

Reading, writing, debating, reciting¹

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Megan Voss (2012, p. 22) argues that the foundations of Queenstown as a settler-colonial town were framed in 1853 by a rhetoric of improvement that emphasised “English notions of education, rights and progress”. It imposed “a cultural construct onto a barren, neutral landscape”. She explains that this ignored the fact that before settlement the landscape was far from empty. The rich culture of the aba-Thembu and the rock art of the San of the Eastern Cape region were simply overlooked to create a new ethos and network of intellectuals in the town. Its library, museum, and mutual improvement society were key institutions to achieve this improvement. A proposal in 1865 for a literary institute explained that it would get “the rough edges of the townsman’s character taken off by.... having access to a healthy and improving class of literary productions” (Voss, 2012, p. 40). As in Queenstown, this rhetoric would be defended, challenged and changed in English literary societies, Dutch-Afrikaans debating societies, and African mutual improvement societies in small towns and settlements in the second half of the 19th century. In these societies, reading communities adapted ideas of improvement to serve other cultural and political purposes.

Swellendam Literary Institute

Established in 1830, the Swellendam Book Society was re-named the Swellendam Reading Society in 1852. It then became the Swellendam Literary Institute, and eventually merged with the Swellendam Public Library for financial reasons. This library had itself been established in 1838, and the local cricket club and agricultural society often rented it for their meetings. This space was used on occasion to discuss topics of general interest, such as a public meeting on education in May 1862. Like the Book and Reading Societies before it, the Literary Institute members also met in the library. In its life-span of about 8 years, divergent views of literary value in a culture of improvement became apparent in a town that was diverse in its population and language. Of the 2009 residents (925 European and 1084 ‘Coloured’) in 1865, there were 776 or 38.62% who could read and write in either English,

¹ Draft of Chapter for forthcoming book – *Reading Spaces in South Africa, 1850-1920s* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Dutch, or German.² The Institute's members were however primarily English-speaking, and its lectures and readings intended to bring "rational amusement" to Swellendam.

An elitist outlook complicated efforts to attract the general public, and to collaborate with the town's other voluntary societies. "Mr. Russouw" of a local Young Men's Improvement Society, who had been invited to read an essay on '*The acquired qualities of the mind*,' was accused of plagiarism. Several letters to the *Overberg Courant's* editor ensued, presenting different views of the incident. The chairperson should not have criticised the young man to his face, wrote one correspondent, adding that other Institute lectures were compilations too instead of originals. But the newspaper editor, who claimed to have attended some meetings of that Improvement Society, confirmed that the speaker had not composed a single sentence. He advised the speaker and other young men that "the public will not recognise a bold and presumptuous bearing, without ordinary intelligence, as indication of genius".³ It mattered little that English was probably not the speaker's first language. Nor that the Improvement Society may have considered the successful public reading of an essay more important than who its author was. Whether it had been copied was less significant for non-English speakers than improving one's elocution skills, deemed especially valuable for debating in an English colony.⁴

At that time the Dutch Reformed Church was establishing Mutual Improvement Societies in the colony. Reverend Andrew Murray had started one in Cape Town where a young Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr⁵ and other Dutch speakers were members. Its proceedings were in English, and debates included the use and abuse of novels, as well as the power of the press (Hofmeyr & Reitz, 1913, p. 65). The Literary Institute's relation with mutual improvement societies was still strained 5 years later. Another invited lecture, this time to promote the formation of these societies, again proved controversial. Dr Antoine Changuion, a liberal-minded and internationally respected Dutch linguist, was accused of using this opportunity to raise funds to support cleric Reverend Thomas Burgers' heresy case in the Cape Supreme Court.⁶ Steering away from church and language politics, several lectures and readings were however presented at the Institute's meetings. A selection was published in 1862 under the title *Literary Recreations*. Printed by Pike & Byles and advertised as Swellendam's first locally-produced book, it claimed to say "much for the public spirit of the

² *Overberg Courant*, 29 March 1865. 'Coloured' was used in the 1865 census as a collective noun for those named as 'Hottentot', 'Kafir', and 'Other'.

³ Mr Russouw's "Lecture", *Overberg Courant*, 24 August 1860.

⁴ Lovedale Missionary Institute, for example, ran elocution competitions (Hofmeyr, 2006, p. 272).

⁵ He became a well-known politician and newspaper editor.

⁶ *Overberg Courant*, 25 January 1865. Burgers who later became the President of the South African Republic was also chairperson of the Hanover Public Library.

inhabitants”.⁷ It had hoped to prove that “even in the wilds of South Africa” audiences appreciated literary pleasures.

Besides essays of historical and scientific interest, there were literary contributions on ‘The Words we Use’, ‘Scott and his Poetry’, ‘The Influences of Nature and Literature’, and Archdeacon Nathaniel Merriman’s lecture on the study of Shakespeare.⁸ Reverend J. Baker’s chapter on his ‘Literary Reminiscences’ is a condescending view of books and reading. He argued that in a country like South Africa, unlike older countries like England where “the minds of people generally are more disciplined”, guidance in reading is of “the greatest importance as affecting the growth of a national character” (Baker, 1862, p. 93). That is why, he argued, to learn the world as it is in works of fiction, “Dickens, Bulwer, Kingsley, and Disraeli” are to be preferred to Frederick Marryat and James Fenimore Cooper⁹ and others of their class which should only be “taken occasionally, as one goes for a ride in the country” (Baker, 1862, p. 107). The Reverend’s ‘preferred’ authors were probably among the books that the Literary Institute donated in 1870 to the Swellendam Public Library.

The wider reading preferences in Swellendam were quite different however from that of the Institute. A library sub-committee reported in that same year that 111 volumes of ‘Tales’ or light fiction were “still unaccounted for”.¹⁰ And the novels auctioned from time to time in the library’s Reading Room generously supplemented the library’s income from annual government grants and subscription fees. The Institute’s lectures and public readings were advertised and reviewed regularly in the *Overberg Courant*, which was read and circulated also in nearby towns. But this newspaper included material that appealed to Swellendam’s working classes. In March 1863 it published “The Poor Washerwoman” from the improving magazine *The British Workman*. This piece’s language did not differ much from that of the more literary *Cornhill Magazine*, and assumed that there were intelligent readers among the working classes. The *Overberg Courant* also summarised the proceedings of annual meetings of library subscribers, and periodically announced the addition of new titles to the library’s catalogue.¹¹

Through its own programme of lectures, the Swellendam Public Library supported a popular focus that the Institute overlooked. It allowed its Reading Room to remain open for two hours

⁷ *Overberg Courant*, 17 September 1862.

⁸ He had delivered 2 lectures on Shakespeare at a ‘General Institute’ in Grahamstown in 1857 (Wright, 2008).

⁹ Their books were listed in the catalogues of several rural public libraries.

¹⁰ *Report of the Sub-Committee appointed at the meeting held in the Library on the 19th August 1870 to consider the best means of resuscitating the Institution*, Swellendam Archives.

¹¹ *Overberg Courant*, 17 August 1864; 2 November 1864.

in the evening to offer “agreeable and useful recreation to all classes”.¹² There were special concessions for country subscribers, such as permission to borrow more books for longer periods. And Penny Readings in the winter months attracted the working classes. In this way, the library both challenged and complemented the work of the Literary Institute. Some Institute speakers in turn used the library’s books for their lectures, and in July 1864 it encouraged young men who attended a public reading of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* to become library members.¹³ Institute members even donated their colonial newspapers to the library for the benefit of poorer readers. The well-known Afrikaans prose writer, M.E. Rothmann (1947, p. 68) wrote that English historian, James Anthony Froude, warmly complimented the library collection during a visit.¹⁴

The Literary Institute was however in terminal decline by the mid-1860s as a result of a drop in its membership, after the Montague and Robertson field cornetcies were separated from Swellendam. But controversy persisted with the reading of Alfred Tennyson’s narrative poem *Enoch Arden*, advertised as ‘An Evening with Tennyson at Swellendam’. The reader, Honourable J.C. Davidson who was also the Cape Colony’s Treasurer-General, was criticised in a letter to the *Courant*. His elocution was described as “slip-shod, mamby-pamby, and mumble-jumble”. Another letter argued that this was all jealousy from a rival reader “whose Swellendam reputation Mr Davidson has snuffed out”.¹⁵ Ending however on a gender-progressive, if controversial, note the Literary Institute announced in May 1865 a reading by “Mrs Hutchinson... a lady of education and accomplishment”.¹⁶ Just a few years later, similar complexities and contradictions surfaced in the Wodehouse Literary Society, about 870 km north east of Swellendam.

Wodehouse Literary Society

In the Dordrecht area of the Eastern Cape in the early 1870s a library too was a part of the Wodehouse Literary Society, but as one of its sub-committees. It supported the Society’s programmes that included debates, lectures, readings in dramatic and general literature, as well as musical entertainments. Andrew Gontshi probably became the first Black South African officially appointed as a librarian when the Society elected him for this position in 1874.¹⁷ The committee skills honed in this capacity would prepare him for leadership roles in political associations that he later helped to establish. Gontshi had been educated at the

¹² *Overberg Courant*, 30 September 1863; 14 October 1863.

¹³ *Overberg Courant*, 15 June 1864; 27 July 1864.

¹⁴ She also acknowledged this library’s role in her own literary career (Immelman, 1970, p. 76).

¹⁵ *Overberg Courant*, 15 March 1865; 22 March 1865.

¹⁶ *Overberg Courant*, 3 May 1865.

¹⁷ *Cape Argus*, 24 February 1874.

Lovedale Institution, and had probably been a member too of the Lovedale Literary Society and the Lovedale Public Library.

Reverend Andrew Smith, a teacher there at that time, reported that the young men of the institution both worked under superintendence and used this library. A new catalogue was printed every time that a case of books arrived. Smith believed that the “abundance of opinion and intelligence in the home country” (England) would stimulate the reading tastes of “native young men”, which were “evidently growing rapidly”.¹⁸ They however applied their skills in unexpected ways, and Gontshi subsequently founded the Association for the Advancement of the Ngqika, and the Union for Native Opinion (Odendaal, 1993, p. 9). It must have been a challenge for Gontshi to grow a black membership for the Wodehouse Literary Society and its library. By 1875 there were still only 71 male and 56 female Wodehouse residents “Other than European or White” who could read.¹⁹

But some of those who could read became members of this Society. Its programme for June to October 1873 included debates on free trade; federation; the superiority of Napoleon as General; and, Dutch versus English laws of inheritance. There was also a lecture on the advantages of a Cape university to the colony, as well as several public readings and recitations. A Cape Town newspaper reporting on the Wodehouse Literary Society stated that “For a country village in South Africa this programme indicates a great deal of intellectual life in the locality, and it would be well if other places were to follow the example of Dordrecht”.²⁰ This certainly happened, and neighbouring towns added debating programmes to form literary and debating societies (see Appendix). And their connections with reading and libraries remained key features.

Whereas the English-language literary and debating societies had middle-class memberships and emphasised their cultural importance, the Dutch-Afrikaans and African-language voluntary societies that emerged would stress their ‘improving’ educational and political roles. Becoming ‘literary’ for them meant self-improvement through the mastery of the basic literacy skills of speaking, reading, and writing in their own languages. It also implied agency and self-determination through participation in the political changes unfolding in South Africa. These voluntary societies were viewed by their members as people’s universities and political schools (van der Bank, 1993; Odendaal, 2012).

¹⁸ *Replies to Circular, 1873-4*, CO 4692, Cape Archives.

¹⁹ *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*. Cape Town: Saul Solomon, 1877, p. 74.

²⁰ *Cape Argus*, 22 July 1873.

Dutch-Afrikaans debating societies

From about the 1870s Dutch-Afrikaans Debating Societies raised literary, cultural and political awareness in remote rural towns such as Komga-Diepkloof, Vlekpoort, and Brintjieshoogte. Typically named Young People's Debating Societies or just Debating Societies, they were valuable too for a literary self-education (Booyens, 1983, p. 12; Marais, 2009, p. 85). Their cultural importance cannot be underestimated, and the Biesiesvlei Debating Society was considered this little town's 'first taste of culture' (Conradie, 1985). South African poets A.G. Visser, Cornelis J. Langenhoven, and Eugene N. Marais were active members of these societies, as were the novelists D.F. Malherbe and J. van Bruggen. Langenhoven (1914, p. 71), who was a member of the Oudtshoorn Debating Society and wrote a guidebook for use by other societies,²¹ described them as 'grindstones' in post-school days where one's thinking may be purposefully sharpened. Importantly, these societies kept manuscript journals that recorded their members' original literary contributions such as essays, poems, dialogues, plays, short stories, and letters to the journal editor recorded in Dutch, Dutch-Afrikaans, and English.

They spread quickly across the countryside. There were two types, and the secular societies differed from the religious societies, which affiliated with the Dutch Reformed Church and drew on Western European models.²² Some like Oudtshoorn's secular society, on the other hand, had evolved from the town's Mutual Improvement Society (Booyens, 1983, p. 39). Subsequently called the Oudtshoorn Parliamentary Debating Society, it featured contemporary political and economic topics. Ironically, it was the town's religious debating society that first admitted women. There were more similarities than differences between the two types, and historical events consolidated their political and cultural missions. The First Anglo-Boer war (1880-81) and the South African war (1899-1902) deepened a political and cultural consciousness among Afrikaners, and re-awakened an interest in language and literary developments. Whereas Dutch and English were not unusual in the proceedings of some societies, the Afrikaans language featured prominently after these wars.²³ This was however not the rule, and from its inception in 1876 until 1890 English was dominant at Stellenbosch's Union Debating Society. After that Dutch was preferred until 1918 when Afrikaans was entrenched.

²¹ Another guide with examples was van der Spuy, 1913. As a student at the University of Stellenbosch, Langenhoven had also been a member of its Union Debating Society.

²² These were the Christian Youth and Debating Societies.

²³ At a Debating Society in a detention camp in Ceylon, Paul Roux submitted a poem 'Myn Moedertaal' that preferred Afrikaans over Dutch (Brink, 1960).

From early on it was customary for debates and meetings to be conducted in Afrikaans, while Dutch remained the dominant language for the speeches, lectures, written pieces, and official matters. The minutes of the Stanford Debating Society in the Overberg region for example only switched to Afrikaans in 1921 (Booyens, 1983, p. 72). Although divergent interests thwarted attempts to unify these societies, political decisions to achieve the Union of South Africa in 1910 spurred this process. Religious-oriented societies led the way, and the Cape Union of Christian Young Peoples' Debating Societies was launched in 1904 in Cape Town. It had 94 affiliated branches by 1910, representing 3 185 members. A similar Union of the several religious-oriented debating societies in the Transvaal or South African Republic was established in Boksburg in 1906. It represented about 50 branches by 1914, and had a combined membership of about 2 000 by 1918 (Booyens, 1983, p. 64).

By the time that the Union of Natal Debating Societies was launched in 1917, Afrikaans had become the preferred language for many of its member societies.²⁴ Afrikaans had already unified the religious-oriented societies in the Orange Free State republic (subsequently the Orange River colony), where military and nationalist elements typified their pattern of development. Here Dutch Reformed Ministers connected with the Afrikaner Bond²⁵ had nurtured an Afrikaner ethnic consciousness, and elaborated an ethnic culture (Giliomee, 1991, p. 41). They added a programme of shooting skills, and revived commemorations of the Battle of Blood River²⁶ as standard features in their annual programmes. By 1907 their societies, some with as many as 80 members each, had become instruments in the Afrikaner cultural struggle, and promoted Christian National education (Nienaber, 1947, pp. 23-35).

Secular societies also sought to amalgamate, and to accommodate religious societies. As a result the Central Union of Debating and Christian Young People's Societies in the Cape was launched in 1889, curiously in Murraysburg, a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking 'Coloured' town. But its motto 'Knowledge and Development' soon changed to 'Forward Afrikaners' to signal a political shift (Booyens, 1983, p. 48). The cue for this development may have come from the prominent Union Debating Society in Stellenbosch where the statement "the Colony derives no benefit from the Higher Education of Natives" had won by 16 votes to 0 (Na Vyftig Jaar, 1926, p. 36). In the Transvaal about 15 independent or

²⁴ The first Debating and Literary Society in Natal was established in Pietermaritzburg in February 1908 (Prinsloo, 1995). A bilingual Dutch-English one was active at the Transvaal University College (University of Pretoria) in the same year.

²⁵ The Afrikaner Bond was a political organisation founded in 1880.

²⁶ Originally known as Dingaan's Day, this was the name given to the battle between the Voortrekkers and the Zulus on 16 December, 1838.

secular societies assumed an increasingly Afrikaans and racially exclusive character, and remained active until the Second World War.

Although debating featured prominently in these societies' programmes, the members' literary contributions were equally if not more intriguing. These were recorded by elected 'journalists' in the societies' manuscript journals, several of which are still preserved today in church and other archives around the country.²⁷ Literacy and 'the literary' intersected in these societies, and the evaluation and critique of written pieces mattered as much as the mastery of reading, writing and speaking. Public readings of original essays tested and improved the art of reading rather than simply acquiring knowledge. For several years the *Volksleesboek*, and ironically *The Royal Path of Life*, provided topics and source material for members.

The 'essay' as another programme item tested the art of original composition and creative writing. Uncertainty and anxiety in the years before Union, the importance of preserving their histories and language, as well as prospects of employment in new administrative positions may have led to essays on 'The Archives in Cape Town', 'Our Language', and 'The Politics of our State'. In a few cases the journals carried essays copied or '*overgenomen*' from other sources that had been read aloud and critiqued by members. If judged worthy of inclusion by the 'journalists' at the monthly or bi-monthly 'Journal nights', the essays would be copied into the Society's magazine by the 'journalists' or their assistants.

The standard programme of the secular Klein Drakenstein Debating Society, active in the Cape's Paarl region from 1891 to the 1920s, comprised a debate, a reading or essay and a recitation, although a '*vrije-woord*' or open topic was not unusual. The names of members responsible for the following meeting's items, as well as the topic of the next debate along with the 'opener' and 'opposer' were usually announced at the end of each monthly meeting.²⁸ Klein Drakenstein's journal included English poems such as the ballad *Death of Jan Cronje* and H.W. Longfellow's *The Wreck of the Hesperus*.²⁹ An intriguing poem about Cecil John Rhodes appears in the Journal of the secular *Dicendo Discimus* Debating Society in Pretoria. Entitled '*The political death and burial of Cecil John*', the opening lines are:

Who killed Cecil John? "I, said the Ballot Act,

All thro' his want o' tact, I killed Cecil John."

Who saw him die? "I said the Bond,³⁰

²⁷ Journals were kept separate from the minute books.

²⁸ A type of spreadsheet in the back of the minute book shows how names and responsibilities were rotated.

²⁹ Klein Drakenstein Debating Society, Cape Archives, ZD/K2.

³⁰ A reference to the Afrikaner Bond.

“Of him once so fond, I saw him die.”³¹

But this society’s journals for 1896 to 1898, which run to more than 300 pages and contain 110 literary contributions, intended primarily to develop and maintain the Dutch language. At the Magaliesberg Debating Society near Pretoria where Dutch was also favoured, the aims were to develop both literary knowledge and oratorical skills, and several journal entries ended with the phrase, “Ik heb gezegd” (I have spoken). It was established in 1898, and its Journal was so treasured that it lay buried for 8 months during the South African War.³² By 1917, in another town and with an amended name, this Society was still active with the help of Langenhoven’s guidebook. Readings now addressed labour strikes and women’s right to vote, and the journal included short stories, dialogues, and other literary items.

About 300 kilometres east of Magaliesburg, the Boven Vallei Debating and Dramatic Society enjoyed an equally active literary programme that carried Dutch and English items.³³ Its monthly journal programme dates from 1903 and members submitted essays, poems, short stories and dialogues or short sketches that were often performed, adding an exciting dimension to proceedings. The Boven Vallei journal editors appealed for original contributions, and provided useful tips for writers. In one case an original submission and a corrected version in the journal shows all the editorial changes. This practice demonstrates the adult literacy and literary functions that these societies performed in remote locations. The annual ‘Public Entertainments’ of some societies included musical and dramatic performances to raise funds, which they used to extend their educational reach to the general public. Their reports in local newspapers and journals amplified their impact across Dutch-Afrikaans communities from the 1870s until the early decades of the 20th century.

Several debating societies established libraries in small country towns, assisted in some instances by the supply of crates of Dutch books from the Algemeen Nederlands Verbond’s ‘Boekencommissie’ in Rotterdam from 1903 onwards.³⁴ Debates and essays on the value of books and reading in their programmes, as well as the supply of literature in Dutch, Afrikaans, and English strengthened a reading culture across rural South Africa.

³¹ *Dicendo Discimus*, Joernaal der Debatsvereniging, University of Pretoria Library, A10, Book 1, p. 46. Rhodes drove the Franchise and Ballot Act of 1892 that disenfranchised a large number of non-white, as well as poor-white, voters.

³² Argief van die Magaliesberg Nasionale Debatsvereniging, National Archives, Pretoria, A 1026.

³³ Debat en Dramatisch Vereeniging Boven Vallei, Wits Historical Papers, A203.

³⁴ Cape Archives, Algemeen Nederlands Verbond, A1545/AG 8397-8. The value of imported Dutch books to South Africa for 1903 was second highest after the UK with £11812, and continued to surpass other countries in that decade.

African mutual improvement societies

Reading spaces for political and 'literary' education expanded too in African-language reading communities in the 1880s. Ironically, the Afrikaner Bond inspired this development. In 1882 Simon Sihlali, a leader of the *Imbumba Yama Nyama*³⁵ (the South African Aborigines Association), asked "Where is our Bond?", and by the next year there were over 300 *Imbumba* members with branches in Port Elizabeth, Graaff-Reinet, and Colesberg (Odendaal, 2012, pp. 68, 70). Several types of associations and societies sought to address political, social, and educational challenges but urban-rural, clan, language, class and other divisions complicated their longevity and effectiveness. Also, much of their activity was reported in vernacular newspapers and not readily accessible to outsiders. Some of the associations and societies however attempted to bridge these divides, and their activities across the countryside reveal concerted efforts at improvement across South Africa. In Northern Cape settlements, groups of illiterate Africans used to gather around local ministers, school teachers, or younger readers to hear about essayist, novelist, and poet John Dube, and about political activist and newspaper editor John Tengo Jabavu.

Sol Plaatje (1916, p. 5) recalls reading newspapers (probably the English-isiXhosa *Imvo Zabatsundu* and the Setswana-language *Mahoko a Becwana*) aloud as a boy "under the shady trees outside the cattle fold" at Pniel mission station near Barkly West.³⁶ This practice stimulated "the interest in politics amongst Africans of all classes" (Odendaal, 1984, p. 63). When *Mahoko a Becwana*, for example, reported in 1893 that Cecil Rhodes intended to gain control of Bechuanaland, a missionary observed "several leading men of the town [Kanye] sitting as solemn as a congregation of owls around a copy of the newspaper" (*Words of Batswana*, 2006, p. xxix). *Mahoko* also published Moffat Institution senior student Ntloyatshipi Pula's three-part commentary on Setswana proverbs, and his regular column on "Things That Are Not Known". Anxiety about retaining their land, and control of their language and indigenous knowledge, stimulated political and literary discussions and debates in the Batswana community. Besides religious matters, letter writers to *Mahoko* discussed the benefits and challenges of education, books, and reading, as well as disagreements with editors (Volz, 2007). This pattern was found wherever 'the literary' and the encouragement to read carried a political purpose (Odendaal, 2012, p. 57).

At the Lovedale Literary Society in the 1880s divergent meanings of 'literary', 'reading', and 'debating' emerged among teachers and students. For teachers, literature was a moralising

³⁵ Loosely, it means solid unity or unity is strength.

³⁶ This happened in the early 1890s when literacy had not improved much from the 9.09% rate at this mission station in 1849 (Fourie, *et. al.* 2013, p. 26).

force that would 'improve' readers and 'save' them from "corrupting pastimes" (Hofmeyr, 2006:266). For students, literature had become less important than debating because debating was about training for leadership. Students maintained that literature should serve political purposes and "current events, be they local or national" (Hofmeyr, 2006: 269). As a result, quotations from Shakespeare, Dickens, and Scott would be used in political speeches nurtured in student debates. This shift reflected broader political and economic developments in the region. Whereas Africans in the Eastern Cape in the early 1870s had adapted in "all spheres... to the Cape Colony's institutions, systems, and norms", this began to change as a consequence of mineral discoveries and further wars and setbacks in the late 1870s (Odendaal, 2012: 39-40). Disillusionment spread among educated adult Africans at this time, and was felt by their children at missionary schools.

The promise of a bright future dimmed at the Presbyterian Lovedale Institution, as well as the Methodist Healdtown and Clarkebury schools. This happened too at the Anglican Zonnebloem College in Cape Town, and the Anglican Institution in Grahamstown. Alumni of these institutions responded by initiating a network of African-led voluntary associations. By the 1880s and 1890s these associations helped to 'improve' fellow-Africans, and to safeguard their political rights. They included Vigilance Associations, Native Associations, Educational Associations, and *Manyanos* or Political Associations, as well as Mutual Improvement Associations or Societies. In the Native Education Association, Paul Xiniwe read an essay in January 1884 arguing that it was time for Africans to sit in Parliament (Odendaal, 2012, p. 62). The programmes of mutual improvement associations began to blend political and literary themes. They were familiar in African communities where missionary societies established some themselves. In 1889, for example, the Wesleyan Methodists started one in Knysna (Whiteside, 1906, p. 156).

In African hands, they pressed for political mobilisation. But because they were not reported in the English colonial press, their activities were largely unknown. Vernacular newspapers however introduced a generation that was breaking free from "the Victorians' conception of themselves as the leaders of civilisation" who had produced Shakespeare, Bacon, and Milton (Odendaal, 2012, pp. 61-2). This generation would produce Sol Plaatje, Samuel Mqhayi, John Dube, and Robert Grendon. Lovedale graduates helped to establish the Burnshill Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association and the D'Urban Teachers' Mutual Improvement Association, and Healdtown had its own association. Topics such as the registration of Africans as voters were discussed, and members were expected to read newspapers and become familiar with public affairs. Mutual Improvement Associations were also started in Port Elizabeth, and in 1884 there was one in Butterworth (Gcuwa, and later called the Transkei Mutual Improvement Association).

Mission-educated Africans from the Eastern Cape who found jobs in Kimberley in the 1880s and 1890s were prominent in that city's network of clubs and societies. The South Africans Improvement Society typified "their ideals and aspirations", and the name avoided 'Native' or 'African' to emphasise "nationality rather than race" as a defining factor of identity (Willan, 1984, p. 36). Described as "non-political and un-denominational", it was established in June 1895, and emphasised cultivating the use of the English language and criticism in readings, recitations, and composition. Performance of musical selections were included too in some programmes. Sol Plaatje's 'literary debut' as a member was a reading of Max O'Rell's *John Bull and Co.* The secretary, Simon Mokuena, reported that the reading was "fairly criticised" and that "the mistakes corrected did not only benefit the reader, but also the other members".³⁷ Plaatje probably mocked the reference to John Bull as Britain acting in the interest of South Africa as a whole, when in fact it meant the interests of the English and Dutch-Afrikaners to "maintain white supremacy against the Africans" (Giliomee, 1991, p. 40).

At the same meeting, the recitation by Walter Kawa of Milton's *Paradise Lost* was recorded by Mokuena as "not highly appreciated by the majority of members, as it was too classical to be comprehended by the average native mind". Willan (1984, p. 37) argues that this was an example of overstepping "the limits of social and literary one-upmanship", and of Mokuena's doubts about the universality and comprehensibility of English culture. At another meeting devoted to short essays, Plaatje read one that he composed called 'The History of the Bechuanas'.³⁸ "Being a Bechuana by birth, he showed great mastery over his subject", according to Mokuena. A West African member, W. Cowen, also read an essay that he composed on 'Civilisation and its advantages for the African races'. The Society encouraged the composition of essays as original and creative pieces of writing, and as part of its aim of promoting a literary education. Mokuena's essay on 'Reading', for example, was described as having been delivered in a humorous style that "made his paper interesting".

Membership of this society encouraged Plaatje to read after office hours in his Post Office job in Kimberley. As a young boy he had already purchased his own books from money earned as a groom at a hotel near the Pniel mission station. In Kimberley, he may well have used the public library's concession of free visitor access to its reading room. The average daily attendance of visitors at the Kimberley Public Library rose from 166 in 1894 when he arrived in the town to 285 when he left for Mafeking in 1898.³⁹ Also intended to be a Debating Society, topics in the South Africans Improvement Society broached controversial

³⁷ *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 23 August 1895. This newspaper published the Society's reports.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Not to be mistaken with A.J. Wookey's *History of the Bechuana*.

³⁹ Called Mahikeng today; Reports of Public Libraries, *Cape of Good Hope Blue Books/Statistical Register*, 1894 and 1898.

issues regarding 'civilised life', such as: 'Is lobola⁴⁰ as practised at the present time justifiable?' Defending the negative view, even if it contradicted private convictions, improved an individual member's qualities of critique and resistance. Mass resistance, on the other hand, characterised the Becoana Mutual Improvement Society at Thaba 'Nchu, about 500 kilometres south-east of Mafeking. With about 25 000 Sotho and Tswana-speaking members, it was a powerful political player in the Orange River Colony in the years leading up to the Union of South Africa.

Reverend Joel Goronyane, a Lovedale graduate and Wesleyan minister who helped to establish it in about 1899, was well-acquainted with the educational value of such societies. Prominent leaders of the Baralong people had assisted Goronyane in attempts to unify African and Coloured organisations, and to negotiate with key national intermediaries (Odendaal, 1984, pp. 158, 168). The Becoana Mutual Improvement Society was seen as "one of the strongest bases" of the fledgling South African Native Convention (which Goronyane chaired) during the desperate but failed efforts to include Africans in the Union Government in 1910 (Odendaal, 2012, pp. 439-41). He was also a member of the Thaba 'Nchu syndicate that launched *Tsala ea Becoana* (The Bechuana Friend), which Plaatje edited. This English-Tswana newspaper with a circulation of several thousand would provide an effective African voice in the new whites-only Union of South Africa. By that time, as Opland (2003, p. 40) aptly states, "print media introduced by whites had been conscripted in the struggle for political and social equality".

Conclusion

In the 1870s and 1880s, Dutch-Afrikaans debating societies and African-language mutual improvement societies evinced a shift in the 'English' rhetoric of improvement that typified the voluntary societies of Queenstown, Swellendam, and Wodehouse. In other towns and settlements, political and economic developments had also thrown into sharp relief the realities and consequences of English cultural domination. Dutch-Afrikaner debating societies responded by affirming language rights and cultural expression to present alternative ways of political participation. In their turn, African mutual improvement societies adapted literacy and literary activities to produce alternative political strategies. Through their own voluntary societies Dutch-Afrikaner and Black reading communities reframed the 'English' rhetoric and ethos of improvement, and stressed ideas about education, rights, and equality. Reframing did not however mean rejecting, and the remarkable reception of the

⁴⁰ Bride price, traditionally paid with cattle.

works of Charles Dickens demonstrated some of the complexities of South Africans' literary engagement with Victorian literature.

Appendix

Sample of South African reading spaces, ca. 1850-1920

Town	Founded	First printing	First public/ subscription library established	Voluntary associations	Early and contemporary newspapers
Aliwal North	1849	1870	1870	Reading Association/ Mutual Improvement Society (1874)/ Literary entertainment (1870s)	<i>Aliwal Observer/Aliwal North Standard</i>
Bloemfontein	1846	1850	1867 (traveling library)	Literary, Scientific, and Debating Societies (1870s)	<i>Friend of the Sovereignty/Bloemfontein Gazette/De Tijd</i>
Cape Town	1652	1784	1818 (South African Public Library)	Mutual Improvement Societies (1874)/ Mechanics Institutes (1870s)/ Literary & Debating Societies	<i>Cape Argus/Cape Town Daily News/Standard and Mail/Cape Times</i>
Cradock	1813	1850	1865	Reading Society (1840s)/ Literary entertainment (1870s)	<i>Cradock & Tarkastad Register/Cradock Express</i>
Dordrecht	1856	1872	1890	Wodehouse Literary Society (1870s)	<i>Aliwal Observer and Dordrecht and Lady Grey Times</i>
Durban	1835	1850/1	1853	Mechanics Institute (1853)	<i>D'Urban Observer/Natal Times/Natal Mercury</i>

Graaff-Reinet	1786	1851	1847	Reading Society proposed (June 1853) Literary Society (early 1900s)	<i>Graaff-Reinet Courant/Graaff-Reinet Herald</i>
Graham's Town	1812	1831	1841	Reading Society (1830)/Mutual Improvement Society (1860s)	<i>Grahamstown Journal/ Great Eastern/Eastern Star</i>
Kimberley	1871	1870	1882	Literary & Debating Society/ Mutual Improvement Society (1890s)	<i>Diamond Field/Diamond Fields Advertiser</i>
Lovedale	1824	1861	1868	Literary Society (1879)	<i>Indaba/Isigidimi SamaXhosa/Imvo Zabantsundu</i>
Pietermaritzburg	1838	1844	1849 (Natal Society Library)	Book/Reading Society (1846)/ Natal Literary Society (1851)	<i>De Natalier & Pietermaritzburg True Recorder/Natal Witness</i>
Port Elizabeth	1820	1845	1848	Book Society (1830s)/ Mechanics Institute (late 19 th century)	<i>Eastern Province Herald/Port Elizabeth Mercury</i>
Pretoria	1855	1857	1878	Literary and Debating Society	<i>Staats Courant der ZAR</i>
Queenstown	1853	1859	1859	Mutual Improvement Society (1860s)	<i>Queenstown Free Press</i>
Robertson	1853	No date given	1872	Mutual Improvement Society (1883)/ Literary Society (1905)	<i>Oudsthoorn Courant/ Worcester Courant (nearby towns)</i>
Stellenbosch	1679	1859	1859	Reading Club (1849)	<i>De Zuid-Afrikaan/Lees-Vruchten</i>
Swellendam	1745	1859	1838	Book/Reading society (1834;1852)/	<i>Overberg Courant</i>

				Literary Institute (1857)/ Play Reading Society (1903)	
Uitenhage	1804	1864	1858	Reading Society (1825)/ Literary and Debating Society (1886)	<i>The Uitenhage Times</i>
Worcester	1820	1865	1854	Literary Society (1860s)	<i>Worcester Courant</i>
Other towns with Reading/Literary /Debating Societies since the 1850s	Barkly West, Claremont, Graaff-Reinet, Greytown, Isipingo, Middelburg, Newcastle, Richmond (Cape and Natal colonies), Stanger, Verulam.				
Some towns with Dutch-Afrikaans Debating Societies since the 1870s	Komga-Diepkloof, Vlekpoort, Bruintjieshoogte, Biesiesvlei, Oudtshoorn, Stellenbosch, Stanford, Klein Drakenstein, Magaliesberg, Boven Vallei, Hartebeestrivier, and many others.				
Some towns with African Mutual Improvement Societies since the 1880s	Burnshill; D'Urban; Healdtown; Butterworth (Gcuwa and Transkei Mutual Improvement Association); Peddie (D'Urban Teachers' Mutual Improvement Association); Port Elizabeth; Thaba 'Nchu (Becoana Mutual Improvement Society); Kimberley (South Africans Improvement Society).				