South Africa’s unique history has produced literatures in many languages, in oral and written forms, reflecting the diversity in the cultural histories and experience of its peoples. The Cambridge History offers a comprehensive, multi-authored history of South African literature in all the country’s eleven official languages (and more minor ones), produced by a team of over forty international experts, including contributors drawn from all of the major regions and language groups of South Africa. It will provide a complete portrait of South Africa’s literary production, organised as a chronological history from the oral traditions existing before colonial settlement to the post-apartheid revision of the past. In a field marked by controversy, this volume is more fully representative than any existing account of South Africa’s literary history. It will make a unique contribution to Commonwealth, international and postcolonial studies, and serve as a definitive reference work for decades to come.

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THE CAMBRIDGE
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and
DEREK ATTRIDGE
Contents

Notes on contributors x
Acknowledgements xvi
Note on racial nomenclature and languages xvii

Introduction 1
DAVID ATTWELL and DEREK ATTRIDGE

PART I
ORATURES, ORAL HISTORIES, ORIGINS

1 · ’The Bushmen’s Letters’: |Xam narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection and their afterlives 19
   HEDLEY TWIDLE

2 · A contextual analysis of Xhosa iimbongi and their izibongo 42
   RUSSELL H. KASCHULA

3 · ’I sing of the woes of my travels’: the lifela of Lesotho 60
   NHLANHLA MAAKE

4 · Praise, politics, performance: from Zulu izibongo to the Zionists 77
   MBONGISENI BUTHELEZI
Contents

5 · IsiNdebele, siSwati, Northern Sotho, Tshivenda and Xitsonga oral culture 95
MANIE GROENEWALD and MOKGALE MAKGOPA

PART II
EXPLORATION, EARLY MODERNITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT AT THE CAPE, 1488–1820

6 · Shades of Adamastor: the legacy of The Lusiads 117
MALVERN VAN WYK SMITH

7 · In the archive: records of the Dutch settlement and the contemporary novel 138
CARLI COETZEE

8 · Eighteenth-century natural history, travel writing and South African literary historiography 158
IAN GLENN

PART III
EMPIRE, RESISTANCE AND NATIONAL BEGINNINGS, 1820–1910

9 · Writing settlement and empire: the Cape after 1820 185
MATTHEW SHUM

10 · The mission presses and the rise of black journalism 204
CATHERINE WOEBER

11 · The imperial romance 226
LAURA CHRISMAN

12 · Perspectives on the South African War 246
ELLEKE BOEHMER

13 · The beginnings of Afrikaans literature 262
H. P. VAN COLLER
Contents

PART IV
MODERNISM AND TRANSNATIONAL CULTURE, 1910–1948

14 · Black writers and the historical novel: 1907–1948 291
BHEKIZIZWE PETERSON

15 · The Dertigers and the plasroman: two brief perspectives on Afrikaans literature 308
GERRIT OLIVIER

16 · New African modernity and the New African movement 325
NTONGELA MASILELA

17 · Refracted modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N. P. van Wyk Louw 339
TONY VOSS

18 · The metropolitan and the local: Douglas Blackburn, Pauline Smith, William Plomer, Herman Charles Bosman 360
CRAIG MACKENZIE

PART V
APARTHEID AND ITS AFTERMATH, 1948 TO THE PRESENT

19 · The fabulous fifties: short fiction in English 387
DOROTHY DRIVER

20 · Writing in exile 410
TLHALO RADITLHALO

21 · Afrikaans literature, 1948–1976 429
HEIN WILLEMSE

22 · Afrikaans literature after 1976: resistances and repositionings 452
LOUISE VILJOEN

23 · The liberal tradition in fiction 474
PETER BLAIR
Contents

24 · Black Consciousness poetry: writing against apartheid 300
   THENGANI H. NGWENYA

25 · Popular forms and the United Democratic Front 523
   PETER HORN

26 · Writing the prison 545
   DANIEL ROUX

27 · Theatre: regulation, resistance and recovery 564
   LOREN KRUGER

28 · The lyric poem during and after apartheid 587
   DIRK KLOPPER

29 · Writing and publishing in African languages since 1948 607
   CHRISTIAAN SWANEPOEL

30 · Writing the interregnum: literature and the demise of apartheid 633
   STEPHEN CLINGMAN

31 · Rewriting the nation 652
   RITA BARNARD

32 · Writing the city after apartheid 676
   MICHAEL TITLESTAD

PART VI
SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE: CONTINUITIES AND CONTRASTS

33 · South Africa in the global imaginary 697
   ANDREW VAN DER VLIES

34 · Confession and autobiography 717
   M. J. DAYMOND and ANDRIES VISAGIE

viii
Contents

35 · ‘A change of tongue’: questions of translation 739
LEON DE KOCK

36 · Writing women 757
MEG SAMUELSON

37 · The experimental line in fiction 779
MICHAEL GREEN

38 · The book in South Africa 800
PETER D. MCDONALD

39 · Literary and cultural criticism in South Africa 818
DAVID JOHNSON

Index 838
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Note on racial nomenclature and languages

The history of racial classification in South Africa makes it necessary to use terms referring to different racial groups; this is done without any implication that these categorisations have a scientific basis. The terms ‘black’ and ‘African’ are used to refer to the indigenous Bantu language speakers and their descendants, ‘white’ to European immigrants and their descendants, and ‘coloured’ (without capitalisation or quotation marks) to what the apartheid legislators called ‘Coloured’ or ‘mixed-race’ peoples. The largest group of Asian South Africans identify themselves as Indian.

In opposition to the official vocabulary of apartheid, ‘“coloured”’ in quotation marks and ‘so-called coloured’ were widely used, but the term can now be employed without any stigma. During the ascendancy of the Black Consciousness movement, ‘black’ or ‘Black’ was often used collectively with reference to African, coloured and Indian peoples, but that is less frequently the case today.

The earliest inhabitants of the country, when encountered by European settlers, were called ‘Hottentots’ (a pastoral people of the western and northern Cape) and ‘Bushmen’ (hunter-gatherers widespread through the country). The former are referred to as the ‘Khoikhoi’, the latter as the ‘San’ or ‘Bushmen’ (see Chapter 1, note 2, on these terms). The two groups are closely related and are known collectively as the ‘Khoi-San’ or ‘Khoisan’ peoples. Only small populations survive in South Africa today.

Numerous languages are spoken in South Africa, eleven of which have been declared ‘official languages’ (see Introduction, p. 2, and note 2). The names of the indigenous languages are formed with prefixes: thus the Zulu people speak isiZulu. Similarly, Xhosa: isiXhosa; Ndebele: isiNdebele; Swazi: Siswati; Tswana: Setswana; Tsonga: Xitsonga; Venda: Tshivenda. The Sotho language, Sesotho, is distinguished from Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa), which is also referred to as Sepedi.