interest and importance. The socio-political observations are sometimes overstated, but nevertheless provide pointers to what was a country totally out of kilter with the modern world and dominated by the heavy hand of a neo-fascist state that had the benefit of building upon colonial authoritarianism and prejudice.

What we know and understand of geographic place in the past depends to a significant extent on literature. The portrayal of fictional people and events does not invalidate background where authors employ it to add authenticity to their writing by way of cultural and physical milieu.⁹² In such cases the historic value of fiction becomes clearly evident. Indeed, literary mediation and representation through fiction – and biography – may be the only connections we possess to memory and the feel of place; the re-creation of formerly famil-

iar, but now lost worlds. It is significant, in particular, for bland conservative societies such as Pietermaritzburg's during the apartheid era. White hegemony rendered the social, economic and political order so normal it did not require description or explication. Anything else was abnormal or exotic; and that rarely required recording either, except perhaps by novelists such as those considered in this article. Ultimately what they provide is a sense of place in time woven out of locale and location, society and geography that possesses a distinctive, almost tangible, identity.⁹³

NOTES

- 1 The only remotely comprehensive history of Pietermaritzburg for this period is to be found in John Laband and Robert Haswell (eds), *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988: A New Portrait of an African City* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, 1988).
- 2 Other writers have used Pietermaritzburg as background to their novels, but they have not been considered here because their setting falls outside the apartheid period. Examples are John Conyngham's *The Lostness of Alice* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1998) and Margaret von Klemperer's *Just a Dead Man* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2012).
- 3 Sarah Nuttall, 'Interview with James McClure [Wallingford, 21 March 1994]' *Southern African Review of Books* 30 (1994).
- 4 The Kramer and Zondi books are: *The Steam Pig* (1971, reprinted in New York by Soho Press, 2010); *Caterpillar Cop* (1972, Soho Press, 2010); *The Gooseberry Fool* (1974, Soho Press, 2011); *Snake* (1975, Soho Press, 2011); *The Sunday Hangman* (1977, Soho Press, 2011); *The Blood of an Englishman* (1980, Soho Press, 2011); and *The Artful Egg* (1984, Soho Press, 2013); with a prequel set in 1962, *The Song Dog* (1991, Soho Press, 2013), which barely mentions Trekkersburg and is set in the Fynn's [Charter's] Creek area of Zululand. All page references relate to the Soho Press reprints. McClure also wrote two well-received non-fiction books about the British and American police.
- 5 Richard Peck, 'The mystery of McClure's Trekkersburg mysteries: text and non-reception in South Africa' *English in Africa* 22(1) 1995.

- 6 Richard Peck, 'Kramer and Zondi [review] *Southern African Review of Books* 30 (March/April 1994); Nuttall, 'Interview with James McClure [Wallingford, 21 March 1994]'.
 7 Sam Naidu and Elizabeth le Roux, *A Survey of South African Crime Fiction: Analysis and Publishing History* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017), pp. 2, 32–35, 86, 91.
 8 Nuttall, 'Interview with James McClure [Wallingford, 21 March 1994]'.
 9 *ibid.*
 10 Peck, 'Kramer and Zondi'; McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 37.
 11 Duncan Campbell, 'James McClure: expatriate South African journalist and celebrated crime writer' [obituary] *Guardian*, 22 June 2006.
 12 Helen Kapstein, 'Red herrings: looking back at apartheid through James McClure's detective novels' *Anthropology and Humanism* 28(1) 2003, p. 85.
 13 Umgungundhlovu means 'place of the elephant', the Zulu name for Pietermaritzburg.
 14 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 81.
 15 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 223. Occasionally McClure confuses his establishments: the Albert appears as both a club and a hotel.
 16 McClure, *Snake*, p. 147.
 17 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 112. This building has been transplanted from its actual Alexandra Road location.
 18 McClure, *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 12.
 19 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 99.
 20 McClure, *Gooseberry Fool*, p. 79.
 21 McClure, *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 43.
 22 McClure, *Artful Egg*, p. 17.
 23 McClure, *Snake*, p. 151.
 24 McClure, *Sunday Hangman*, p. 195.
 25 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 27. A *khaya* (house in the Zulu language) is the term used to describe a domestic servant's quarters in the garden, usually at the back, of a white-owned residence.
 26 McClure, *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 171.
 27 McClure, *Artful Egg*, p. 213.
 28 McClure, *Caterpillar Cop*, p. 66.
 29 Jack Frost, 'Steamy hub of travel' *Natal Witness*, 17 March 1999.
 30 McClure, *Snake*, p. 148; *Blood of an Englishman*, pp. 146, 183.
 31 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 81.
 32 McClure, *Blood of an Englishman*, pp. 61–63, 69, 109.
 33 McClure, *Sunday Hangman*, pp. 83–84.
 34 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 82. This is one of McClure's few deviations from reality: Ukulinga research farm flourishes to this day.
 35 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 59; *Sunday Hangman*, p. 48; *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 117.
 36 McClure, *Artful Egg*, p. 264.
 37 McClure, *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 117.
 38 McClure, *Artful Egg*, pp. 47, 264.
 39 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 82. McClure slips up with Peacehaven, which later became a name for part of the white suburb of Lincoln Meade. For the violence that would afflict Edendale see John Aitchison, *Numbering the Dead: The Course and Pattern of Political Violence in the Natal Midlands, 1987–1989* (Pietermaritzburg, Natal Society Foundation Trust, 2015) and Lou Levine (ed.), *Faith in Turmoil: The Seven Days War* (Pietermaritzburg, PACSA, 1999).
 40 McClure, *Gooseberry Fool*, p. 125.
 41 McClure, *Sunday Hangman*, p. 6.
 42 McClure, *Snake*, p. 24.
 43 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 227. Chronology suggests that this could be extensions to Imbali.
 44 McClure, *Artful Egg*, pp. 2, 47, 225.
 45 McClure, *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 299.
 46 McClure, *Caterpillar Cop*, p. 150.
 47 McClure, *Gooseberry Fool*, p. 160.
 48 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 133.
 49 B.B. Lockwood, 'A study in black and white: the South Africa of James McClure' *Human Rights Quarterly* 4 (1983), p. 456; McClure, *Steam Pig*, pp. 141, 150.
 50 Kapstein, 'Red herrings', pp. 90, 94–95.
 51 McClure, *Steam Pig*, p. 100.
 52 McClure, *Caterpillar Cop*, p. 107; *Snake*, pp. 93, 108.
 53 McClure, *Gooseberry Fool*, p. 104.
 54 McClure, *Snake*, pp. 71, 135; *Blood of an Englishman*, p. 103.
 55 McClure, *Artful Egg*, p. 48.
 56 This refers to the spectacular escape of Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich from Marshall Square Police Station, Johannesburg in 1964. See AnnMarie Wolpe, *The Long Way Home* (London, Virago, 1994).
 57 McClure, *Steam Pig*, pp. 105, 113.
 58 McClure, *Caterpillar Cop*, p. 235.
 59 McClure, *Sunday Hangman*, p. 89; *Artful Egg*, p. 17.
 60 McClure, *Gooseberry Fool*, pp. 9, 57.
 61 McClure, *Caterpillar Cop*, p. 75.
 62 McClure, *Artful Egg*, pp. 303–304, 314. Ahmed Timol, an anti-apartheid activist was murdered by security branch police on 27 October 1971 when he was dropped from a tenth-floor window at John Vorster Square police station in Johannesburg. For many years the police claimed it was suicide, but a verdict of murder was recorded in October 2017. See Intiaz Cajee, *The Murder of Ahmed*

- Timol: My Search for the Truth* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2020).
- 63 Yves Vanderhaegen, 'Poise amid mayhem' *Witness*, 29 May 2018, p. 6; Goolam Vahed, *Chota Motala: A Biography of Political Resistance in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018), p. 74; Niall McNulty and Lindy Stiebel, *A Literary Guide to KwaZulu-Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017, p. 89). His two books, *Riotous Assembly* (1971) and *Indecent Exposure* (1973) were republished in London by Arrow in 2002 and 2004 respectively (quotations are taken from pp. 1–10 of the former and pp. 1–4 and 7–10 of the latter).
- 64 McClure, *Song Dog*, pp. 10–11, 16.
- 65 The South Staffordshire Regiment was withdrawn in 1914 and replaced by troops of the South African Defence Force (see Graham Dominy, 'Pietermaritzburg's imperial postscript: Fort Napier from 1910 to 1925' *Natalia* 19 (1989), p. 32).
- 66 Michael Power was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1933. His academic training in Pietermaritzburg and Oxford was in law, but his career was first with Anglo American and then in public relations. His third novel, written under the pseudonym of Lawrence Eben in the early 1970s, was about homosexuality across apartheid's race lines.
- 67 Michael Power, *A Gathering of Golden Angels* (London, Cassell, 1963), pp. 38–39, 104, 132. This book is in part autobiographical.
- 68 *ibid.*, p. 204.
- 69 *ibid.*, pp. 11–12, 87–88, 123.
- 70 *ibid.*, pp. 27, 93, 130.
- 71 *ibid.*, pp. 148–149, 160, 163, 186, 208–209.
- 72 *ibid.*, pp. 199–200.
- 73 *ibid.*, pp. 50–53, 215–216.
- 74 Thabo Masemola, *Mixed Signals* (Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1993), pp. 79–80. It won the Bertrams VO Prize for African Literature.
- 75 Masemola, *Mixed Signals*, pp. 105, 119, 121–122. In real life Manatha was D.C.O. Matiwane.
- 76 For a comprehensive history of Edendale see Marc Epprecht, *Welcome to Greater Edendale: Histories of Environment, Health, and Gender in an African City* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016).
- 77 Masemola, *Mixed Signals*, pp. 7–8.
- 78 *ibid.*, pp. 29, 34, 56–57.
- 79 *ibid.*, pp. 29, 69, 74, 89.
- 80 *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 81 *ibid.*, p. 28. This was true of the real-life Sobantu.
- 82 Verne Harris, *Where They Play the Blues* ([Cape Town], Buchu Books, 1990), pp. 134, 143.
- 83 *ibid.*, pp. 7, 15–16, 34, 85, 89, 110–111, 136.
- 84 *ibid.*, pp. 24–26, 62–63, 82–83, 127.
- 85 *ibid.*, pp. 50–51, 69, 110.
- 86 The Blue Moon and Bombay Corner were fictional, each a compound of Harris's 1960s childhood memories (personal communication).
- 87 Verne Harris, *A Cool Anger Blowing* (London, Minerva Press, 1994), pp. 11, 31, 39–41, 43, 46, 51, 83, 86–87, 106, 110, 115, 117.
- 88 This phrase was used by Muriel Horrell of the South African Institute of Race Relations.
- 89 Harris, *A Cool Anger Blowing*, pp. 21, 29–30, 60, 85, 116.
- 90 *ibid.*, pp. 19, 86.
- 91 Peck, 'Kramer and Zondi'.
- 92 Naidu and Le Roux, *A Survey of South African Crime Fiction*, pp. 84–85. In recent times the Association for Literary Urban Studies has been established, largely it seems based on the work of Scandinavian academics.
- 93 John Agnew, 'Representing space: space, scale and culture in social science' in *Place/Culture/Representation*, edited by James Duncan and David Ley (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 263.