

# ROY CAMPBELL'S CHILDREN'S NOVEL, *THE MAMBA'S PRECIPICE*

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## ABSTRACT

Roy Campbell's *The mamba's precipice* (1953), a novel for children, is his only prose work of fiction. This article examines three aspects of the book, namely its autobiographical elements; its echoes of Campbell's friendship with the writers Laurie Lee and Laurens van der Post; and its parallels with other English children's literature. Campbell based the story on the holidays his family spent on the then Natal South Coast, and he writes evocative descriptions of the sea and the bush. The accounts of feats achieved by the boy protagonist recall Campbell's self-mythologising memoirs. There are similarities and differences between *The mamba's precipice* and the way Van der Post wrote about Natal in *The hunter and the whale* (1967). Campbell's novel in some respects resembles nineteenth-century children's adventure stories set in South Africa, and it also has elements of the humour typical of school stories of the 'Billy Bunter' era and the cosy, mundane activities and dialogue common to other mid-century South African and English children's books.

**Keywords:** Roy Campbell, South African children's fiction, Laurens van der Post

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Roy Campbell wrote one children's story, a full-length novel called *The mamba's precipice* (1953). Alexander (1982, 220) accords it half a sentence in *Roy Campbell: A critical biography*: 'He spent the time correcting the proofs of his translations of St John of the Cross, and finishing a story for children, *The mamba's precipice*, a powerful evocation of then Natal as it had been in his privileged childhood.' Notice of the book by other scholars of Campbell is for the most part just as scant. For example, in *Bloomsbury and beyond: The friends and enemies of Roy Campbell*, Campbell's second biographer, Pearce (2001, 301), blatantly plagiarises Alexander's sentence and leaves it at that. Major histories of South Africa literature by Chapman (1996) and Gray (1979) do not mention it. For the most part, criticism of Campbell from his own time to the present is concerned only with his poetry, which is the literary work that gave him his status. Campbell is studied as a man of intellect and learning. For example, Voss (2013, 1), after reviewing 'a range of criticism from the first decade of the twenty-first century', concludes that 'Campbell's work can be rewardingly read in the context of the Graeco-Roman classical inheritance that he embraced and the Romance culture in which he settled'.

Is there more to be said about *The mamba's precipice*? Campbell's daughter Anna, in *Poetic justice: A memoir of my father, Roy Campbell* (Lyle 2011, 14), calls it 'a very revealing piece of autobiography', thus directing our attention to Campbell's boyhood and his autobiographical memoirs *Broken record* (1934) and *Light on a dark horse* (1951). On the other hand, her sister Teresa (Tess) (T. Campbell 2011) does not mention it at all in *In the shadow of a poet: Memoirs*. Smith (1972, 224, 228) gives it thoughtful attention in *Lyric and polemic: The literary personality of Roy Campbell*, in which he places the book in the context of Campbell's life and works: he devotes a paragraph each to how the book illustrates Campbell's 'urge to demonstrate expertise', 'the childlike quality in his coterie-talk', and how 'the world he creates is clearly that of the first decades of this [twentieth] century'. Among children's literature scholars, Heale (1985, 37, 1996, 16), the sole commentator, has devoted a couple of paragraphs to it that make a start in placing it in the context of other mid-century South African children's books in English.

Campbell would probably not have expected his book to be subjected to close analysis. Lyle (2011, 43) remarks, 'He did not, in any case, take prose-writing seriously, and whereas he loved writing verse he found the other to be a chore.' Heale (1996, 16) calls his children's book 'a curious indulgence from South Africa's famous poet'. But he did write it and publish it, so he expected it to be read, and as his only work of prose fiction it is an important part of his oeuvre. It is one of the few children's novels ever to come from Natal, and indeed only a few dozen comparable South African children's novels in English were published in the early to mid-twentieth century (Jenkins 2006). It is also one of the few from that period to have been written by South Africans who were otherwise successful authors for

adults, the others being Daphne Rooke and two authors of 'crossover' non-fiction and fiction read by adults and children, Victor Pohl and Fay Goldie. Laurens van der Post wrote three adult novels featuring child protagonists, of which *The hunter and the whale* (1967) has significant links with Campbell that are explored below. It is helpful to read *The mamba's precipice* in conjunction with these books since there is no trace of its reception by readers in the English-speaking world and particularly in South Africa. (By contrast, several of his poems were regularly prescribed for study in South African schools in the twentieth century: 'Zulu girl', 'Autumn', 'Horses on the Camargue', 'The zebras', 'Choosing a mast', and 'The serf'.)

These scattered references to the novel and its parallels in Campbell's life and his memoirs, and the few remarks by critics on its literary context, suggest three ways of approaching the book that might prove fruitful in understanding it as a part of his literary oeuvre: the autobiographical elements, Campbell's connections with Van der Post, and the models of children's literature on which he apparently drew.

## 2. HOW AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IS IT?

Roy Campbell was born in Durban in 1902. After completing his schooling he left for England to study at Oxford University in 1918. He returned to Durban in 1924, where his wife, Mary, and daughter, Tess, joined him. While there, he collaborated with William Plomer and Laurens van der Post in the production of the literary magazine *Voorslag*. After the birth of his second daughter, Anna, they returned to England in 1926. Apart from brief visits later in life, Campbell never lived in South Africa again.

By the time Campbell wrote *The mamba's precipice*, he had already published two books of memoirs, *Broken record* (1934) and *Light on a dark horse* (1951). Coullie (2011, 14n), who collected and edited the memoirs of his two daughters in *Remembering Roy Campbell*, says, 'Although clearly heavily autobiographical, [*The mamba's precipice*] is published as a work of fiction.' This overstates the case; nevertheless, his two memoirs and information about his childhood from other sources do show that elements of the novel are based on his own childhood.

The story is set on the Natal South Coast, where the wife and children of a Durban doctor are spending a holiday at his brother's beach cottage. The principal character is 15-year-old Michael, who has an older sister, Mary, and two younger brothers, Billy and John. After various minor adventures, the plot culminates in Michael's shooting of a mamba that has long terrorised the area. Sub-plots include a so-called haunted grave, two leopards that are also shot, a murderer on the loose and a 'witch-woman' who gives him sanctuary.

The parallels with the Campbell family are obvious. Roy was one of six children of a prominent Durban doctor, and an uncle who owned a sugar-mill did indeed lend

them a beach cottage where they spent many holidays. His boyhood in Durban and at the cottage provides the basis for the story.

The autobiographical features of the novel do not extend to exploring family relationships in any detail, and the personality of Michael does not resemble that of the author. Lyle (2011, 14) says, 'Roy's timidity had always exasperated his father. He says as much in his book for children, *The mamba's precipice*, a very revealing piece of autobiography'; but there is no hint of this in the book. Michael is the antithesis of a timid boy, and there is no sign of exasperation in the only emotionally charged interaction between father and son. After a short factual account of preparation for the holiday, Dr Jackson drives the family to the cottage and stays overnight before returning to Durban, making no further appearance in the story. That first night, when they open the mouth of the lagoon Michael is in danger when the sea rushes in, catching him in a boat with his brothers. Dr Jackson calls to Michael, 'Meet it head-on!', which he does, and he expertly brings the boat home. 'Dr Jackson knew that Michael had weathered the danger, and he mopped his brow and sat down' (Campbell 1953, 33).

Where the novel coincides with Campbell's boyhood is in its settings, activities and some of the characters. Details capture the atmosphere of life at the cottage, such as fishing and riding to the store for provisions, and some of the colourful characters that people the area, such as the servants and the Indian store keeper, are probably drawn from life. The poet becomes lyrical in his evocation of the wild, unspoilt coast and bush. The whole of Chapter 5, 'Night on the lagoon', is a good example. There are many descriptions of the sea and the rock pools, while he grows ecstatic over the inland forest:

He could hear the song of falling water and followed it into the twilight of the tree-ferns and yellow-woods till he came to some green mossy boulders, with waving fronds of watercress between them, and crystal-clear ice-cold water spouting down through clefts and tunnels in the boulders. Myriads of maidenhair ferns sprayed in the mist that rose from the splashing cascades. Enormous mother-of-pearl, tortoise-shell, and golden-mooned purple butterflies with swallow tails played around him, and sucked the flowers of a kind of scarlet polianthus which from hundreds of hair-like tendrils rayed out their transparent blossoms, or hung from the cream-white waxen orchids which festooned the yellow-woods like tiny cataracts of stars. (Ibid., 114)

Stirring passages of graphic realism, especially in the earlier sections of the novel which set the scene before they give way to a rapid development of the plot, reflect not only Campbell's cherished memories but his love of extravagant action. Among these dramatic episodes are the opening of the mouth of the lagoon, a hunt for buck using beaters in the thick bush, and the sardine run, which is worth quoting at length since the descriptive passages are the best parts of the book:

The sun had lit up some low-hanging clouds over the horizon with violet, orange and crimson; and against them, shimmering and showering like clouds of midges, black against

the dawn, were flying myriads and myriads of gannets, with a sprinkling of albatrosses and molly-hawks. As far as the eye could see, for leagues and leagues to the north and south, they appeared like dark patches of smoke in the far distance; nearer, they were like swarms of mosquitoes; nearer still they looked like flights of locusts; but in the foreground you could see they were showers of great big birds and they were falling, as a cascade falls sheer from a cliff, and striking the water with millions of powdery plumes of spray ... As the light grew, shoals of sardines could be seen lying like the shadows of clouds on the sea, and staining it in deep purple patches for acres round. One of these dark patches, about twenty acres in extent, was nearing the fringe of the surf just in front of the house, and out of the midst of it, with a report like a cannon and a terrific splash, flew a huge eagle-ray, or devil-fish, with its wings spread wide like some gigantic bat. It planed for a few yards, struck the water, and disappeared. Great black fins showed above the surface, and every now and then a big shark's tail would emerge and strike the water. (Ibid., 68–99)

### 3. DIDACTICISM AND ACCURACY

Campbell packed *The mamba's precipice* with technical information. Unfortunately, he was drawing on boyhood memories of almost 40 years ago, and the text has some minor errors. Apart from a footnote reference to 'Fitzsimmon's *Snakes of South Africa*' (ibid., 43) when discussing the behaviour of snakes, he appears not to have checked anything. For example, he does not use the standardised spellings for Zulu words and names that were in place in 1953. Some of the characters use the rather archaic South Africanism 'tiger' for a leopard, and this apparently misled the illustrator of the book, Dolf Rieser, since his lurid dust cover includes a picture of a striped tiger stalking a zebra.

Campbell intersperses his narrative with didactic asides and longueurs, such as half a page on the honey-guide, remarking, 'There are several varieties of honey-guides, which are related to cuckoos' (ibid., 39). (He gets this wrong – honey-guides are members of the barbet family.) Both his use of didactic asides and the prominence he gives the honey-guide in the plot draw attention to how he was influenced by his early reading. He had always been a prodigious reader. Tess (T. Campbell 2011, 182) recalls his knowledge of children's literature:

My sister and I were exceptionally lucky children because my father loved to read to us in loud, clear tones. Among our children's literature, the stories that impressed me most were Andersen's ... and Lear's Nonsense Stories ... My father knew Lear by heart.

It is likely that he would have read the adventure stories of the nineteenth century set in South Africa by English and Scottish writers such as Charles Eden, Frederick Marryat, T. Mayne Reid, William Gordon Stables, George Manville Fenn and G.A. Henty. Didactic passages like Campbell's are a common feature of their works, and in those set in South Africa certain creatures that would have struck English readers as peculiar appeared repeatedly, such as ostriches, trapdoor spiders, and, especially,

honey-guides, which had a mysterious aura because of their uncanny ability to invoke the help of animals and humans to rob bee hives (Jenkins 2002, 99, 106–126). It appears that Campbell, in writing a children's story, which was a new venture for him, resorted to his early reading for a model. Rieser's inaccurate cover was also in keeping with a long history of inaccurate illustrations for children's stories set in South Africa that were published in Britain (*ibid.*, 93).

Writing of Campbell's prose works, Smith (1972, 224) comments, 'The fascination is caused by a momentary, total imaginative involvement. A different kind of involvement, and one that detracts from Campbell's prose, is the desire to show inside knowledge, or to be associated intimately with selective groups.' He instances the scenes where Michael learns the techniques of motor cycle rough riding and where Iberian cattlemen at the cattle dip give a demonstration of bull fighting – arcane information drawn respectively from Campbell's military training in the Second World War and his years of living in Spain and Portugal.

Campbell (1953, 89) provides a footnote explaining, 'Almost every word relating to cattle and horses – rodeo, lazo, corral, etc. – derives from the Spanish.' Like that other flamboyant writer, Ernest Hemingway, Campbell had been captivated by bull fighting when he lived in Spain and Portugal. He once actually arranged for his young daughters to lead the parade into the bullring on horseback and in costume. Smith (1972, 224) observes:

The technique described in *The mamba's precipice* has already been described in detail in *Taurine Provence* (1932, 41–42) ... and the fact that he should repeat it in *The mamba's precipice* is an indication of his personal involvement in suggesting both encyclopedic knowledge and his membership of a privileged group.

Campbell has forgotten that he is writing about South Africa, where the Spanish words are not in everyday farming use and cattle terms are likely to be in Afrikaans.

#### 4. EXAGGERATION AND FANTASY HEROICS

Campbell's personality and way of life laid the foundation for excess in his writing. He loved carousing and telling tall tales with the peasants, and he was adventurous when he had the opportunity. In Provence he would go out at night in the boats with the fishermen and also take part in their violent aquatic sport of jousting.

His small inaccuracies in *The mamba's precipice* pale in comparison with his exaggeration. He departs from authentic memories of his boyhood, and Coullie's (2011) characterisation of the book as 'heavily autobiographical' cannot hold. However, it is no use turning to his memoirs to ascertain what elements of the novel are autobiographical, since what Heale (1996, 126) calls his 'fanciful adventure plot' joins his two autobiographies in the realm of fantasy. Campbell uses the opportunity that his work of fiction offers to go even further than in his memoirs in creating a memory of himself as a boyish hero.

The South African poet David Wright (1961, 31), who was a friend of Campbell, wrote in an early study of him, 'Both *Broken record* and *Light on a dark horse* contain a number of anecdotes that are – to say the least – startling and fantastic.' Later influential South African critics concur. Chapman (1996, 181) in his authoritative *Southern African literatures* says, 'His memoirs are bragging, bullying and preposterous in their adventures,' and Daymond and Visagie (2012, 719), writing in *The Cambridge history of South Africa literature*, place Campbell in a particular tradition: 'Quest romance is boastful and the stuff of thrills.' After adducing Percy FitzPatrick and *Jock of the Bushveld*, they go on:

The self-vaunting note of the quest romance survived for at least another century, surfacing in Roy Campbell's two volumes of autobiography and in Laurens van der Post's blend of myth-making, adventure and big-game hunting in *Venture to the interior* (1952) and *The lost world of the Kalahari* (1958). (Ibid.)

Alexander (1982, vii) sees Campbell's myth-making as a pervasive feature of his personality:

Another problem facing the student of his work: Campbell was a great myth-maker. His two autobiographies do not merely distort and conceal the truth: they substitute for it an elaborate and consistent un-truth, a realistic mask which has to be torn aside before an attempt to see Campbell as he was becomes possible.

The exaggeration in *The mamba's precipice* is a further illustration of the story's similarity to the nineteenth-century South African adventure stories by Henty, Fenn and the like, in which young heroes accomplish impossible feats of derring-do. Michael's fishing feats are a relatively minor example. He makes his own beautiful fishing rod from bamboos that he had cut and matured for nine months, and 'in the five or six hours since he had started fishing, had landed something like three hundred pounds of barracuda, springer, garrick, salmon-bass, and kingfish, and a small hammer-head shark, averaging about twenty pounds' (Campbell 1953, 76). In the water, he fights a giant cuttle-fish and turns it inside out.

Another early feat that he accomplishes before the main events of the plot unfold is when the whaler of his friend Capt. Thorsen from Durban is wrecked in the surf one night in a storm. Michael, who has been out on the whaler several times and has previously signalled a friendly greeting to the crew with morse code using a shaving mirror, plays a leading part in their rescue and then gallops 'off into the night' (ibid., 104) to summon help at the sugar-mill. Michael's final encounter with the mamba is preceded by two other snake adventures, when he shoots a green mamba and also a python that 'had hold of' (apparently had bitten) a holidaymaker's leg (ibid., 98). News of this 'was in all the South African papers'. 'The skin of the python was a superb one which kept Mrs Jackson and Mary in shoes, and the boys in belts, for years' (ibid., 99).

It is noticeable that when writing about the creatures that Michael fights, Campbell anthropomorphises them as being consciously cruel. For the mamba, 'The more he thought about that deadly old cunning *indhlonlo*, the more he was determined to avenge its ferocity and wanton cruelty' (ibid., 44), and for the cuttle-fish, 'The eyes, which never winked, were loathsome and cruel and cold' (ibid., 61). When hunting, Michael paradoxically admires the quarry he will kill (the damage caused by his bullets being often graphically described). When he sees a bushbuck, he exclaims, 'What a beauty! ... Just like black velvet and with white tips to his horns! I shall mark him down for your first buck, Billy, as soon as mother wants some meat for the larder' (ibid., 21). Both these attitudes to animals, ascribing human motives to them as a reason for killing them and admiring the game that he is about to kill, are typical features of gory nineteenth-century hunting stories set in Africa (Jenkins 1993, 64), and they both resurfaced in Pohl's anachronistic books, such as *Bushveld adventures* (1940), which were popular as prescribed reading in South African schools in the mid-twentieth century.

The action of the story is stepped up to melodramatic heights. A fugitive murderer, Mahakaan, is loose in the vicinity. The hunt for bushbuck that Michael has organised turns into a manhunt. "If you see Mahakaan," said Blake [a policeman], "shoot to kill!" (Campbell 1953, 156). In a sub-plot as build-up to the climax when Michael shoots the mamba, Michael's brother John, who has been teased as a scaredy-cat, visits the so-called haunted grave of an Indian at night, where he shoots what he thinks is a ghost, only for it to be revealed in the morning as the leopard that has been terrorising the area.

The main plot and subplots reach their climax in action played out over less than 24 hours. Michael has put strichnine in the body of a calf to kill the leopard, but Mahakaan eats some of the meat. Michael finds him dying and sends a child to call Sergeant Bekker. They watch him expire, and Bekker sends the child for the other police. 'Meanwhile, Michael, explaining that he had business on hand, went back up the buck-path' (ibid., 171) in search of the mamba, for which he has baited a hooked line with a poisoned chicken. On the way he encounters the leopard's mate and fires, but it keeps on charging until he fires again. 'At two yards range it took the beast in the throat just under the chin, jolted its spine, and tore out its jugular vein' (ibid., 172). Michael sits, trembling 'for some minutes', but 'suddenly there was a rustling sound' and the mamba passes by and disappears. Michael goes home for a 'speedy' lunch and returns to find the mamba has swallowed the hooks, and he 'blew its head clean off with the shotgun' (ibid., 173). Killing it was, he found, easier than shooting the green mamba. When the news spreads, 'natives came from miles around' with gifts to thank and praise Michael, 'who became a sort of minor patron saint of the countryside, a kind of St George the Dragon-killer' (ibid., 174).

While a 15-year-old boy pausing a moment to watch a man die in agony from poisoning before dashing off to shoot a leopard and a mamba stretches credulity, the



most unusual chapter in the book is the one called 'Dipping the cattle' in which one Spanish and two Portuguese political refugees demonstrate bull-fighting at the dip. (They are royalists – Campbell despised Communists.) The boys join in:

Bambata, a boy of about fourteen, was sitting on an eighteen months old steer which first of all bucked him straight off into the air and then went for him, butted him, picked him up, and savaged him ... The steer pounded [Billy] with its head and got one of its horns inside his belt picking him up once more, trying to toss him away, and shaking him up and down as if he were a rat' (ibid., 92),

but in spite of the mayhem neither boy is harmed.

## 5. CAMPBELL'S CONNECTIONS WITH LAURIE LEE AND LAURENS VAN DER POST

It is not surprising that Campbell was a lifelong friend of two other literary figures who are known for their fantasising. While living in Spain he met Laurie Lee, who was later to become a well known writer and poet, and they immediately hit it off. Grove's (1999) biography of Lee prompted reviews which came up with terms reminiscent of Campbell and Van der Post: 'self-mythologising propensities' (McCrum 1999) and 'serious questions about his veracity' (*Publishers Weekly* 2001). In *As I walked out one midsummer morning*, Lee (1969) describes his stay with the Campbells for a week in Toledo. His yarns of his wanderings in Spain struck a chord with Campbell. He remained a friend and wrote the Foreword to the Penguin edition of *Light on a dark horse*, saying that he 'continued to cherish him [Campbell] through the years' (Lee 1971, 11).

*The mamba's precipice* has more detailed associations with Van der Post. In the story, Michael is said to have been on a whaler several times and to be friends with the captain. While Van der Post was working as a journalist on the *Natal Advertiser*, on 14 August 1926 it published an anonymous commissioned article, 'There she blows! – Out with the whale hunters off the Natal Coast'. In his biography of Van der Post, *Storyteller: The many lives of Laurens van der Post*, Jones (2001, 116) writes, 'The prose style is definitely not Laurens's. But one might very plausibly guess that the author was Roy Campbell.' A few weeks later the article was published under Van der Post's name in Afrikaans translation in *Voorslag*, the magazine that Van der Post, Campbell and Plomer were editing. This translation would have been by Van der Post, claiming it as his original work. In Van der Post's autobiography, *Yet being someone other* (1982), he writes in detail about life on the whalers. The details come from the *Natal Advertiser* article, which includes a stoker, 'Mlangeni. Jones (2001, 117) sums up:

The conclusion must be, in the absence of other evidence, that Laurens never went whaling but took over the experiences of Campbell ... He might also have benefited from

the reminiscences of David Divine ... None of this should detract from the imaginative achievement of his 1967 novel, *The hunter and the whale*.

*The hunter and the whale* has some features that are reminiscent of Campbell. While Campbell translated the poetry of the Spaniard, Federico Garcia Lorca, Van der Post's (1967, n.p.) epigraph to his book is by the Spanish poet, S.A. Lillo:

And on the sea the blood spreads out  
Like a crimson mantle floating ...

The protagonist, Peter, is a 17-year-old boy (with flashbacks to when he is 14) who, like Campbell as a boy, has experience both of Durban and its seafarers and the upcountry, game-populated bush. The captain of a whaler takes Peter on during his holidays because of his phenomenal skill as a whale spotter. On board, he becomes close friends with a stoker, 'Mlangeni. Mambas appear in this story too: implausibly, he sees a mamba through binoculars from the boat passing the Bluff (*ibid.*, 155), and, just as Campbell does, Van der Post imbues a mamba with a mysterious supernatural quality when 'Mlangeni tells how a black mamba with a scar resembling his great-great-grandfather's had come and stayed in his homestead for a month. The feats of Peter and the eponymous hunter, who is a Boer friend of his, contribute to a swashbuckling atmosphere that is similar to that of *The mamba's precipice*. For example, the hunter has already shot four elephants, six buffaloes, seven lions and three leopards.

### 5.1. Portrayal of African people

A marked difference between Campbell's and Van der Post's books is that Van der Post is critical of the structure of society in Natal, whereas Campbell accepts the racial status quo without question. Van der Post, writing 14 years after Campbell, was also drawing on his memories of Natal decades earlier, but while the whites in Campbell's book are surrounded by servants and labourers who are deferential and loyal, Van der Post is scathing about the whites' treatment of other races.

In *The hunter and the whale*, Peter visits the colonial mansion of a wealthy man on the Berea. The owner is a racist who objects to his fraternising with the servants, with whom he converses in fluent Zulu. Van der Post (*ibid.*, 23) is scathing about the prosperous white men 'sprawled in the yellow chairs, their faces and necks pink with blood-pressure and exertion', who dress their servants in smart tunics but keep their feet bare:

The bare feet were, perhaps, a mark of the extent to which we exceeded our humanity in Africa and unwittingly assumed the role of gods, for certain forms of worship do demand that men remove their foot-wear before entering the temples. Anyhow we are only now beginning to encounter, like the first faint ripples of a converging typhoon, the consequences of the equinoxial [sic] tensions we have set up both in the Africans and ourselves. (*Ibid.*, 22)

It is a small world: Campbell grew up in the home of a wealthy Durban citizen on the Berea, but to be fair, the extended Campbell family were philanthropists and strong sympathisers with the Zulus. However, Campbell is not reflective like Van der Post, so much so that his portrayal of blacks falls easily into longstanding literary tropes. Simple examples are the American clichés of the names of 'Topsy, the native nurse-girl' (Campbell 1953, 16) and the old man Tom, who 'was always laughing' (ibid., 14). 'Tom was the faithful old Zulu servant,' he writes, 'and very smart he looked in his white suit with great red fez on his head ... But when he went in the country, he used to wear Dr. Jackson's old army clothes ... As soon as he had put on the old tattered uniform, he would stick out his chest like a sergeant-major, and swagger' (ibid., 13, 14). Another South Africa writer, Goldie (1968, 12), produced a similar stereotype in her children's story, *Zulu boy*: 'Sezulu, ... a man of dignity and held in high esteem by his neighbours ... He wore the military jacket with the brass buttons which he had bought many years before from a Big Baas in the dorp.'

Campbell need not have written in this mode. A children's story from Natal published in 1935, *David goes to Zululand* by Marshall, anticipated Van der Post's stance. David is mentored by a Zulu man, Boutelezi, whom he treats with respect. The author condemns the way white hunters treat Boutelezi, who tells David, 'You, white child, have a full understanding, and at once feel at peace with a black man when you speak to him' (Marshall 1935, 157), before asking David not to shame him by paying any attention when he has to play the obsequious servant to the hunters.

Campbell's stereotypes appeared in other South African children's stories from early in the nineteenth century to some that were still being written in the mid-twentieth century. The sensational nonsense of *M'Bonga's trek* by Cahill ([1947], 1952), one of Lutterworth Press's Sunday School Rewards series by 'a team of first-class writers who give the uncompromising Christian message in really gripping modern stories' (Cahill 1947, cover), features – although it is set in modern times – a grotesque 'witchdoctor' and unrecognisably savage Zulus. The book is a disgrace to the 'Christian message'. In *The mamba's precipice*, when John shoots the leopard, 'the natives ... were all rejoicing, drinking beer and dancing war dances' (Campbell 1953, 160). Rieser illustrated this scene with caricatures taken from kitsch souvenirs and ceramics of the period. The blacks are superstitious: they believe the Indian's grave is haunted, and they are given a fright by a gramophone – the latter being a plot already given racist treatment in 'Macepa and the voice', a children's story by Mackenzie (1923). Hints of the supernatural and mumbo-jumbo pervade Campbell's story, as they do Van der Post's books and many other works of fiction and non-fiction about Africa from that era. The murderer, Mahakaan, is 'a member of the Ninevite gang of ritual murderers' (Campbell 1953, 151); and is acquainted with an 'insangoma or witch-woman' (ibid., 144). Mahakaan, 'who was also a witch-doctor, but not such a high-brow one' (ibid., 148), moans with dread when she dares to scold the honey-guide. In addition to the locals' superstitious fear of the grave, he

devotes two pages to building up the mysterious terror that overwhelms Willem and his horse while riding past the precipice – only later does he learn that the mamba was watching him.

## 6. TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TRADITIONS

In addition to the literary models from the nineteenth century and the racial stereotypes of the first half of the twentieth century that Campbell followed, there are also elements of *The mamba's precipice* that are typical of early and mid-twentieth century children's literature. One of these is a kind of grotesque humour that Campbell almost certainly derived from the genre of the comic school story that goes back to the first appearance in 1908 of the Billy Bunter stories by Frank Richards (real name Charles Hamilton). Campbell (1953) introduces two characters who fill this role.

Sennacherib Cholmondely is an enormously rich diamond dealer from Johannesburg, whose doctor has prescribed a fishing holiday. He arrives in a Rolls Royce with an entourage of servants who lay out a picnic of 'cold chicken, ham sandwiches, pâté-de-foie and caviar' (ibid., 64). Red-faced, he gorges and drinks and offers Michael 'a cigar from a gold case studded with diamonds and rubies' (ibid., 63) before falling asleep 'snoring loudly under his umbrella' (ibid., 76). Like many a non-ethnic Englishman in the Bunter stories, he is an odious figure of fun. It is he who ends up being saved by Michael when he is bitten by the python. In gratitude 'he sent Michael a watch and chain of pure gold' (ibid., 99) with a message in Billy Bunter style:

*'Multum in Parvo'* (Shakespeare)

Thanks Chum!

Should auld Acquaintance B forgot?

Sennacherib B. Cholmondely. (ibid.)

This kind of unsavoury humour was already outdated and discredited by the time Campbell resorted to it. George Orwell (1939) had published a celebrated essay, 'Boys' weeklies', which condemned Hamilton for the xenophobic comedy in his stories, but Hamilton was unrepentant, responding simply that 'foreigners *were* funny' (Hamilton in Turner 1948, 214).

The second cameo appearance is Trooper the Honourable Piers de Spivel-Tomkinsley, who is a suitor to Michael's sister, with whom he discusses poetry over tea. He is a rival to homely Willem. His musical abilities and achievements in sport are an exaggerated catalogue: polo and equestrian skill, rugby, fencing, golf, tennis, squash and athletics, and he is a crack shot. He is struck dead by the mamba, leaving behind 'his hair-brushes and his shaving tackle, silver, mother-of-pearl and ivory, ...

all won at various sports', and 'all kinds of mugs and egg-cups which he had won for sprinting and jumping at Eton and Oxford' (Campbell 1953, 122).

Another feature of *The mamba's precipice* is typical of a later period than the heyday of Billy Bunter. The critics Heale and Smith miss the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's literature antecedents of Campbell's novel, but what they do identify is a parallel with mid-twentieth-century children's stories. Heale (1985, 37) observes, 'The style is typical of the 1950s, full of happy chatter and action', and Smith (1972, 228) calls it 'a childhood smugness and cosiness'. Whatever the touch of excitement in other stories of the period – even if crooks make an appearance – the effect is tame. Smith (*ibid.*) notes the tone of childish boastfulness in Campbell's narrative, such as 'Moonsammy was the best cook in Natal'. The dialogue that Campbell gives young children is what strikes Heale (1985) as typical: it sounds stilted, dated and often inauthentic, such as when John calls out in his sleep, 'Here comes another! Hurrah for the jolly old wave!' (Campbell 1953, 34), or little Vemvan, the Zulu boy, says, 'The boat would certainly have capsized if I had been in it, for it would have counter-acted your medicine to have somebody in the boat who had no fish inside him' (*ibid.*, 24).

Three stories set in Natal at the same time that Campbell was writing were filled with similar banal family chatter and activities: *The South African twins* by the prominent author of adult fiction, Rooke (1953), *Umhlanga, a story of the coastal bush* by Wager (1946), and *Stories from sunny Zululand* by Carter (1947). The last mentioned has a young protagonist who is actually given as his first name the quintessential Natal white colonial name of Campbell. They are typical of mid-twentieth century English children's fiction, for example the genre identified by Watson (2001, 124–5) as 'camping and tramping fiction', which appeared between 1930 and 1960. Some of its features that can be recognised in *The mamba's precipice* are a fictional world that is 'fundamentally conservative', a lack of 'imaginative and meditative quality', stereotypical characters, a cosy, intimate atmosphere, 'detailed and affectionate authenticity', 'rapturous lyrical description' of nature, and a 'tendency [for nature stories] to turn into adventure stories'.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It is intriguing that Campbell wrote in the styles of three genres of English children's literature: nineteenth-century African adventure, early twentieth-century schoolboy humour, and mid-twentieth-century cosy stories that erupt into high adventure. Nothing that is known of the extensive literary sources on which he drew for his poetry would have suggested this side to him. His choice of setting and plot for this boys' adventure story, and the model of colonial romance that he apparently drew on, suited his self-vaunting, myth-making personality – the very terms critics employ to characterise his friends Laurens van der Post and Laurie Lee. Yet hidden in the

novel, in his moving descriptions of the Natal coast of his boyhood, is evidence of the sensitive child – the child who became a fine poet.

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