

## Craig MacKenzie: On Bessie Head and Pat Cullinan

[Invited remarks at the launch of *Imaginative Trespasser*, 30 July 2005, at the Boekehuis, Auckland Park, Johannesburg. Remarks kindly supplied by the speaker].

Good afternoon, book lovers. First, why am I — and not someone else — talking about **Bessie Head**? Well, I did my MA on B Head in 1983-1984. I met her in Botswana in early 1985, so I know a little bit about her.

Let me introduce you to a man who was one of her devoted correspondents, a man who has now forged their long exchange of letters into a book — the book that we celebrate today. I refer of course to Patrick Cullinan, here beside me.

### Patrick Cullinan: poet, editor, and publisher

Patrick is a poet, editor, and publisher. Born in 1932 in Pretoria and educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, he has worked on a sawmill, has farmed, and has lectured at the University of the Western Cape. He has since retired from academic life and works as a writer in Cape Town.

Cullinan has published six volumes of poetry: *The Horizon Forty Miles Away* (1973), *Today Is Not Different* (1978), *White Hail in the Orchard and Other Poems* (versions from the poetry of Eugenio Montale, 1984), *I Sing Where I Stand* (versions from the Afrikaans poetry of Phil du Plessis, 1985), *Selected Poems* (1991, rev. 1994) and *Transformations* (1999) for which he has won numerous awards. He is also the author of the biography *Robert Jacob Gordon, 1743-1795* (1992) and the novel *Matrix* (2002).

Cullinan's poems offer vivid, and at times sharply imagist, descriptions of landscape, often simply registering the imprint of landscape on the imagination. Concerned with the life of the senses, Cullinan's poems provide not so much the meaning of any given encounter as the experience in itself.

### Astoundingly frank and fascinating letters

I've provided this introduction to Patrick both because I know he is too modest to do it himself, and also because it is important for all of you to realize that, in *Imaginative Trespasser*, we encounter not only a set of astoundingly frank and fascinating letters between Bessie Head and Pat and Wendy Cullinan, but also bridging commentary by Patrick himself that is both riveting and also felicitously written — written, in other words, by a poet. I'll provide an example of this writing in a moment.

But, first: Bessie herself. What those of you who don't know much about Bessie's life perhaps don't realize is that the period 1963 to 1977 (the time span of the letters contained in *Imaginative Trespasser*) is without doubt the most important phase of Bessie's rather short and unhappy life. This period begins just before her momentous decision to leave SA, covers her early days in Botswana as a teacher, then her life as a refugee and forced-to-be writer, her early successes with *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*, the onset of her mental troubles, the writing of her tour-de-force novel *A Question of Power*, and her entry into the world of international status as a writer.

Thus, the letters gathered in this book offer unparalleled insight into a troubled and yet productive phase of Bessie's life. Notwithstanding some excellent biographical work done on Bessie Head (I'm thinking of Gillian Eilersen's superb biography here<sup>1</sup>), I believe that this volume contains some of the most revealing information yet released on this enigmatic writer.

### Patrick's "bookends" to Bessie's literary career

It occurred to me while preparing this talk that Patrick has played a more significant part in Bessie's life than has been realized up to now. He provided vital assistance to her when she was desperate to leave SA, he provided material and moral support during her early days as a writer (indeed, her first published work, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is dedicated to "Pat and Wendy Cullinan"), and he was there in the middle years as well. And now he has produced what I think is a landmark biographical work on the writer. That is the second of the "bookends" at either side of Bessie's writing life that Patrick has provided. The first was the manuscript that Bessie sent to Patrick as a gift to thank him for his help in the early years. That manuscript became, under the skilled editorship of Prof. Margaret Daymond, a vital early work that would otherwise have been lost — *The Cardinals*, written in the early 1960s, but only published in 1993. The first "bookend", then, was this callow but important first work, the second bookend is this (I think) last major archive of Head's letters.

For Bessie's letters are very revealing — more so, perhaps, than those of most writers. She is frank, forthright, and sometimes downright outrageous. *Imaginative Trespasser* offers us an alternative Bessie Head — one not clearly discernible in her more carefully crafted novels and stories. Head, after all, was not a prolific writer, certainly not as measured in her total published output — five novels, two story-collections, one social history of Serowe, and some miscellaneous autobiographical writings. So her copious letter-writing is an alternative literary oeuvre — offering insights into an inner world that was as frightening as it was fascinating. Patrick has done the South African literary world a great service in providing us with such a readable, revealing book.

I would like to read aloud two brief examples.<sup>2</sup> The first is from Patrick's explanatory text:

**"For Wendy and me, the first four letters she wrote to us from 'B.P.' (Bechuanaland Protectorate) were lively as well as affirming. We knew, of course, that the country was not yet independent; that would happen two years later in 1966. Nevertheless, it was a place where black people could lead a life virtually untouched by racialism or its regional offshoot, *apartheid*. There can be no doubt that then, in the early sixties, the Africa beyond our border represented some sort of Eden, not only to Bessie but to many of her black (and not a few white) fellow writers. One only has to read the newspapers and magazines published by the Left or by Liberals at that time to realise how ardently this belief was held.**

**"There is another fact that emerges from these 1964 letters. Bessie establishes her ability to write, her power over words, from the very start. It is a little tentative at the beginning: logic, grammar, spelling sometimes go a little astray. Despite this, the writing is convincing. It comes as something of a revelation that the sad young woman who first wrote, harassed and vulnerable, from the poverty of Modisakeng Street, was undoubtedly that rare creature: a born writer. Furthermore, however uncertain Bessie's feelings about Botswana were then and however equivocal they would remain throughout her life, it was the country that first allowed her to look at the world anew and to examine it with a gaze of canny intensity."**

The next excerpt was written by Bessie to Pat and Wendy. It comes from Serowe, Botswana and is dated September 28th, 1964.

**"You know, I've been one of those kind of fools who take great pride in being different, individualistic — an independent, free-thinker. It's a shock to me to discover that I'm really one of a herd of intellectual sheep bleating the same old tune. Intellectuals or thinkers believe it a great act of courage to say there is no God. Actually, in this age it's a great act of courage to say that there is a God and fully understand all the implications of saying so. When intellectuals say there is no God, they are merely confirming the materialistic trend of the age in which we live. We look inside nothing. Only outside all the time. Electricity and water in the tap make us feel so safe and newspaper reports with scientific explanations for everything do our thinking for us.**

**"Of course there are the poor illiterate masses who believe in God but then they are hemmed in by superstition. Illiteracy and superstition go hand in hand and Karl Marx said 'religion is the opium of the masses'. It's easier to accept Karl Marx's view of the brotherhood of man than that of Jesus Christ. Jesus is almost a myth, but Karl Marx was born in 1880 something. He figured out his brotherhood of man in £.s.d. which is so much easier to understand than mystical clap-trap. Somehow, £.s.d. is no answer to me. The inner pain and agony and uncertainty is too real. It is real enough to drive me to insanity, suicide and yet, as I have such a strong instinct for survival it must be some good purpose and meaning. If I am to live it must be meaningful and above all I live with the inside of myself. The outside, brown eyes, 5 ft 2 ins, 40-30-40 — what is it? A shell, a husk!"**

Finally, I want to attest to Patrick's great personal courage in producing this work. Bessie, famously, turned on just about everyone close to her, and some of the unfounded — frankly, mad — accusations she flung at Patrick (and, of course, others) later on, must have made this project an extremely painful one for Patrick.

I want to begin with this point. Patrick, here are my three questions to you. I believe our audience look forward to your answers as much as I do. First: Did you at any point feel that you didn't want to continue with this project? What persuaded you to carry on? And what, finally, do you think of Bessie Head — as a writer and as a person?

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<sup>1</sup> *Bessie Head: The Thunder Behind Her Ears*, by Gillian Eilersen. Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 1995. ISBN 0-86486-279-2.

<sup>2</sup> Our thanks to Patrick Cullinan for permission to use these two extended quotes from *Imaginative Trespasser, Letters between Bessie Head and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 1963-1977*. Compiled by Patrick Cullinan, with a personal memoir. Johannesburg: **Wits University Press**, 2005. ISBN 1-86814-413-5. May be ordered via <http://witspress.wits.ac.za>. Alternatively from co-publisher **Africa World Press**, P.O. Box 1892, Trenton, New Jersey, USA 08607. ISBN 1-59221-392-8. Telephone +1-609-695-3200.