

Constructed as a historical novel, this is neither fish nor fowl

BLOOD ON THE PATH

Harvey Tyson
Springbok Press

BLOOD on the Path is a panoramic historical novel set in late 19th and early 20th century South Africa. The historical novel is a difficult genre, and on this showing Harvey Tyson, a veteran South African journalist, has not mastered it, with the result that this lengthy book is neither fish nor fowl.

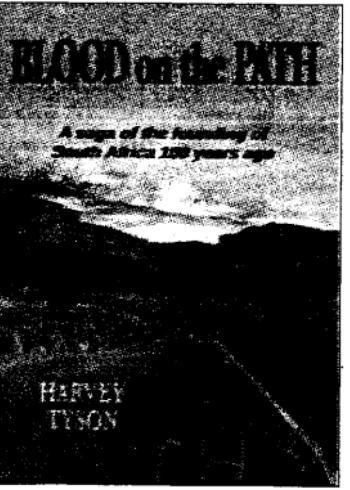
He struggles throughout with the necessary balance between fiction and history, and history wins hands down.

At the end of the book, in a perfunctory attempt at meta-narrative, a minor character openly admits fiction is playing

second fiddle: "Don't you think he wrote about the Green Face for one reason and one reason only? To get his readers interested ... in all this historical stuff?" (p 542).

The novel tells the story of Andrew Whitfield, born in Cape Town in the late 1860s to a white father and a Muslim mother. As a young teenager, in 1883, Whitfield kills a leopard with his bare hands and sees his father eaten by a shark while hunting whales in False Bay.

Soon afterwards, he leaves with his half-brother, Yusuf, to seek his fortune in the diamond fields of Kimberley. They carry with them the Green Face, a jade carving and family heirloom. During the journey the brothers fall out, and after a fight, Yusuf leaves Andrew



for dead in the Karoo, and takes Green Face. Andrew is rescued by a San hunter called /Xam, and they live together in the bush for a time.

From Kimberley, Whitfield

moves on to Johannesburg, where at the age of 19 he finds work as a stockbroker's messenger. Eventually, Whitfield becomes a journalist, and lover of Mary Grant, an early feminist. At the end of the book, Mary dies in an air crash, but not before revealing Whitfield is the father of her son, killed in World War 1, who plays no role whatsoever in the narrative.

As South Africa moves towards Union, Whitfield meets and is on terms of intimacy with nearly every significant political figure in his immediate environment, especially John X Merriman (1841-1926).

Although Whitfield is a witness, he is not often a participant in important South African events. Tyson wants his hero to be an "outsider, a

neutral observer" (p 460) rather than an active protagonist.

He is in Johannesburg during the Jameson raid; he goes on commando with Jan Smuts as a war correspondent, and he sits in on the founding meeting of the African National Congress in 1912. He seems to have no difficulty finding acceptance as a white person, and there are only occasional psychological costs for hiding his identity.

The plot summary fails utterly to convey the flavour of this unfocused novel, weighed down with lengthy, didactic digressions into historical events. The fiction is static, the viewpoint shifts constantly and the narrative is buried in superfluous historical detail: there is a map, a bibliography, a set of footnotes, a timeline and

even an index, and Tyson quotes extensively from letters.

Tyson is much more interested in the historical context of his novel than in the story, and his fictional characters spend much of their time standing around while the author analyses the events that they – and we – are watching.

For example, Andrew's half-brother, Yusuf, is angered by the introduction of racial segregation in Kalk Bay schools. But rather than following a novelist's instinct and actually showing us injustice – how Yusuf's children were affected, for example – Tyson prefers simply to lecture us about the unfairness of segregation.

Good historical fiction can sometimes tell us things about the past that "factual history"

cannot, because it allows the narrative to move beyond what has merely been documented, to the emotional truth of history. Tyson shows little sign of being aware of this: his is a South African history of white rulers and political decisions, not of the oppressed and dispossessed battling to live ordinary lives.

The book is poorly edited. Russian anarchist Petr Kropotkin (1842-1921) becomes Prince Propoktin (p 320), British labour leader Kier Hardie (1856-1915) makes a brief appearance as Keri Hardier (p 421), and anachronistically, Tyson has a black character talking about his "dompas" (an expression first recorded in about 1958) in a chapter set in 1902 (p 375).

– Colin Darch