

Introduction

During the War of Ngacyecibi, a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and notes in isiXhosa and English were found on a fatally wounded 'native' in Piri forest, near King Williams Town.¹ The story was reported in the *Fort Beaufort Advocate* on 19 April 1878, and carried by other 'frontier' newspapers.² What struck the colonial volunteers who retrieved the body for burial was not just that this 'native' had been reading John Bunyan's classic, but that he was dressed in 'a full suit of black broadcloth' and had 'a first-class field glass slung over his shoulder'. Paul Nkupiso's name was inscribed on the flyleaf of this First-Prize book for English Reading, awarded by the Lovedale Missionary Institution. But its reader on the battlefield was in fact Dukwana,³ a lay preacher and church elder at the Chumie (Tyumie) mission station, near Lovedale in the Eastern Cape (Odendaal, 2012, p. 42). He had trained as a printer, and at the Lovedale Press had helped to publish four issues of the English–isiXhosa newspaper *Ikwezi* (*Morning Star*, August 1844–December 1845), as well as school and hymn books.

In a lecture to members of a mutual improvement society in Port Elizabeth later that year, Reverend Robert Johnston recalled that Dukwana maintained that he was not fighting civilisation or Christianity. He was instead fighting the English 'who have robbed us of our country, and are destroying us as people' (Hodgson, 1986, p. 204). In these dramatic events, we find references to reading, a reading community, printing, publishing, the circulation of books, voluntary societies, and ideas about self-improvement and 'becoming literary' in rural South Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. For Dukwana, the challenge of

¹ Hodgson (1986), p. 205. This war from 1877–8 was the last of nine Frontier 'wars of dispossession' fought over a period of 101 years.

² For example, *Kaffrarian Watchman*, 17 June 1878, and *Queenstown Free Press*, 19 July 1878.

³ Dukwana was the son of Ntsikana who was regarded by the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape as a prophet and the first Xhosa Christian. Hodgson, J. 'Dukwana' in *Religion Past and Present*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_SIM_03946. Accessed 21 December 2019.

being a ‘committed Christian and also an African patriot’ meant that like his belief and practice, his reading should be ‘relevant to his immediate social and political context’ (Hodgson, 1986, p. 205). Saul Dubow (2006, p. 24) argues that, in the early years of the nineteenth century Cape Colony, ‘the language of improvement and civilization served to legitimate the colonial enterprise in the eyes of the colonists themselves’. This was not just to gain approval in the metropole, but to help them to establish a corporate sense of identity.

By the 1870s, however, there were other languages of improvement, and different ideas about identity and ‘becoming literary’. The first British missionaries were from the upper working classes in newly industrialising areas, and they believed in ‘aggressive self-improvement’. Similarly, European-based Moravian missionaries brought craft production as well as basic education, literacy, and books, as did the French and German missions (Elbourne & Ross, 1997, p. 32). The lending library in Genadendal run by the Moravian mission since 1823, for example, carried works in German, Dutch, and English. It was praised by a Cape literary magazine to be ‘the best country library in the colony’.⁴ But what the early missionaries understood by improvement was challenged and changed by converts and native inhabitants in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Elbourne and Ross (1997, p. 50) explain: ‘What the missionaries saw as liberation in matters spiritual was not accompanied by the promised temporal improvement. The implications of this failure had still to be worked out’.

Much of this would happen in a range of indigenised voluntary societies, whose reading programmes and literary outputs heralded a new dawn both culturally and politically. ‘Native’ or African, and Dutch-Afrikaans voluntary societies, founded in the 1870s and 1880s, shared some of the features of existing English-language societies and associations. But they also developed unique qualities, and some designed programmes that nurtured alternative ways to ‘become literary’ and more politically aware. Book, reading, literary, debating, and mutual improvement societies were effective improvement initiatives in small towns, and they included public reading in their programmes. Mechanics Institutes were less successful because of

⁴ *The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, 2 April 1832, p. 273.

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Excerpt

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their condescending features, and their libraries ‘frequently consisted of a hotch-potch of books contributed as gifts by well-meaning and philanthropically-minded people’. The Cape Town Mechanics Institute library was described in 1858 as ‘small, but select’ (Immelman, 1956, pp. 18, 21).

And this Institute’s decline was explained as a typical Anglo-American transplant that did not take local conditions sufficiently into account. But other voluntary societies adapted with greater care to meet more pressing demands. Laura Weiss (2017) studied the literary and mutual improvement societies of Glasgow in the long nineteenth century, and she identifies their manuscript magazines as evidence of a unique movement of improvement. Although those societies had connections with adult education and libraries, their special differences were ‘the production of ‘improving’ manuscript magazines . . . and oral and written “criticisms” that were products of a quest to become “literary”’ (Weiss, 2017, p. 12). These features, she argues, reveal a ‘religiously-infused ethos of improvement developed within Scottish dissenting culture’ (Weiss, 2017, p. 12). The formation of clubs and societies, in which these magazines were created to record their group reading and writing practices, typified the movement in Glasgow.

Reverend Robert Johnston, the missionary who spoke about Dukwana at the Port Elizabeth Mutual Improvement Society, was connected with the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland that had taken charge of the Glasgow African Missionary Society in 1847 (Hodgson, 1986, p. 201). He would have been familiar with, and a participant in, this ‘religiously-infused ethos of improvement’ that Weiss elaborates. Dukwana knew Johnston, as well as Tiyo Soga, who had studied in Scotland and translated the first part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* into isiXhosa, which was published at Lovedale Press in 1867 (Davis, 2018). Dukwana was their adviser when the Glasgow African Missionary Society sent them to establish the Mgwali mission station, near Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape. Literary historian David Attwell describes Soga’s translation and Dukwana’s possible attraction to the ‘materiality of the book as magical icon’ as the first instance of ‘transculturation of enlightenment’.⁵ He relates this claim to what John

⁵ Attwell, who refers to ‘the unnamed Xhosa soldier’, probably did not know that the reader who died in battle was in fact Dukwana.

and Jean Comaroff described as Africans recasting ‘European forms in their own terms . . . in the country’s long history of symbolic struggle’ (Attwell, 2006, p. 30).

He then proceeds to argue that the missionary enterprise was hugely consequential in the fields of literacy and book production. Whereas mission literacy had defined the terms on which a Black South African literature was to emerge, there were opportunities too. And in this way, Soga’s adoption of the mission ethos and discourse in the English language entailed ‘a transculturation into African terms of the aims and instruments of colonialism’s civilising mission’ (Attwell, 2006, pp. 32–3). This ‘transculturation of enlightenment’ was the challenge for Soga and succeeding generations to achieve emancipation salvaged from ‘economic and political instrumentalism, imperialism and racism, and pressed into the service of all humanity’ (Attwell, 2006, p. 33). Whether or not Attwell is correct that the events involving Soga and Dukwana mark ‘the moment . . . in which a black literary culture first develops in South Africa’, and that this ‘transcultured enlightenment’ resurfaced in the early 1990s as ‘the recovery of human rights’, are uncertain.

What is important, and what this Element attempts to do, is to expand the focus on Soga as representing the production and creative literary outputs of writers to include Dukwana as representing the consumption and creative literacy practices of readers. As a printer and publisher, Dukwana was also involved in producing instructive material for reading communities. In other words, Dukwana the reader and printer is as important as Soga the writer and translator in South Africa’s story of literacy and literary culture. And it was in the indigenised spaces of voluntary societies that readers would help to shape a unique ethos of improvement in the long nineteenth century. Dukwana would have been aware of the mutual improvement and other voluntary societies in Port Elizabeth, where, by the 1880s, several had been founded and led by Africans themselves (Odendaal, 1993). Past students of Lovedale, Healdtown, St. Mathews and other mission schools, who had been members of their literary and debating societies, tended to form literary and mutual improvement societies across the Eastern Cape, and elsewhere (Switzer, 1997, p. 62).

Shadrach Bobi who studied at Lovedale and qualified as a teacher, for example, started a literary society in 1877 at a boys' school in Morija, Lesotho.⁶ Gwayi Tyamzashe explained a few years later that societies like these were started by 'natives themselves independently of any European assistance', and represented 'the necessity of striving to secure their interests'.⁷ More recently, Ntongela Masilela (2010, p. 247) elaborated that this was a 'search for independence, and an effort to establish the means of self-empowerment'. He explains that although these societies affirmed Christianity, the English language and English cultural and literary knowledge, they viewed vernacular newspapers such as *Isigidimi Sama-Xosa* (*The Xhosa Messenger*), *Leselinyana* (*The Little Light*), and others as playing a transforming role. Importantly, the earliest pieces of writing by native speakers published in the isiXhosa mission newspaper, *Umshumayeli Wendaba* in 1838/9, came from four young learners. Their dialogues probed the benefits of reading, writing, and printing, and 'the way the book speaks' (Opland, 2004, pp. 33–5).

The ethos of improvement that emerged in these early literacy and literary activities can be described by what Christopher Saunders (2010, p. 14) explains as 'some kind of collaboration and cooperation' between 'settlers and indigenous people'. Or as Tyamzashe (1884) succinctly put it: 'to help yourself after you have been helped half way. It is with civilization as with Christianity'.⁸ This ethos typified Dutch-Afrikaans debating societies too. Whereas some had aligned with the Dutch Reformed Church and drew on Western European models, others favoured a secular approach adapted to local conditions. The vernacular newspapers in which African mutual improvement societies published and commented on members' lectures and debates, and the Dutch-Afrikaans debating societies' manuscript journals carrying members' original literary contributions, represent

⁶ Shadrach Bobi. www.ancestors.co.za/general-register-of-native-pupils-and-apprentices-lovedale-missionary-institution/. Accessed 21 December 2019.

⁷ A Native Society at Kimberley, *The Christian Express*, 1 April 1884. <http://pza.cad.pitzer.edu/NAM/xhosaren/writers/tyamzash/tyamzashQ.htm>. Accessed 13 December 2019.

⁸ *Ibid.*

a unique ethos of improvement that arose in the second half of the nineteenth century. These voluntary societies were also spaces where common readers could confront elites and challenge political authority.

In South Africa's book history, there are several examples of sites and spaces where reading was repurposed (Dick, 2012). What should not, however, be overlooked is that, like the social libraries in the United States and proprietary libraries in England, subscription libraries in South Africa were also voluntary societies (Glynn, 2018; Harris, 1971, p. 45). They were, in fact, modelled on the pattern of British proprietary libraries (Immelman, 1970, p. 82). Their histories are connected with this ethos of improvement, and to the larger story of language and literary development, growing political awareness, and cultural recreation in South Africa's colonial transition to Union government. A number of subscription libraries started out as voluntary book societies or reading societies and amalgamation boosted their collections as well as membership numbers and types of readers. Small-town initiatives were tentative, characterised by bankruptcy and resuscitation, and the libraries were often rendered moribund. At one point, Grahamstown Public Library, for example, had to sell some of its books in order to save itself (Immelmann, 1970, p. 81).

Some sought relief through special grants until eventually the Cape colonial government in 1855 started a system of financial aid to subscription libraries in country towns and villages. A condition was that the general public should be admitted to the library free of charge on certain days of the week. In 1874, this concession to the public became 'whenever the library is open' in new legislation that made grants available 'to encourage the formation and proper management of public libraries in the smaller towns of the Colony'.⁹ As a result, the number of subscription libraries across the Cape Colony swelled from 55 in 1874 to 157 in 1909,¹⁰ with subscription fees and government grants as their principal sources of income. Although some

⁹ *Memorandum of Regulations to Encourage Public Libraries in the Smaller Towns of the Colony*. Printed by Order of the House of Assembly, 28th May 1874.

¹⁰ Immelman, 1970, p. 78; *Cape of Good Hope Blue Book, 1909*. Cape Town: Saul Solomon, p. 188. There were 173 by 1930 in the Cape Province (Immelman, 1970, pp. 45–6).

libraries had absorbed earlier book and reading societies, the mutual improvement and the literary and debating societies that sprang up included reading as an integral component of their programmes. They often used the reading space of the libraries as the venue for their meetings, and members drew on library resources to prepare debates, lectures, and public readings of essays and poems.

A study of reading communities and their reading spaces in these voluntary societies across South African towns reveals important insights into their number, range, and types. By throwing light on some of their writing spaces as well, this Element also explains the place of readers as writers in the literary and cultural history of South Africa's long nineteenth century. Many of the primary sources that provide the basis for arguments, descriptions, and statistics in the ensuing sections of this Element are housed in the country's national libraries, and archival depots. These were supplemented by records found in countryside public libraries and archives, as well as university special collections. They include government blue books, parliamentary and library annual reports, library catalogues, newspaper articles, yearbooks, private correspondence and journals, census records, diaries, and biographies. We can now better understand the unique ethos of improvement that these reading communities cultivated.

Section Summaries

Section 1 sketches the emergence of reading communities in voluntary societies, and their amalgamation with subscription libraries, in small towns and settlements. Some members used them to leverage careers and to connect with strategic social networks. As government-supported 'public libraries' in the second half of the nineteenth century, many collaborated with literary, debating, and mutual improvement societies. These voluntary societies provided members and residents with opportunities to become more literate and more literary.

Section 2 describes how reading communities in rural towns challenged and re-framed the 'English' rhetoric and ethos of improvement. Dissatisfaction and a growing political awareness produced alternative approaches to education, rights, and progress. Dutch-Afrikaner debating

societies crafted new ways of political participation that affirmed language rights and cultural expression. And African mutual improvement societies sought alternative political strategies that adapted received literacy and literary practices.

Section 3 explains that Charles Dickens' works were not just found and read in public libraries. In other voluntary societies they were performed, quoted, copied, critiqued, gifted, preached, and screened. And across anti-apartheid organisations in the twentieth century some were repurposed for protest and revolution. His early humorous works, and the later works in which social criticism featured more prominently, assured Dickens' reputation in South Africa.

In Section 4, Charlie Immelman's diaries reveal what fiction he read and shared with others, and what films he watched in small towns of the Cape. Local literary figures were among the book selectors for libraries, and they contributed to building 'improving' collections. As Immelman's diaries reveal, however, entertainment and distraction trumped serious literature whether available in public libraries or screened in cinemas. But when his tastes eventually turned to more literary themes, he could use these libraries profitably.

Section 5 explains how an obscure but important Islamic reading community connected with global printing networks. Distinctive reading, writing, and printing practices guided its participation in the transnational Islamic book trade, and shaped literary-cultural developments. By the early twentieth century, an emerging pan-Islamic and pan-African outlook characterised an ethos of improvement that would prepare this community to face the challenges of segregationist and apartheid South Africa.

1 Becoming Literate, Becoming Literary

Emulating mid-Victorian British culture, Emma Rutherford (Rutherford & Murray 1968, p. 19) read Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Sunny Memories* to her Cape merchant-class family in the drawing room in the evenings of November 1852. Privately, her father had spent 'morning and night' completing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And although her brother Frederic considered some of Dickens' works 'too long and trifling', he was reading *Bleak House*. Joseph, the family servant,

was also fond of reading and when a serious illness concerned Emma about his deteriorating health she gave him *The Contrast*, a book about preparing for death.¹¹ Emma's concern for 'appropriate' reading material persuaded her to read Dutch evangelical tracts to nearby farmers and their poverty-stricken workers. They, in turn, carried the tracts to countryside villages to read and distribute to neighbours until they were worn (Rutherford & Murray, 1968, p. 131). A Sailors Home, a Young Men's Mental Improvement Society, and a Mechanics Institute also benefited from the Rutherford family library's discarded books. These private and shared reading practices stretched into rural towns and settlements, and stimulated the growth of reading communities.

The *Cradock Despatch* ran briefly in 1850, and was followed soon by other newspapers in English and Dutch in that town, just over 800 km from Cape Town (Picton, 1969, pp. 60–1). Here, in the evenings of that year, Samuel and Lucy Gray gathered with their Yorkshire servant Edith to read novels. Lucy described Miss Grierson's *Pierre and His Family; or, A Story of the Waldenses* as nearly a Victorian bestseller in the style of Charlotte Mary Yonge's novels. Whether the Grays were members of the Cradock Reading Society is uncertain, but similar works of fiction filled the shelves of its Reading Room. A request for a portion of ground on which to erect it was approved as early as 1842.¹² It was a 'thatched building of white-washed brick on stone foundations' that preceded the construction of the Cradock Public Library by several years (Hattersley, 1951, p. 50).¹³ By the 1870s, this library's collection had grown considerably, and Olive Schreiner was a keen borrower. She also used the libraries at Hanover and Kimberley, as well as Fraserburg when she visited her sisters or worked as a governess to children on nearby farms (Immelman, 1970, p. 77).

Almost 850 km west of Cradock, the public library at Clanwilliam also started as a reading society, and became a treasure house for the poet

¹¹ Some middle class women, like Caroline Molteno, taught family servants how to read (Duff, 2011, p. 499).

¹² Cape Archives, KAB 556/02/975.

¹³ Although called public libraries in contemporary documents, these were strictly speaking subscription libraries that allowed a measure of access to the public.

C. Louis Leipoldt from the age of eight. Here he found and read the works of Scott, Eliot, and Austen as well as those of Byron, Browning, and Tennyson, donated to the library by an English settler. Leipoldt worked briefly at this library, which still bears his name today.¹⁴ In similar fashion, the writer and poet, Francis Carey Slater, served on library committees and helped to select books for small country towns such as Dordrecht, Peddie, Barkly East, and Matatiele (Immelman, 1970, pp. 74–6). The middle-class reading practices and spaces in the Cape Colony's small towns were replicated in the Colony of Natal, proclaimed as a British colony in 1843. From the capital city of Pietermaritzburg, Marian Churchill wrote in 1858 to a friend that 'We employ our evenings in sewing and reading aloud in turn. *Tom Brown's Schooldays* . . . gave great satisfaction to our lady listeners' (Child, 1979, p. 119). Her brother Joseph was a member of the Natal Society Library, and in Durban a Reading Society, a Mechanics Institute library, and Penny Readings in public buildings offered additional venues for reading.

Mission Stations

But these were not the only reading spaces in which to become more literate and literary in mid-nineteenth-century South Africa. Beyond these towns were even humbler locales where Black South Africans and 'those of mixed descent' read and wrote in unexpected ways. By 1849, the literacy rate of 4,678 residents on thirty-one mission stations across the Cape Colony had already reached 25.36 per cent, and their numeracy rate was 62.87 per cent (Fourie *et.al.*, 2013, p. 26). At Theopolis mission station in the Eastern Cape, a fourteen-year-old girl had read all the books in the mission library two or three times over. She was reading Rowland Hill's *Village Dialogues* just before her untimely death (Jones, 1850, p. 552). Just over 1,000 km north west of Theopolis, in 1842, Johann Frederick Hein, a 'mixed race' youth of just seventeen years old, had started his own school in the Ugrabib location in the Northern Cape's Richtersveld (Strassberger, 1969, pp. 70–1).

¹⁴ See Leipoldt-Nortier Library, Canwilliam. www.clanwilliam.info/clanwilliam-member-163.php. Accessed 16 December 2019.