A PREFACE TO HERMAN CHARLES BOSMAN'S «A BOER RIP VAN WINKEL»
Un prólogo para «A Boer Rip Van Winkel» de Herman Charles Bosman

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It is typical of Herman Charles Bosman (1905-1951) that the man, one of South Africa's best-known and best-loved authors, wrote stories about a region (the Marico District) to which he was sent by sheer chance. So much of his life has the aura of chance and happenstance about it – or what the writer John Fowles would call 'hazard.'

Bosman was born in Kuils River near Cape Town but lived in the Transvaal for most of his life. In 1926, having graduated as a teacher after studying at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, he was sent out to the remote Marico region by the Transvaal Education Department, which, in its wisdom, saw him converting the still largely oral people of the region to civilisation, culture and – above all – literacy.

The irony of this is that it was Bosman who was converted: from his city ways, his book learning and his literary education he came to value the richness and wisdom of the oral culture of the Marico District. In "Marico Revisited", written after a return visit to the Marico in October 1944, Bosman had the following to say about the district:

> A month ago I revisited the Marico Bushveld, a district in the Transvaal to which I was sent, a long time ago, as a school-teacher, and about which part of the country I have written a number of simple stories ...
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> There were features about the Marico Bushveld that were almost too gaudy. That part of the country had been practically derelict since the Boer War and the rinderpest. Many of the farms north of the Dwarsberge had been occupied little more than ten years before by farmers who had trekked into the Marico from the Northern Cape and the Western Transvaal. The farmers there were real Boers [farmers]. I am told that I have deep insight into the character of the Afrikaner who lives his life on the platteland. I acquired this knowledge in the Marico, where I was sent when my mind was most open to impressions. (Bosman 1972:157)

In "Reminiscences", which first appeared in 1946, he reflects on how the stories he wrote gained their very special character:

> I realised where all that local colour came from: I had got it from listening to the talk of elderly farmers in the Marico district who had a whole lot of information that they didn't require for themselves, any more, and that they were glad to bestow on a stranger. It was all information that was, from a scientific point of view, strictly useless.

> That was how I learnt all about the First and Second Boer Wars. And about the Native wars. And about the trouble, in the old days, between the Transvaal and the Orange Free State...
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> I regarded them as wonderful storytellers, the old Boers who lived in the Marico district twenty years ago. (Bosman 1972:162)

Bosman's sojourn in the Marico was cut short when he was convicted for shooting and killing his stepbrother at the family home in Johannesburg during the July school vacation. A painful interlude in prison followed, but when in the early 1930s he turned to writing in earnest, it was to the Marico region that he famously returned in the form of some 150 'bushveld' stories.

He achieved greatest success with his 'Oom Schalk Lourens' tales, memorable for their masterful use of a narrator figure, and his later 'Voorkamer' sequence, which features a group of farmers who gather in Jurie Steyn's voorkamer (which doubles as the local post office), and pass the hours spinning yarns about pretty girls, ghosts, seers and hypochondriacs while ostensibly waiting for the post lorry to arrive.

"A Boer Rip van Winkel" belongs to a third grouping of less known, but equally engaging, stories in which Bosman becomes more personally involved as a narrator. Productive and challenging as the Oom Schalk and Voorkamer sequences were for Bosman, they confined the author to a certain formula: a stable narrator (or set of narrators), a fixed setting, and the kind of story one expects to hear in an oral, storytelling milieu.

In this third grouping – which includes other famous stories like "The Affair at Ysterspruit", "Old Transvaal Story" and "The Clay-pit" – we see Bosman revelling in the freedom of being able to experiment with more self-conscious, ludic story forms. The element that binds all of these stories together is the ongoing, self-ironic commentary that Bosman conducts on the art of storytelling. Indeed, many of the stories are 'retellings' of tales heard so often that they have entered the store of oral folklore and as such are ripe for playful, humorous subversion.

Bosman was supremely conscious of the impossibility of being entirely original in the telling of a story: a story one tells is inevitably a reconstitution of stories that go before it, as he implicitly acknowledges in many of his stories. What remains to the writer, therefore, is the self-conscious redeployment of pre-existing materials, a process Bosman puts into practice with consummate mastery in a story like "A Boer Rip van Winkel."

The story deals with the aftermath of the second Anglo–Boer War of 1899–1902 and the outbreak of the Afrikaner rebellion in 1914. Former Boer War generals, disaffected with the British-dominated, post-Boer War dispensation in South Africa, and South Africa's alliance with Britain in the looming 1914–1918 Great War, staged an unsuccessful insurrection which centred on the northern Cape town of Upington.

The humour in the story – and its underlying satirical import – is the suggestion that certain die-hard Afrikaner loyalists, represented by Herklaas van Wyk in the story, have 'gone to sleep' for the years between 1902 and 1914 – *à la* Washington Irving's famous 'Rip van Winkle' character (1819). This reactionary tendency is both admirable for its unbending obduracy and risible for its myopic parochialism – and each of these qualities is captured with great skill and sympathy in Bosman's tale.

"A Boer Rip van Winkel" is one of eleven stories Bosman wrote about the Boer War. Typically, he was drawn to tales about the war dealing with the quirky, less admirable aspects of human nature – cowardice, duplicity, vainglory – and it is these failings that he gently but incisively reveals to lie beneath the glossy patina of Boer mythology. He was, after all, pre-eminently a satirist, and the glamorous, embellished tales that he encountered in the Bushveld clearly aroused his sharpest debunking instincts.

Despite this, the characters that one encounters in these tales are sympathetically drawn. In all of us, Bosman appears to be saying, lies the potential for both nobility and ignominy; it all depends on circumstance. As one of the characters in "The Red Coat" puts it, "if, at the battle of Bronkhorstspruit, Piet Niemand did perhaps run at one stage, it was the sort of thing that could happen to any man; and for which any man could be forgiven, too" (Bosman 2000: 28).

So the Boers are treated sympathetically, but Bosman is also completely unillusioned about their callowness and parochialism, their lack of discipline and their disorganisation. Most damning of all is the tendency of some of them to betray their comrades and go over to the other side. There are several Bosman stories in this vein: "The Red Coat" deals with a Boer who dons an English soldier's red coat in order to evade the enemy; "Karel Flysman" centres on a coward who flees at the onset of battle; "The Traitor's Wife" concerns a once-brave soldier who joins the English and is shot by firing-squad; while "The Affair at Ysterspruit" tells the story of a young man who joins the National Scouts, a corps of Afrikaners who were in active service with the English.

This aspect of the Anglo–Boer War is a dark, unwelcome element in Boer mythology about the war. In his magisterial study of the war, Thomas Pakenham notes that the '*hensoppers*' ('hands-uppers') and the '*yoiners*' ('joiners') were political "outcasts – skeletons well hidden away in the cupboard." He then remarks: "The fact that a fifth of the fighting Afrikaners at the end of the war fought on the side of the British was a secret that has remained hidden till today" (1982: 571).

Bosman's concern was to make that secret more apparent, to debunk the over-glamorised and embellished tales that he heard about the war. Writing between 1931 and 1951, in an era of increasing Afrikaner control of the state and its propaganda apparatus, he sought to expose the flaws in the developing Afrikaner nationalist ideology. He therefore wrote stories that drew attention to the darker, little-known and still less welcome secrets.

Bosman's relationship to his own Afrikaner heritage is thus ambiguous. He may say (through the voice of his narrator in "The Affair at Ysterspruit") that, when shown a photograph of a veteran of the war, "it was always with a thrill of pride in my land and my people that I looked on a likeness of a hero of the Boer War" (Bosman 2000: 17). However, in his fictional portrayals of the events of the two wars (Sir Theophilus Shepstone's annexation of the Transvaal in 1877, the battle of Bronkhorstspruit in 1879 and of Majuba Hill in 1881; the siege of Mafeking in the Second Anglo–Boer War, the defeat of Louis Botha at Dalmanutha and the later skirmishes of the 'small commandos') it is the telling human weakness that he lifts out of the surrounding swath of historical data. This is Bosman's Boer War – a war in which heroism is never free from the element of self-doubt, in which self-interest frequently asserts itself in moments of crisis, in which resolve falters under the hail of English lyddite, and the shabby remnants of once mighty commandos roam disconsolately over the desolate veld.

Somewhat paradoxically, though, what ultimately emerges from this piecemeal portrait of the Boer War is a sense of the protagonists' inner nobility and irreducible human value. Like the veteran fighter Oom Herklaas van Wyk in the "A Boer Rip van Winkel", they seem to emanate "a strange kind of assurance, a form of steadfastness in the face of adversity and defeat" (Bosman 2000: 85).

It is Bosman's singular achievement – having already stripped away all of the comforting layers of bravado and self-deception – to leave the reader with this poignant after-effect. For, in the end, it was not his purpose to ridicule and demean the Boer people. His abiding fascination with human beings (Afrikaner, English, or otherwise) was their frailties and foibles, their affectations and self-deceptions, their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Had he been writing in another era – when, perhaps, Afrikaner nationalism was not the nascent, threatening force it was in the 1930s and 1940s – he might have looked a little more kindly on the Boer people and their struggle for independence.

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