

Book Reviews

Alex la Guma: A Literary and Political Biography

by Roger Field

Auckland Park: Jacana, 2010, 256 pp.

ISBN: 978-177009-888-6

Reviewed by Jabulani Mkhize

Department of English

University of Fort Hare

East London Campus

jmkhize@ufh.ac.za

As Field informs us, his main objective in writing this literary and political biography was ‘to narrate and interpret the story of La Guma’s literary and political life and work in a more detailed and nuanced context than previous La Guma scholarship [had] attempted’ (p. 1). Apart from Field’s personal interest in La Guma and the political milieu that shapes his writing he is interested in the ‘history of La Guma’s reception’ and showing that ‘La Guma had grown up in a more complex intellectual, emotional and political environment than most studies had hitherto acknowledged and explored’ (p. 3). Whether he succeeds in this regard is a moot point. One thing that is clear about Field’s study though is that it ‘examines a much wider range of material within a more complex analysis of his life’ (p. 5) using an eclectic approach.

In terms of its focus, Field’s study is arguably the most ambitious and comprehensive in La Guma scholarship to date, covering a wide spectrum of La Guma’s life and his artistic interests: namely, painting, drawing, comic strips, poetry, fiction, radio interviews and plays, political writing and travelogue. For this reason, *Alex la Guma: A Literary and Political Biography* will have an enormous impact on future research on La Guma – the lengthy bibliographical references will certainly come in handy for future scholarship on La Guma. Chapters are arranged, largely, in terms of periods considering whatever artistic production and political work La

Guma was engaged in during a particular chosen period. This sequence, or should I say, this distinction, may, while useful for Field who wanted to explore La Guma's oeuvre in terms of La Guma's South African period and his exile years, have had an adverse effect on Field's attempt 'to sustain the combination of narrative detail and analytical depth' (p. 2). For example, Field does not seem to engage as rigorously with La Guma's critics on his work in exile as he does with commentators concerned with the author's writing prior to his departure from South Africa. Central to Field's argument are the different ways in which La Guma grapples with the problem of coloured identity, not only in his early fictional writing but also in political debates in different media, such as *The African Communist* and *Sechaba*, for example – a debate that largely remains unresolved. Field's main objective is to show 'that La Guma's dynamic explorations of coloured identity suggest a subtle, angry, ironic and at times contradictory approach to literature and politics' (p. 141). According to Field, La Guma's early artistic productions and his political work (which are covered from chapters 1 to 5), dealt with the representation of race, specifically in the Western Cape.

Chapter 6 examines La Guma's writing of his father's biography and *And A Threefold Cord*. This is where Field's argument begins to take a different turn. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is cited as an intertextual referent for *And A Threefold Cord*: 'La Guma took from *The Grapes of Wrath* some formal elements and a wealth of plausible detail about an economically marginalized family ...' (p. 130). But Field does not end it there. Instead, he stops short of accusing La Guma of plagiarism – or does he? While Field provides evidence for the intertextual links the terminology used to discuss this intertextuality (Field prefers the Bloomian phrase 'anxiety of influence') is as curious as it is revealing: 'La Guma's performance of his anxieties about narrative debts raises two questions: why he talked about the relationship between himself and other writers and what facts about his fiction he *wanted to hide*' (p. 137). Referring to an interview that La Guma had with Cecil Abrahams, Field insinuates that Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is one of those '[literary] debts that [La Guma] *wanted to hide*' (p. 137; e.a.). Having said this he avers 'In *And A Threefold Cord* La Guma *borrowed guiltily* from, and reworked Steinbeck ...' (p. 151; e.a.). It comes as no surprise, therefore, when he proffers: 'The public La Guma's denotative view of literature meant that *to confess* without causing his own

death as an author he could do no more than reject the possibility that Steinbeck had influenced him' (p. 152; e.a.). Field continues: 'The desire *to confess without confessing* would soon resurface and then return in his last public works' (p. 152; e.a.). As can be seen, Field's argument is couched in the language of morality that tips the scales towards providing ample justification to accuse an author of 'literary plagiarism' (p. 141). Whether these accusations are justified is, however, an interesting aspect for further research by La Guma scholars.

Reading La Guma against the grain, Field discusses how critics have overlooked or glossed over the modernist or experimental vein in La Guma's writing. Curiously, he attributes La Guma's supposed experimentation with form to 'a desire to imitate work of famous writers' (p. 140). He alludes to Hemingway's influence on La Guma in 'The Lemon Orchard' and 'Coffee for the Road': 'La Guma continued to experiment and copy' (p. 141)[!] He cites multivocality and the fragmentation of the minor stories as evidence of La Guma's experimentation with modernist techniques. According to him, Hemingway's influence on La Guma extends to *Time of the Butcherbird* and the travelogue, *A Soviet Journey*. In his determination to trace La Guma's literary debts, Field goes on to argue that 'Mazisi Kunene's influence on La Guma's exile fiction (read: *In the Fog of the Season's End* and *Time of the Butcherbird*), where heroism, social obligation and a sense of the past play much greater roles is much clear' (p. 165). Regrettably, the evidence provided for this assertion is hardly convincing. Ultimately, it is only *The Stone Country* that is exonerated, albeit partially, from 'the anxiety of influence' that Field claims pervades all the other La Guma literary texts because 'in *The Stone Country* [La Guma] *borrowes more from himself than any other writer*' (p. 151; e.a.).

The most useful aspect of Roger Field's study is that, apart from serving as a resource for future scholarship interested in La Guma (as it provides interviews with some of the writer's colleagues and access to manuscripts from the La Guma collection), it has raised the need for a sustained and rigorous study of an intertextual reading of La Guma's oeuvre.

