

BOOK PAGE

Some notable translations

SEVEN DAYS AT THE SILBERSTEINS
 by Etienne Leroux (C.N.A. Centaur Books).
 THE AMBASSADOR by Andre Brink
 (C.N.A. Centaur Books).
 DIE BITTEREINDERS by Stuart Cloete
 translated by Henri Snijders (Simondium)

ONE of the more extraordinary sides of South African life is that comparatively few books are translated from one official language into the other.

Ideally this should not matter: We should all be able to read and understand each other's language. But in practice this is not so. The country is not fully bilingual; and even if it were, people like doing things in their home language.

In English, now, they can read Etienne Leroux's "Sew Dae by die Silbersteins," which was published in Afrikaans two years ago, and André Brink's "Die Ambassadeur." These two novels have been produced by the Central News Agency in a new series, Centaur Books — English translations of the works of the top Afrikaans authors.

In Afrikaans they can read Stuart Cloete's "Rags of Glory" under the title "Die Bittereinders." It is the first of his books to be translated into Afrikaans. The publishers are Simondium.

Fantasy

Those who have not read the Afrikaans version of "Sew Dae" will know enough about it not to have to be told it is a satirical fantasy and that it was awarded the Hertzog Prize this year. They will have gleaned this from Press reports and followed with interest the furor the choice caused. Now is their chance to try to find out why.

Frankly, it is difficult to understand why. The theme is original and quite brilliant and the undertones, overtones, middle-ones and whatever tones (and colours) one reads into it are surely tempered by how much the reader conforms to traditional — and often stuffy — outlooks.

Henry spends his week at the

farm home of the Silbersteins in the Cape to celebrate his engagement to nebulous Salome. Four of the days are for good, two for evil and the last for good to triumph over evil.

The story has hundreds of facets. It can be read and re-read with a new meaning, a new picture popping up from an old paragraph each time. And through it all runs the sometimes cynical chuckle of the author. Like the incident when guests wear evening dress for a braai-veis. Why? Because they are farmers, and "farmers are the aristocracy of the country."

Charles Eglinton translated the book. He has done a fine job. He has the sure touch of a man with a feeling for language, a touch that, on occasion, caresses the words with poetry.

Readable

André Brink himself translated his thoroughly readable novel "The Ambassador." (The Afrikaans version was reviewed on this Book Page on April 24).

This tale of a South African Ambassador in Paris, who has a love affair with a girl 30 years younger than himself, is told with understanding, sympathy, and a competence that marks the author as a leading novelist in any language. Sex runs right through the book, but it is never distasteful, never what one might call sex for sex's sake.

Saleable words

Can the same be said of Stuart Cloete's "Bittereinders?" Not really. Not that he writes distastefully on the subject, but the reader is always made well aware of the saleable words and situations when they crop up.

The Afrikaans bookshelf of "daring" stories is growing, but Cloete's formula story is hardly a real gain in the Afrikaans library.

Drawing liberally from the 179 sources named in the bibliography, the writer has grafted two main and several subsidiary love stories on to most of well-known events of the 1899—1902 war.

Name-dropping

Cloete tends to use names to create atmosphere and bombards the reader with close-ups of historical figures; but Afrikaans lends itself less to name-dropping than English, so while the Boers sound true the English cavalry officers often come through strangely.

The translation suffers the same type of difficulties. For example, the name of the book, "Die Bittereinders," has a different connotation to "Rags of Glory." A "bittereinder" was a Boer who wanted to fight on and who was dissatisfied with the peace at Vereeniging. The novel includes bittereinders, but covers a wider scene.

In the main, the translation is competently handled. It must have been a major task. There are 597 pages.

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