CHAPTER NINE

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN: ANATOMY OF A LITERARY-HISTORICAL POLEMIC IN COLONIAL CAPE TOWN
CIRCA 1880–1910

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Introduction

Written culture in the colonial context, in Cape Town in the late 19th century and well into the 20th, was dominated by a practice in which a social elite marked out their identity and laid their claims. This English-speaking, Cape-based elite enjoyed extensive resources and discursive platforms by which they envisioned a particular view of the emerging unified state of the Union of South Africa. It is possible to generalise and to suggest that the common thread in their discursive intention was to develop and to direct what came to be termed ‘Africana’, a settler-originated concept for the interpretation of southern Africa. This concept appears to embrace antiquarian studies about the land and its peoples, artefacts, histories, architecture and landscapes, botany and horticulture, heritage, property and objects of art. At the core of this received concept of Africana lies the idea of book collecting — books, manuscripts and ephemera of all sorts that pertain to South and southern Africa, in which practice the

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1 The title of this essay completes the title of a novel That which hath been, which is discussed in the essay. The phrase is from Ecclesiastes 1:9, ‘that which hath been shall be, and there is nothing new under the sun’. Its present meaning (as was the title of the novel, from a different perspective) is intended with a sense of historical irony.

2 The Union of South Africa was the unification in 1910 of the two British colonies of the Cape and Natal, and the two Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. It was established as an autonomous state within the British Empire, with similar status to that of the Australian Federation (established in 1902) and the Canadian Confederation. Internal politics were entirely to be under the authority of the Union parliament, while the head of state was a British-appointed governor general. Some aspects of foreign policy (and the military) remained under the control of Whitehall. Black South Africans were summarily marginalised, and the main debate was whether the country would retain close British affiliation and grow an English-speaking white voting majority or yield to the ambitions of nascent Afrikaner republican nationalism. The key words in 1910 were ‘reconstruction’ and ‘reconciliation’, the latter being between the ‘two races’ of English and Dutch.
Victorian virtues of collecting and cataloguing by scientific method gave a
governing taxonomy to a complex and extensive panorama of the land. An
total world view is tacit in the emergence, since the 1880s, of catalogues
of written material about South Africa. This world view, as the essay will
describe, was a sentimental colonial version of an assumed latter-day ‘Tory’
English perspective that carried weight (in England) in relation to the stress
of modernity and social change, and (in South Africa) in terms of defensive
colonial ‘Englishness’.

These broad issues are organised for present purposes around a
particular historical controversy in late 19th-century and early 20th-
century Cape Town. The controversy seems, today, to be irrelevant to
questions of South African nationhood and public culture, but at the time
it became a stormy microcosm of broader issues. The context in which
the controversy took place was the shaping of a new nation-state, the
lobbying for political dominance in this new state by British imperialists
and Afrikaner nationalists, and the attempts to frame a sense of desired
cultural heritage, history and identity for the state. The agenda is similar
in the most general sense to debates that led to the shaping of the ‘New
South Africa’ in 1994, but the details are very different indeed. The ‘New
South Africa’ of 1910 was, with the tacit consensus of the dominant lobbies,
a white state. The Union of South Africa that emerged from a decade of
political manoeuvring was a racially exclusive entity, and its identity was
shaped by the interests of the dominant elite of the day. The purpose of
this paper is to trace the emergence and the fortunes of a particularly
intense controversy over a period of thirty years, a controversy that in
many ways epitomises broader developments from about 1880 to 1910,
and to indicate the role of a culture of letters in late Victorian Cape Town,
where the debate was aired and amplified.

I. The source of the controversy

The controversy was about two rival interpretations of the behaviour of
an early Dutch governor of the VOC-controlled Cape, Governor Willem
Adriaan van der Stel. He was appointed governor in 1699 but was recalled
in 1708 after a group of free burgher farmers sought to have him impeached

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3 The VOC, or Dutch East India Company, established a replenishment station at the
Cape in 1652, regarded as the founding event of settler South Africa. The VOC was explicit
in its instructions not to develop a ‘colony’, but officials who left the company were
granted land rights as ‘free burghers’ and established their own farms in the Western
Cape. Their produce was sold to the company on terms prescribed by the VOC.