Stuart Cloete: A novelist in Hermanus

by Dr Robin Lee

One of the obvious features of Hermanus history is the large number of famous and well-known people who visited the town. From the time it was known as Duiwelskloof, the first Afrikaans newspaper in South Africa was founded in 1877 by John Lategan and John Whitelocke in a small cottage in the town. The town was known for its fishing, and the serenity 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 Cloete was born on 3 July 1897 in Paris into a little village, and stayed at The Marine Hotel on every occasion. He loved social and business lives and Stuart's much old-

Stuart Cloete was definitely not retired nor resting on his reputation while he lived in our town. Between 1932 and 1976 he published no fewer than eighteen 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 fisherman'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 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, French. He secured a job with the Transvaal Estates and Development Company on a cotton farm near Wambaths, just north of Pretoria and then the couple purchased a farm known then as the community, racial strife and oppression on all sides, 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 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 epicentred forty-six-year-old widower, Hendrik van der Berg, leave the Cape in 1836 and, after numerous tribulations on route, 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 poison was banned until Turning Wheels was not unbanned until 1948. It is a book of suspense as well as a companion to the novel, with 2 million copies sold in the English edition and translations into fourteen languages.

Stuart Cloete was a great fan of film, and as a young man, he had a hand in Hollywood studio production. It was not until the 1960s that he returned to his native land to see it for himself. In 1964, he returned to South Africa and bought a farm known then as The Marine Hotel on every occasion. The farm was 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:

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14 | PROFILE

10 July 2019

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