

Review

Lindy Stiebel (2001) *Imagining Africa: landscape in H Rider Haggard's African romances*. Westport, USA: Greenwood Press.

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Towards the end of *Imagining Africa*, author Lindy Stiebel proposes that, even in late twentieth century South Africa, 'it is difficult not to feel ... when standing on a high vantage point overlooking wide plains of (seemingly) uncultivated land in KwaZulu-Natal, that this kind of space presented to the gaze is "Haggard's Africa"' (2001:135); or in other words a space where the metaphors have overtaken their referents. How such a feeling, and such a description, might be possible – even inevitable – three-quarters of a century after the death of Sir Henry Rider Haggard in 1925, is made clear in the preceding pages of Stiebel's book, the first to concentrate solely on Haggard's treatment of landscape in his African romances.

Stiebel's central thesis in this book is how Haggard, as popular novelist, created a generic 'African topography' which, because it became formulaic, became instantly recognisable for his reading public both in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book shows how Haggard projected his contradictory imperialist impulses, his intense and fearful sexual desires, his misgivings on some of the central issues of his age, such as civilisation and barbarism, and cultural relativity onto the African land he first encountered as a young man in Natal. Though relatively brief, Haggard's youthful experience of southern Africa's peoples and its landscape fuelled a literary output that had, and continues to have, great popular appeal.

Haggard came to South Africa from England in 1875 at the impressionable age of nineteen, at first serving on the staff of Sir Henry Bulwer, Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, in Pietermaritzburg. He then accompanied Theophilus Shepstone to the Transvaal and took part in the 1877 annexation prior to

becoming master and registrar of the High Court. Haggard left government service in 1879 to farm near Newcastle, a venture interrupted by a year-long visit to England during which he got married. He returned to South Africa at the end of 1880 but, following the First Anglo-Boer War, he and his family departed in August 1881. Back in England and bored with the prospect of a legal career Haggard turned to the pen, eventually hitting the bestseller lists with his fourth book, *King Solomon's Mines* (1885).

By the time of his death in 1925, Haggard had written 48 adventure stories or 'romances' as they were then styled – many with an African setting – as well as 12 novels dealing with contemporary subjects and ten works of non-fiction, several dealing with land and agricultural issues such as *A Farmer's Year* (1899), *Rural England* (1902), and *Rural Denmark* (1911). Of all these books, three – *King Solomon's Mines*, *Allan Quatermain* (1887), and *She* (1887) – have remained continuously in print and are currently available in both popular editions and as annotated texts.

Haggard's fiction set in contemporary Britain – novels such as *Beatrice* (1890), *Joan Haste* (1895) and *Stella Fregelius* (1904) – tended to be cautionary morality tales, but once in Africa the shackles of conservatism fell away to be replaced with a blend of eroticism and violence in which the landscape itself colludes. As Stiebel ably demonstrates, Haggard's African fiction provides a glimpse into the desires and fears of the Victorian subconscious, not least through his often unwitting sexualisation of landscape. As Stiebel comments 'that such a fictional force emanated from one so seemingly conservative as Haggard is a source of ongoing surprise' (2001:33).

In the main Stiebel concentrates on the books produced by Haggard during his most creative and inventive years, from 1885 to 1892, which include *King Solomon's Mines*, *Allan Quatermain*, *She*, *Jess* (1887), and *Nada the Lily* (1892), his 'all Zulu' novel set at the time of King Shaka. These titles abound with sexual metaphors, most famously in *King Solomon's Mines* which the mountains named Queen Sheba's Breasts are described in detail down to the 'top of each round hillock covered with snow, exactly corresponding to the nipple on the female breast' (quoted in Stiebel 2001:83).

Stiebel extends her survey to include Haggard's influence on later writers, examining John Buchan's *Prester John* (1910), Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) and the 'potboiler legacy' of Stuart Cloete and Wilbur Smith. That Haggard's view of Africa continues to be a force to be reckoned with

cannot be disputed. His name is regularly invoked in travel articles dealing with the continent and on book blurbs punting African adventures. Apart from the three key titles already mentioned most of his African romances are currently in print in the United States where there is great popular interest in Victorian adventure and fantasy writing. Thirty of his titles – a selection of novels and short stories – are available for free downloading on the internet as on-line texts. Consequently Stiebel's book is dealing with a contemporary phenomenon as much as a Victorian one. 'That Haggard's African romances – and particularly their symptomatic landscapes – can still resonate a century after their publication of his first major success speaks for the need to take Haggard seriously as a mapper of his age's anxieties and desires' (Stiebel 2001:xiii).

Haggard returned to South Africa in 1914 as a member of the Dominions Royal Commission (to which he was appointed for his agricultural expertise). The Commission's work completed, Haggard toured Rhodesia where he was hoisted by his own imaginative petard during a visit to the Great Zimbabwe ruins where he failed to convince the curator R N Hall that the ruins were not the setting for *She*. 'Mr Hall seemed a little aggrieved with me,' Haggard wrote in his diary, 'because I, he said, was responsible for various false ideas about Zimbabwe ... I never wrote of Zimbabwe, but rather of a land where the ruins were built by fairies of the imagination'.

That Haggard's imagination provides insights not only into his complex personality but 'also the Zeitgeist of the late Victorian imperialist age, through the medium of the fiction that public chose to read in such quantities' (Stiebel 2001:xii), is made abundantly clear in this illuminating book.

References

- Haggard, H R (1885, repr 1992) *King Solomon's Mines*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2000) *Diary of an African Journey: the return of Rider Haggard*. Stephen Coan (ed). Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.