

Italy, World War II and South African Poetry

Marco Fazzini
(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

Abstract The focus of this article is Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. Details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters, drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography pertaining to these two South African poets' life and work will be used to show the way in which Butler and Mann had something important in common: War and Italy. Guy Butler took part in World War II in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced World War II conflict in our country. Their experience has been indelibly recorded both in their personal memories and in their writings: poems, diaries and prose pieces.

Keywords Italy. South Africa. World War II. Poetry.

It would be impossible for me to describe all the possible routes and secondary paths this topic can lead to, because I would be forced to discuss at least four or five or, possibly, six different South African poets who have had diverse links and influences through and from Italy. I could, for instance, easily refer to F.T. Prince, Guy Butler, Patrick Cullinan, Stephen Watson, Douglas Livingstone and Chris Mann. For example: I recently read Douglas Livingstone's private diary, which he kept during his 1992 trip to Italy to launch a book of his poems translated into Italian, *Il sonno dei miei leoni*. The diary is full of dates, impressions, drafts, poems, descriptions of places and people, and would be a rich source of discussion. But I am not going to talk about it, though I'm sure it would be as interesting as, say, Richard Rive's trip to Italy or Guy Butler's autobiographies. There might be similar pages in the diary and notebooks that Stephen Watson produced during his stay in Bellagio. Equally, I shall ignore all the work Patrick Cullinan (the eminent poet and translator) did on Montale – the essay on him and the translations of his work. Then, there are F.T. Prince's writings, amongst which you will find more than one page or thought on places in Italy, especially Venice, Florence and Vicenza; but they, too, must remain beyond the scope of this essay.

Italian literature and culture have had a notable presence in South African contemporary poetry in the last seventy years but I must limit myself here to one or two cases that can illustrate the topic.

The focus of this article will be Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. I will use not only details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters,

drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography that I have collected during my research in private houses and libraries such as the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown. I will present images of some of the key books and documents that I refer to, so as to enable you to imagine the larger contexts and bibliographies such a topic might lead to in the future.¹

The reason why I have chosen the above-mentioned poets is simple: in South Africa Guy Butler has been one of the most famous and most influential poets since the 1930s. Chris Mann, thirty years younger than his master, started publishing in the 1970s and is now Professor of Poetry in the same university where Guy Butler was active as a writer and professor. Apart from sharing some personal and professional interests, Butler and Mann also had something else in common: war. Obviously, since their lives are a part of different generations, when I say they shared the experience of war it does not mean that they both fought in our country. Guy Butler took part in World War II in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced the conflict in our country.

When World War II broke out, South African politicians were divided over what decisions to take. "Six ministers, including the Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog, argued for remaining neutral and for upholding National sovereignty, apart from discharging the legal requirement to protect Britain's Simonstown facility" (Nasson 2012, 55).

Seven other Cabinet members, with Jan Christaan Smuts, the Deputy Prime Minister, prominent among them, pushed for joining the war against Germany as a matter of duty, national interest and security. On the one hand, Hertzog thought that only through neutrality could South Africa preserve its full national independence and the freedom to chart its own destiny; on the other, Smuts was afraid that Germany would demand the return of what was then known as South West Africa (the actual Namibia), so as to open a kind of door into the Union. "By cutting loose from its British Commonwealth friends and allies", Bill Nasson writes, "it would find itself adrift and alone in an increasingly perilous world" (56). Let's have a look at one of Bob Connolly's cartoons of the period.

Here he celebrates the liberation of Italy as a joint South African-United States enterprise. The Italian Campaign, where South Africans fought as part of the American Fifth Army, cost something like 9,000 casualties out of the more than 200,000 troops involved. Most of these troops were white, but black and coloured soldiers fought (and died) in auxiliary war service (Vale 2011, 20). The image can be comic, and it is certainly an ironic one; yet, as Desmond Tutu observes in his introduction to Peter

1 The printing of the following images was accorded to me by Chris Mann himself, who holds the rights as their owner.

311 AMERICANS AMONG THE 1,400 PASSENGERS

SURVIVORS PICKED UP BY SHIPS IN NEIGHBOURHOOD

—A PRESS ASSOCIATION REUTER.

LONDON, Monday.

The Ministry of Information states that the Donaldson liner, *Athenia*, of 2,645 tons, with 1,400 passengers aboard has been torpedoed and sunk 200 miles west of the Hebrides. Among those on board were 311 United States passengers.

The master of the *Athenia* has called the owners that all the passengers and the crew, with the exception of those killed by the explosion, took to the lifeboats and were picked up by various ships. The number of killed is not yet known.

The liner had lifeboats to carry 1,550 passengers.

The *Athenia* left Glasgow on Friday, Liverpool on Saturday afternoon, and Belfast yesterday. She was bound for Montreal with a cargo of 1,000 tons.

The liner first dashed the message, "Torpedoed," and all possible assistance was dispatched to the scene.

The sinking rapidly message was received as far as is known, the last to be received.

The Ministry of Information bulletin states that the *Athenia* was torpedoed without warning. Such action, says the bulletin, is in direct contravention of the rules regarding submarine warfare, by which German submarines were to be warned.

The crew of the *Athenia* numbered 230. No official news has yet been received as to how many people were saved.

MANY WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Many women and children were on the liner.

The Americans on board, including the number of girl tourists, were those

... were amongst the ...
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... Government ...
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... Mr. Henderson ...
... the support of ...
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... Chief of the ...
... of the Chamber ...
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Image 1. *The Star* (Johannesburg, Transvaal). Monday, September 4th 1939, 11

Image 2. Bob Connolly, cartoon dated 19th April 1945. *Victory Cartoon. Selection of R.D.M. Cartoons* (Central News Agency)

Vale's book, you can laugh at the cartoons, but "remember, please, that international relations are no laughing matters" (Tutu, in Vale 2011, ix). Both the horrors of war and the pleasures of peace are the main topic here, one which allows us not only to re-live the tragedy of violence but also the ever-present opportunity to show that a longing for life, generosity and humanity can emerge even in difficult times. And this is particularly moving when history, memory and personal experiences are being transformed into literary texts, poems in this case. Let us read what Sampie De Wet (1906-1984) writes about our country. She lived in Pretoria, writing stories and children's books. In 1956 she published *Nine Stories*, which deals with the themes of death, pain, fear and madness. She served with the South African Women's Auxiliary Services in World War II, and wrote a book about her stay in Italy. This is just one of the many examples we could supply in order to give a stranger's view on Italy during the war:

When new acquaintances used to ask me how I liked Italy, I always answered that what I was seeing was not Italy, but a country in the grip of war, and that is a vastly different matter. I should imagine that Italy, at present, is more like England than either is like its peace-time self. Italy is dirty, walls unwhitewashed and shutters unpainted, the roads bad, and everywhere debris which has not been removed, and damage

which has not yet been repaired [...]. It has been a dreadful winter, both for our troops and for civilians, but fortunately the winter is over. When I left at the end of March it was already much warmer, and light till after seven in the evenings, and food was becoming less scarce. Many traces of the war had been removed. (De Wet 1945, 27)

Guy Butler attended Rhodes University during the 1930s, graduating MA in 1938, and left South Africa to fight in World War II. After the war, he read English Literature at Oxford University, graduating in 1947. He returned to South Africa, where he took up a post lecturing in English at the University of Witwatersrand. In 1951 he left Wits to take up a post as Senior Lecturer at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. A year later, he was made Professor and Head of English at Rhodes, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. Throughout his career, Butler promoted the culture of English-speaking South Africans, which led to the charge of separatism from some critics, although he argued for integration rather than exclusivity. He was influential in achieving the recognition of South African English Literature as a distinct body of work. In his poetry, he strove for the synthesis of European and African elements into a single voice. In his late *Collected Poems* volume, published in 1999, he dedicates a full section to our country calling it "Italy 1944-1945". It contains famous poems such as "Pietà", "Giotto's Campanile", "December 1944", "Letter from Monte Stanco", "Before a Dawn Attack", "From a War Diary: Beyond Verona". Let's read how De Wet's prose description of a destroyed country resonates in Butler's first stanza of "Pietà":

Tremendous, marching through smashed buildings, trees,
 a stream of bawdy bubbles from our lips.
 Dog-eyed he stares from the ruin's lower steps,
 then frightened fingers flutter out to seize
 his mother's dusty skirts. She lifts her eyes,
 straightens, flashes back at bay, and almost trips;
 then turns, goes out to him, him only, grips
 his fear-blind head against her bending knees [...]
 (Butler 1999, 37)

But it is in "Giotto's Campanile" and "December 1944" that Butler anticipates what will later become his 'Italian' voice, that particular way of experimenting with the *terza rima* in which he would produce, in a few years, two of his major long poems: "On First Seeing Florence" and "Elegy for a South African Tank Commander killed in action in Italy, October 1944".

The first one, as Butler himself says, was "an attempt to do justice to one such renovating spot of time". It grew from an early-morning view of Florence when units of the 6th South African Armoured Division had

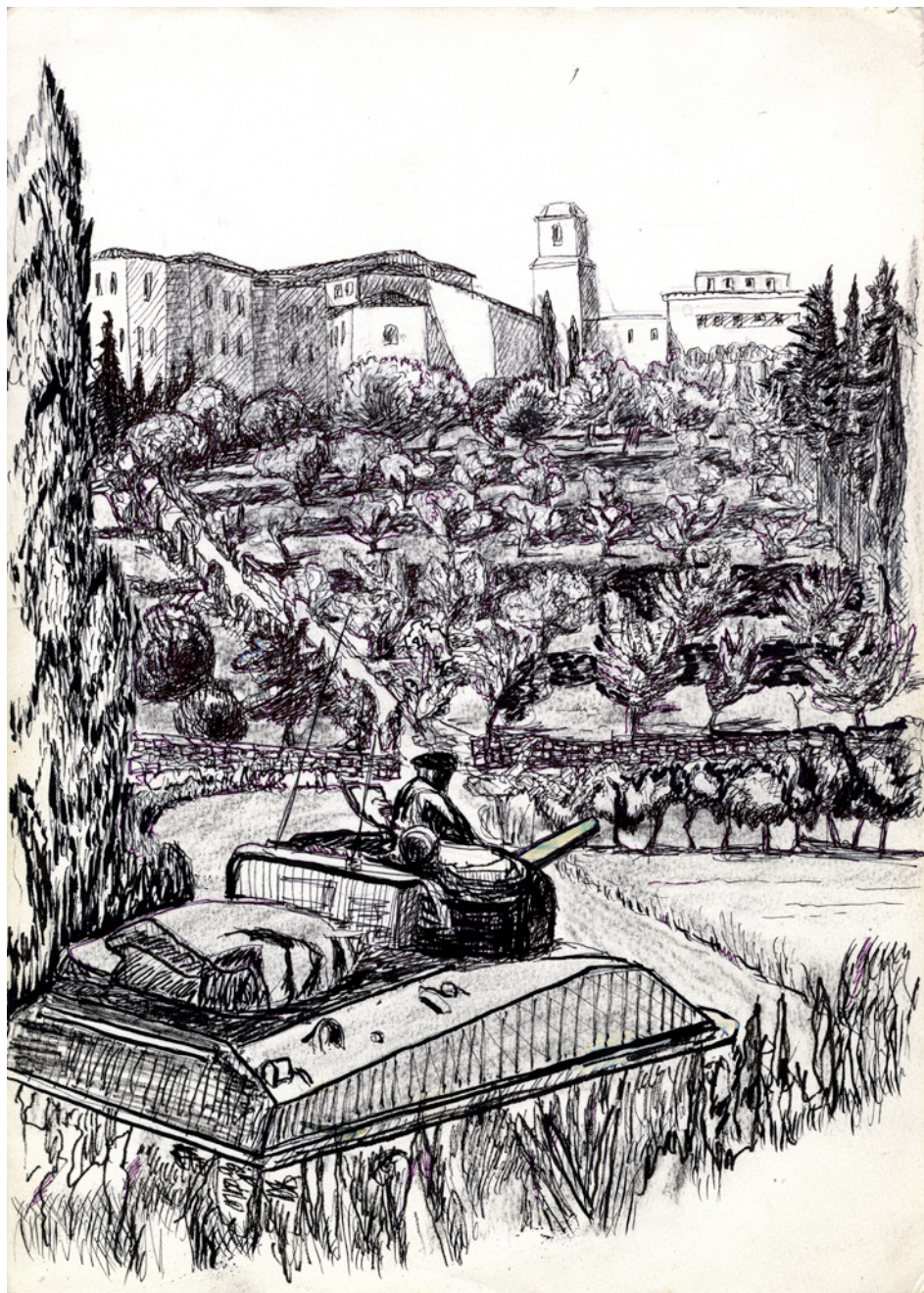


Image 3. Drawing by Guy Butler, *Guy Butler, A Local Habitation. An Autobiography 1945-90*. New Africa Books, 1991

advanced to the southern bank of the Arno, on the 4th August 1944. The poem went through a series of visions and revisions, until it was finally published in 1968, after the Arno floods of November 1966 and a chance reading of Iris Origo's *War in the Val d'Orcia*.

In the other long poem called *Elegy*, Butler had to go through an even more complicated period of writing and revision. Of the many war casualties that made an impact on him, there were three that, more than others, impressed him: David Pitman, Willoughby Jackson and (Janson) Breda van Breda, a young relative of his wife. The tank commander killed in his long poem "is an embodiment of many idealistic young South Africans at that time, whose awareness of their African origins and complex heritage were awakened first by the strange world of Egypt and then by Italy".

I will not go through the long line of drafts and revisions he described in his article on "Elegy"; suffice it to say that there are now four versions of the poem:

1. The so-called 'Third Draft', which is for record purposes only.
2. The version published in the journal *Standpunte* in 1955 (vol. 10, no. 1, August/September 1955).
3. The "Elegy" (reconstructed and shortened in *Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems*) which dates back to 1959.
4. The so-called post-Peter Sacks Version, which Butler wrote in March/April 1986 after reading Peter Sacks' book, *The English Elegy* (Butler 1945-1985).

Here is the beginning of the long poem:

Briefly released from autumn's battle line,
 relaxed as antique shepherds on the sward,
 or lounging like young lords, we'd savour wine,
 we'd say the pen is mightier than the sword;
 we'd nag at ironies: of how we'd come -
 white Africans who artlessly abhorred
 raw voices screaming from Berlin to Rome -
 only to learn the bitter paradox
 of trouble brewing, terribly, back home:
 to help bring Freedom through the storms and shocks
 to harbour in calm waters, victory won -
 and then to run upon the selfsame rocks.
 (Butler 1999, 76)

It is worth noting here that, despite his refusal to take part in any operational and fighting actions in war - by which reason he was appointed as a teacher to the troops - Butler was strongly convinced that he, like

many South Africans, “did not go off to fight *for* an Empire, but against Nazism – *against* a political creed based on a biological belief in a master race”. “We believed”, he writes, “in democracy, and we thought the Commonwealth a good thing” (Butler 1994, 164). Yet, soon after the war, as he tells us in the final volume of his autobiography, *Local Habitation* (1991), apart from the death-camp tragedies and the use of the atomic bombs, he would suffer further difficulties: in 1947, after his graduation in Oxford, he was back in a country where, in 1948, the National Party won at the polls and began the period of apartheid. In his words, we can perceive the final disillusion with humankind and his particular sense of private and public disintegration:

It is very difficult to communicate, at this distance in time, the body blows, and the protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election: the ineluctable implementation of apartheid; the removal of the ‘Coloured’ voters from the common roll; the banning of virtually all black writers; the withdrawal from the Commonwealth; the desperate, sometimes pathetic, sometimes dangerous reactions and conspiracies; Sharpeville, the station bomb [...] The result was that, within a decade, we felt like exiles in our own country. Many of us still do. (Butler 1999, 165)

In 1986, when Butler decided to publish the latest and revised version of *Elegy*, the State of Emergency had just been lifted, but it was re-imposed in June of the same year and continued to be enforced until 2nd February 1990. The unstable political situation had led to a deep economic crisis in the country. The banning and detention of political leaders left a vacuum in black public life, only filled by church leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, and others. Nearly 35,000 people were detained during 1986-87. Reports published in the *Weekly Mail* during the period June 1985 to December 1986 reveal that 813 books, objects, and publications were banned, 371 for political reasons. Butler’s lines seem to have been particularly suitable for the war years in Italy, but also for other possible violent contexts and situations, such as South Africa under the State of Emergency in the 1980s. The following lines were ignored by the state police when they were revised and published in South Africa in 1986:

how can we love
when every outward gesture, thought or word
must see itself distorted, relative
and mirrored in the infinite absurd?
If speech is but a subtle sort of bark,
and song the pretty twitter of a bird,
why should it hurt to hear a falling lark

stutter so sweetly? Why do I choke and turn
to mutter half-meant longings to the dark?
(Butler 1999, 94)

Yet, as Stephen Watson has clearly observed, Guy Butler's life, which had its beginnings in what is to us an "almost unprecedented degree of rootedness in landscapes natural, cultural, spiritual, was precipitated into that condition of uprootedness which has grown to the dimensions of a universal condition in the twentieth century" (Watson in "Introduction" to *Guy Butler's Essays & Lectures* 1994, 4) In more than one critical essay, Butler stressed that traditions must be adapted to new environments, revealing him to be an innovator as well as a conservative, "both radical and traditionalist" (4).

While Guy Butler was teaching South African officers in Italy during the war, and also travelling to Rome, Cassino, Florence and other cities, another South African was in our country, following a different route, mainly made up of prison camps and physical difficulties. Cricketer Norman Tufty Mann joined the 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment during the war, passed through Cairo, Alexandria, and El Alamein, and was captured at the battle of Tobruk. He was deported to a prisoner-of-war camp near Chiavari, having passed through Benghazi, Tharuna, Sicily, and Naples. Finally, he was driven to Padua, soon after the Italian Armistice at Cassibile, passing through Genoa and La Spezia on the way. Here, rumours of an invasion of Italy were in the air, but Tufty Mann, together with other prisoners of war, was still in the middle of German soldiers and officers in a camp near Chioggia. Escaping all the checks, one day he visited Venice because, as he says in his diary, "rumours were falling thick and fast about our ears – that the British Navy was expected in Venice that morning! (Just to show how rumours became distorted!)". On the way back to Chioggia, he saw a violent raid against the town, so his plan to try to escape by boat to Ancona failed, and he had to go back to the port and the mainland, asking for help in a farm. In his diary Tufty Mann says:

We knocked up the family who had given us food previously when we worked on the farm. Having no male in the household it took them over ten minutes to pluck up courage to open the door. When they did so, this was the beginning of incredible kindness from people so poor, peasants who had so little but gave all. We were taken inside and within ten minutes were drinking very acceptable hot coffee and having a lightly boiled egg which had been cooked by being placed on the ashes of the fire. After a long complicated explanation of what had happened we were glad to doss down in the stable after such an exhausting day. This was Saturday, three days after the Armistice.



Image 4. The Ferro and Zagato families in Cavarzere, around 1940

So, this is the beginning of the story of Tufty Mann who, together with a Durban railwayman, spent 20 months evading the Germans in the north-east of Italy.

By day they lived in a pigsty, hiding behind a false wall; sometimes they hid in reeds, freezing. By night, he was taught Italian, living on polenta and beans. He wrote his diary in those slim notebooks used by Elementary School kids under the Mussolini regime.

Tufty Mann smoked homemade cigarettes, made of whatever he could scrounge from the countryside, and caught malaria near the Po River. He was eventually rescued by Popski's Army, an international band of Allied adventurers. After the war, he played 19 cricket tests for South Africa, touring England in 1947 and 1951. He could have played many more, but died in 1952, aged 32. In his will, Mann bequeathed £200 each to Angelina Armoroli and Cesare Zagato, the Italians who took him in when he was on the run.



Images 6-8. Norman Tufty Mann's Italian Notebooks



Image 9. Norman Tufty Mann in Cavarzere during World War II

Angelina named her daughter Normanna, after Norman. Normanna's son, Alberto, is a friend of Chris and Julia's son, Luke. Both Alberto and Luke live in London and are college friends.

Mann's story is interesting from a number of different angles, with various layers of possible literary text involved: a diary, an unpublished autobiographical novel and, finally, a published poem written by his son, Chris Mann, after his visit to the actual spot of his father's hiding place. The poem, published in his book *Heartlands* (2002), is called "A Field in Italy" and concerns both Mann's actual visit, with the whole family, to Cavarzere and a particular interpretation of memory through the invocation of shadows (or shades) in a landscape. I would like to remember here, as a kind of final observation, the thoughts of Walter Benjamin when he talks about digging and remembering. He says that whoever tries to get closer to his or her hidden past must dig according to a plan. And, in digging, he or she must not be mistaken in thinking that the most important thing is to produce a precise list of found objects. He or she must also remember the exact place where antiquities were lodged. So, memories do not have to be founded on references but they have to point exactly in the place where the researcher has found them.

Borrowing some details from Chris Mann's research, it will be enough here to say that the shades, to apply a neuro-cognitive model of understanding, do not need to be restricted to the biological lineage of an individual nor are they ghostly phantoms that have a separate, perceivable existence independent of an individual's mind-brain. The shades, by this definition, are "episodic memories of other people which, inhabiting the interior life of an individual, contribute to that individual's personal and

socio-cultural identity". Recent discoveries show that our personal identity is closely linked to recurrent significant memories of other people. In short, we define who we are by our relationship to our shades. They are the kind of shades that you might find in the poetry of well-known poets such as Homer, Virgil and Dante. Possibly, they include a literary guide in the form of Virgil, or a spiritual guide in the shape of Beatrice, and all the possible presences coming both from the African concept of ancestral shades and the original Catholic doctrine when it brings together the whole company of believers, the living and the dead. This particular form of syncretism reconciles all the imagined and dreamed presences Mann talks about in his poem and helps him (and us) to fill in the gaps of history and the pain of individual and emotional lacunae for the re-construction of a distracted subconscious:

I'm standing in a field in Italy.
 A hot summer's day.
 Crows. Tractors.
 Poplars lining in a river.
 Clods and stubble at my feet.
 The trees are as in his diary.
 The gravel farm road.
 The narrow canals.
 The soft quick plop of frogs
 Arrowing into a ditch.
 I'm standing near Venice
 With people in a field.
 The sky is cloudless
 As blue as Giotto's
 Frescoes inside a dome...
 'Ma tanti anni fa, sai'.
Signora Ferro's beside me.
 'The barn was here,' she says.
 'Or maybe closer to the trees.
 It's all so long ago'.
 My Italian is rough and slow.
 Her dialect's rapid.
 Our talk leads to guesses.
 Confusion. Laughter.
 Scraps of knowing. Then gaps...
 The memory shallows. Fades.
 I hear *Signora Ferro* talking,
 Far off, in swirls of words.
 Stocky. Black-haired. Resolute.
 A handbag over one arm...

People keep leaving each other,
 The words in Zulu put it.
 Humans keep missing others.
 Dangling raw ends.
 Loneliness. Suspicion. Gaps.

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