

Book review

Africa Ablaze! Poems and Prose Pieces of War and Civil Conflict: A review

Africa Ablaze! Poems and Prose Pieces of War and Civil Conflict

Selected by Patricia Schonstein

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Patricia Schonstein is a writer well known to South African readers. Her earlier collections of short stories, songs and poetry were followed by her debut novel, *Skyline*, which was short-listed for a Sunday Times award in 2001. This latest collection, subtitled “Poems and Prose Pieces of War and Civil Conflict”, is a follow-up to her earlier anthology, *Africa! My Africa!*

The literature of war has an enduring appeal. Last year marked the centenary of World War I, and a number of new anthologies and new editions have filtered onto bookshop shelves. Literary works rooted in African, and particularly southern African, conflicts are rarer. This collection promises to be a welcome addition to a thinly populated subgenre.

Africa Ablaze! is an ambitious work. Schonstein has set out to gather “a wide range of voices, all held together by her preoccupation with, and questioning of, war and genocide”. This determined task begins bravely with an extract from Richard Whitaker’s “African” translation of the *Iliad*. Here, the combatants face each other armed with African traditional weapons and so this device functions to neatly relocate an ancient myth in a familiar landscape:

“When they met on level ground, they clashed assegai on assegai, hide on hide,
man on bronze-armoured man...”

This turmoil, this moment of raw, brutal energy that splits attention and conscience, is deeply engaging – the ideal locator of Africa as a continent of ancient battlegrounds. Clever use of such early sources is followed by a traditional Zulu war song and found poems from the Anglo-Boer War. This impressive, non-partisan commitment to present and explore conflict literature does much to establish the merit of the collection. It underscores the falsity of any feeling that war literature is somehow rooted in the “pity of war” associated with the trench poets of World War I.

Schonstein has set herself an unenviable task. Her acknowledgement that literature is larger than poetry is moored in the selection she offers, sometimes juxtaposing opposing voices for ironic effect. Thus we

have the surgical prose by James Whyte, describing the wounding of a Lieutenant Gordon during the Frontier Wars:

“The lead travelled on and its hope changed and it left Gordon’s right thigh and entered his left and destroyed the femur just below the point where its ball sat in the socket of the pelvis...”

In proximity to the (now) outrageously politically incorrect poem “Fuzzy-Wuzzy” by Kipling:

“We’ve fought with many men across the seas,
an’ some of ’em was brave an’ some was not:
The Paythan an’ the Zulu an’ Burmese:
But the Fuzzy was the finest o’ the lot.”

Predictably, Anglo-Boer War writing is well represented, including Hardy’s achingly beautiful piece, “Drummer Hodge”. What would any writing of that war be without this iconic piece? But it is the careful selection of oddities, including this found remnant – a diary entry from Maria Fischer, a Boer woman about to be consigned to a concentration camp – that adds a particular poignancy:

“We must leave our menfolk, children, fathers, brothers, sisters, house, everything, yes everything, and us – what shall become of us?”

With a notable eye for detail, Schonstein’s inclusion of Wendy Woodward’s tender piece, “South African War Horses”, swells the range to cover animal rights in this vast literary debate on war. This is not a serendipitous choice. It reveals Schonstein’s commitment to a balanced, representative collection that dissects contemporary theoretical concerns.

Both world wars are well represented. Established works by well-known poets are complemented by a few oddities, such as HW Schmidt’s “Bully Beef”:

“In the field kitchens
Pork, sausages and potatoes
So long a rarity –
Were frying.
There was British beer to drink
And tinned South African pineapple for dessert...”

These inclusions remind us that war is an inclusive human experience, and that not only the victors pen their stories. The targets behind the guns have stories to tell too: be they terse, humorous, valorous or grief-stricken.

A strength of Schonstein’s anthology lies in her pursuit of those pieces that speak to the forgotten, lonely wars, the conflicts that hardly registered on critics’ radar. Thus a found poem from the former Belgian Congo:

“The soldiers stripped the nuns of their garments
And forced them to walk naked in the streets
Jeering at them...”

This seems an appropriate introit to works we recognise as post-colonial, issuing from liberation struggles. Again the deft selection balances the prosaic and the extraordinary. An excerpt from Mandela’s manifesto at the Rivonia trial secures the authentic representation of South Africa’s freedom struggle, along with a number of pieces that do justice to it.

The editor’s constant, panopticon gaze is impressive. We find on opposite pages what appears to be an excerpt from a technical manual for a Kalashnikov rifle:

“The AK-47 can be stripped in under a minute and cleaned quickly in almost any climatic conditions...”

and a broad, quasi-philosophical piece by Frantz Fanon:

“In guerrilla warfare the struggle no longer concerns the place where you are, but the place where you are going...”

The credits continue for the rest of the anthology. The Rhodesian / Zimbabwean conflict gives space to Chimurenga and opposing voices. But what excites are the number of found voices, the anonymous ones whose words, perhaps lacking technical sophistication and artistic polish, speak clearly and pointedly to the horror of war:

“When he came out on a pass
He used to sleep in the lounge
On the couch
He would make me lock myself in the bedroom
Because he was afraid to hurt me”

The ghosts of Mugabe’s Gukurahundi whisper too.

South Africa’s Border War is given space on this broad canvas, a noteworthy strength of this collection. Unlike the Rhodesian Bush War, which generated a sizeable volume of memoir and other writings, South Africa’s Border War has remained an unexplored literary frontier. *Africa Ablaze!* does much to rectify the situation. Soldiers, activists and others are afforded space and respect to tell their stories. Those interested in the Border War would find the broad selection reason enough to acquire this volume. One cannot easily choose a single piece without neglecting the range and pitch of the others. This simple piece of stark prose from Jillian.

Edelstein’s TRC work, *Truth and Lies: Stories from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* – “So Wallace is rêrig dood” – hammers home something of the awful price extracted from ordinary citizens by the apartheid regime:

“She had sustained the vain hope that it had been the wrong body, that one day she would find him again.”

The final pages of the anthology range widely. Scattered pieces from Rwanda, Sudan, Ethiopia. Indeed, most of Africa’s “other” contemporary wars are represented. It is ironic that one wishes there were more – until the realisation dawns that these poems and stories are birthed in deep tragedy. Wishing for more demands that others pay a terribly high price.

Schonstein’s work is to be commended. Nothing has been published to date that matches this collection for its scope and commitment to arranging a choir of competing voices. My own interest in war literature is well served by this work. I would submit that most people who are invested in South African literature would find this anthology a valuable addition to their personal library.

It seems churlish to suggest room for improvements in this collection. One concern is that the book is issued as a paperback in a non-standard format that is easily damaged and will not long tolerate careless handling. As a work that belongs in a university or public library, this book would need immediate re-binding if it were to survive repeated handling. A glaring omission is the lack of a comprehensive introduction. The anthology tops 400 pages and would benefit greatly from an expert academic essay to unpack the wide range of themes and concerns resident in these pages. While I understand that critical fashions are subject to change, I believe that even general readers would appreciate the selection more if this were supported by a critical context. The notes attached as appendices are barely adequate and the list of contributors appears slim and incomplete. One hopes these issues could be attended to in a future edition. Visual imagery complements this sort of literary archaeology. Perhaps a future edition could be fleshed out with period photographs and / or works of art.

Despite these considerations, *Africa Ablaze!* fulfils its mandate to

“remove the presumed glamour from war, exposing instead its carnage, the subsequent wasteland it gives rise to and the dirge of mourners trailing in its aftermath”.

This anthology is a fine investment. It is available at most good or independent bookshops and online at <http://www.printmatters.co.za>.

Reviewer: Mike Hagemann