

Stuart Cloete: A novelist in Hermanus

Writer
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One of the obvious features of Hermanus history is the large number of famous and well-known people who visited the town during the 20th century. Some came only once, for instance the internationally known English woman pilot, Amy Johnson, who rested for a few days at The Marine after her record-breaking solo flight from London in the 1930s.

Other famous people didn't settle here for any length of time but visited repeatedly. Sir William Hoy is the best example of this. He relaxed here from his work as General Manager of the South African Railways for many years. He loved the fishing and the serene atmosphere of the little village, and stayed at The Marine Hotel on every occasion.

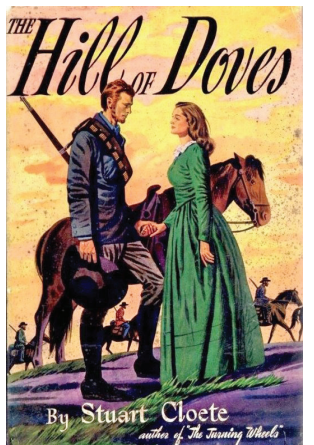
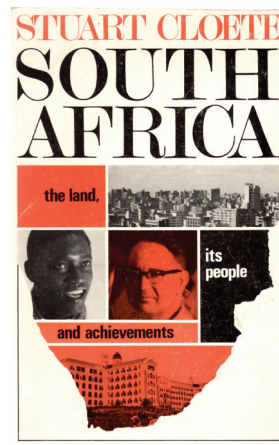
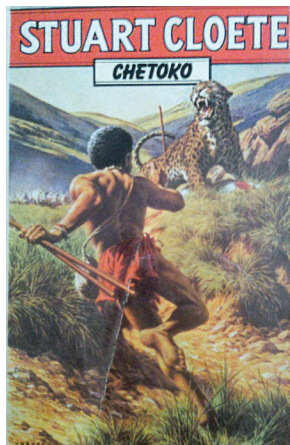
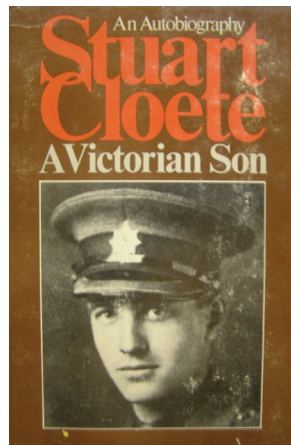
But a few individuals with international reputations settled here and became part of Hermanus life. Perhaps the best known in this category is the novelist Stuart Cloete and his second wife, Mildred West, always known as Tiny.

Stuart was already a best-selling author when the couple purchased a farm known then as Wesselshoek, between Stanford and Gansbaai in 1948. They stayed there for five years and in 1952 moved into Hermanus and bought a property at 24 Westcliff Road in Westcliff. They lived there together until Stuart died in 1976, having resided in our town for 38 years. Tiny continued to live in Hermanus until her death in 1993, having lived here for 45 years. Both Stuart and Tiny are buried in the Hermanus cemetery.

Stuart Cloete was definitely not retired nor resting on his reputation while he lived in our town. Between 1952 and 1976 he published no fewer than eight of his fourteen novels, as well as eight collections of short stories, a three-volume autobiography and four books of social and political comment. In his spare time, he and Tiny bought, renovated and resold at least 20 fishermen's cottages.

Cloete was a highly controversial figure in his time, though not widely read now. His life seems to come straight out of the setting of mystery, violence and misunderstanding portrayed in his novels.

He was born on 3 July 1897 in Paris into a family, the surname of which he believed was "Graham". His mother was Scots and his father, South African. He was the fourth in a family of five male children. Father and mother had busy social and business lives and Stuart's much older



er brothers had already left the family home.

Stuart was brought up by and received early private education from a governess in Paris until he was eight years old. He was then sent to a boarding school in England. In 1909 he was taken out of that school and sent to a series of French schools. He ran away from every one of these and was sent again to England, where he eventually finished the curriculum in 1914. He immediately enlisted in the British Army on 17 September 1914, with the rank of Second Lieutenant in the Coldstream Guards.

In 1915, shortly before Stuart was sent to the frontline in France, his father told him that his surname was not "Graham", but "Cloete". Stuart's father had been convicted of fraud at one time and after serving his sentence, unofficially took a different surname to conceal his identity. Because he was on the point of leaving with his regiment for France, Stuart did not take action at this time, but in 1924 he took legal steps to recover his real surname, which gave rise to the imposing new name of Edward Fairlie Stuart Graham Cloete.

Stuart Graham (as he still was then) fought in France from August 1915 to late 1916, when he was wounded and temporarily paralysed on his left side. He also suffered from shellshock (PTSD) and was hospitalised in the town of Reading in Southern England, where a nurse, Eileen Horsman took care of him. They married in July 1917. Stuart returned to the Front and was wounded again in May 1918.

After the war ended the couple settled in France on a small farm Stuart bought and lived there until he was well again. He had now become interested in his South African origins. In 1924 Stuart reverted to the surname Cloete, and the couple decided to go to South Africa.

He secured a job with the Transvaal Estates and Development Company on a cotton farm near Wambaths, just north of Pretoria and then bought a dairy farm of his own in the same

area. This venture was commercially successful, but by 1935, he felt that he had done enough to prove that he was a capable farmer and started to write stories.

He became bored with ranching, as he admits: *It isn't a bad life, ranching. But after a while, you begin to think. One day it occurred to me that I had spent enough of my life at the job of looking after cows. There is just so much you can do with cows. I had a lot of good ones, and if I would stick at it for thirty years more I'd have better ones... it seemed to me that nothing else would change much whether I stayed on the ranch or not. So I chucked it up and went to London. That's when I decided to have a shot at writing.*

By 1937, he had moved to London as a full-time writer and published his first novel, *Turning Wheels*. The 'turning wheels' are those on the ox wagons of several fictional parties of Voortrekkers during the Great Trek. However, it is not the 'Groot Trek' you were taught about in school history textbooks. Battles with the black tribes are described in gory realism, with heroes and villains on both sides. Sex is an important theme, also vividly portrayed, and the Boers are treated critically, as individuals, and not as national heroes. An academic critic describes the content as follows:

On one level, Cloete relates the saga of a group of Voortrekkers who under the primary leadership of an unequivocally egocentric forty-six-year-old widower, Hendrik van der Berg, leave the Cape in 1836 and, after numerous tribulations en route take several of their lives and decimate their initially vast numbers of horses, cattle, and sheep, reach the Northern Transvaal in January 1838... The overall picture which Cloete paints of this segment of the Great Trek is... one of intrigue, poisoned motives for migrating, social disarray in the community, racial strife and oppression on all sides, and group defeat.

There was an outcry, and importation of the book to South Africa was immediately stopped. Later four more of his novels were banned

while *Turning Wheels* was not unbanned until 1947. But internationally the book was a hit, with 2 million copies sold in the English edition and translations into fourteen languages.

Stuart was invited to Hollywood to consider filming it. With World War II just starting nothing came of the approach, but two of his subsequent thirteen novels were made into popular films. The films were *The Fearless Heart* (1961) and *Majuba* (1968), and both were moderately successful. There was a strong representation of South African actors in *Majuba* (including Patrick Mynhardt and Anna Neethling-Pohl), while South African Juliet Prowse had the starring role in *The Fearless Heart*.

Albert R Broccoli (who produced the early James Bond films) approached David Lean to direct a film version of *Rags of Glory* but Lean declined. He described the book as "Very good, in an awful sort of way".

In 1939, Cloete travelled to the USA to publicise the book and, on board the liner, met the woman who was to become his second wife. After he divorced his first wife, Eileen, he married Mildred, always called Tiny, in 1940. The couple based themselves in the USA for the duration of World War II. Cloete published quite steadily during this period: *Watch for the Dawn* (1939); *The Hill of Doves* (1942); *Christmas in Matabeleland* (1942); *Congo Song* (1943); a book of poetry; and three non-fiction books.

In 1948, he decided to return permanently to South Africa and bought a farm, known then as Wesselshoek, between Stanford and Gansbaai. Some accounts describe the farm as being part of what is now Grootbos Private Reserve, while others claim that it is now the health resort Bodi Khaya. Stuart invested much time and effort in clearing alien vegetation from the land and encouraging the growth of natural fynbos but does not appear to have actively farmed. At about this time, he wrote another novel, *The Curve and the Tusk*, which was published in London and Boston.

Some references claim that Cloete invested large percentages of the couple's income in the farm, without a corresponding return and that Tiny had to intervene and oblige him to sell up and move into town before the farm bankrupted them. However, the official records show that Cloete paid £2 850 for the property and sold it four years later for £8 000, a very considerable profit.

Both remained in Hermanus for the rest of their lives. Stuart died in 1976 and Tiny in 1993. In later life, she became active in the Animal Welfare Society and donated funds for the creation of the Tiny Cloete Clinic that is part of Mollergren Park. In an interview given late in life, Cloete said: *As a man I am very happy, but, as a human being I am in despair, as I can see no answer to overpopulation or pollution.*

The author welcomes any comments or additional information. He can be contacted at robinlee@hermanus.co.za



FAR RIGHT: A seven-year-old Stuart Cloete in 1904.
RIGHT: Stuart Cloete in 1918 and later in life (ABOVE).