Noel Brettell (1908 – 1991)
Poet 'who shied away from any sort of limelight'

Ian Menzies in collaboration with Rob Brettell

Watercolour (Christmas card) by Noel Brettell for his grandson Rob

I recently enrolled in two University of Glasgow and Aberdeen free online courses about the lives and works of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott. Early on, our mentors asked us learners from around the world to share our thoughts about the characteristics of our national bards. A few students mentioned Amanda Gorman's inspirational performance of *'The Hill We Climb'* at US President Biden's inauguration on 20th January. The Welsh bard Dylan Thomas was proposed by a few students, also James Joyce and W.B. Yeats for their lyrical explorations of Irish identity.

During the mid-20th century melting pot of Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, a bed-rock of traditional Shona and Ndebele praise poems, love songs and lullabies were successfully transposed into English. Later poets, **Musaemura Zimunya** ('Black Padre,' *'there is a certain violence, of resentment'*) **Charles Mungoshi** ('Career Woman,' *'Thirty-five and very plain'*) sometimes turn to satire or, in the case of **Chenjerai Hove** ('War-torn Wife' '*This war! I am tired, of a husband who never sleeps guarding the home'*) often express bitterness at the corrupting influence of colonial exploitation. Problems with identity abound and cast a sombre shadow over the work of a whole generation of troubled poets.

To the modern reader, these forms can seem oddly out-dated. As a settler in the 1930s, Noel Brettell's verse, on the contrary, provides a refreshing and immediate appreciation of Man's place amidst the unique fauna and flora of the veld. His inspiration was partly derived from the poignant contrast between his upbringing in the English Black Country and his newfound home. In this paper, I suggest that **Noel Brettell** was amongst the finest poets ever to emerge during the colonial era, and his work exemplifies the search for Zimbabwe's new consciousness and identity.

In a recent email exchange, Rob Brettell, the poet's grandson recalls -

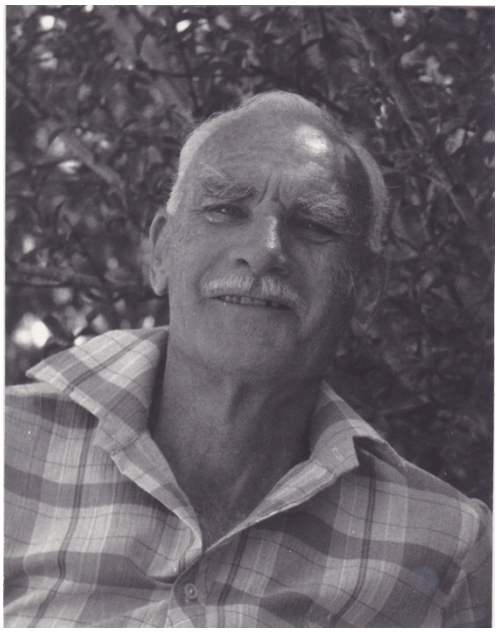
'I was close to him. He was a good man who shied away from any sort of limelight. During the Depression, he came out to Rhodesia to teach at Ruzawi, met my grandmother Eva Scovell, who I think may have been the first overseas teacher recruited by Robert Grinham. After a short stint back in England (for his teaching diploma) they went first to Beatrice, then ran bush schools at Enslindeel and Riversdale. His poetry was a love only discovered during his later years, after befriending Arthur Shearly Cripps, who was a missionary near Enkeldoorn. Noel published one volume under OUP Books of Zimbabwe with compilations of his Rhodesian poetry and some with Snailpress in SA, who were very supportive of local authors. I don't think his poetry is very well understood in a post-colonial world. He wrote very much as an Englishman in Africa and was not your typical colonial type. But I view him as my grandfather first and foremost, so won't necessarily see him how others do!'

My answer: 'Thanks. What you say above is a great start. I found an athletics publication mentions that your granddad was a very fine athlete in his student days – any recollections?'

Rob: 'Yes, he attended Birmingham University on a scholarship; he won the Dame Cadbury Prize. He also boxed. Nearly all of his correspondence is now kept by the Amazwi archives (formerly NELM) in Grahamstown. Cripps and Brettell lived a short ride from one another until the latter's' death (and Cripps was blind and relied on my granddad to read to him.) Noel was friendly with Hugh and Betty Finn (D.E. Borrell.)

Eva Brettell (née Scovell) John Brettell, Noel Brettell and grandson Rob c. 1984

Rob Brettell, was my son's closest friend at school, and I missed several chances to meet this remarkable poet at school events. However, it is never too late to attempt to make up for wasted opportunities. My research has taken me from British athletics tracks in the 1930s, through school corridors and thence to anthologies of Southern African poetry.



NOEL HARRY BRETTELL was born in Lye, Worcestershire in 1908 and went to Zimbabwe, or Southern Rhodesia as it was then called, in September 1930 as a schoolteacher. Brettell was then 22, and while he had written some poetry while a student at Birmingham University none of it was of real substance. It was only once he had lived in Rhodesia for several years and as a direct result of his experience of that country, coupled with his English background and classical literary education, that he developed into one of the finest poets of Southern Africa. While Africa and its imagery was strange and new to the young Brettell, it was also immediately and compellingly attractive. However, it took Brettell a number of years before he was able to make poetic sense of his surroundings and translate his attraction to Africa and its people into poems on the page.

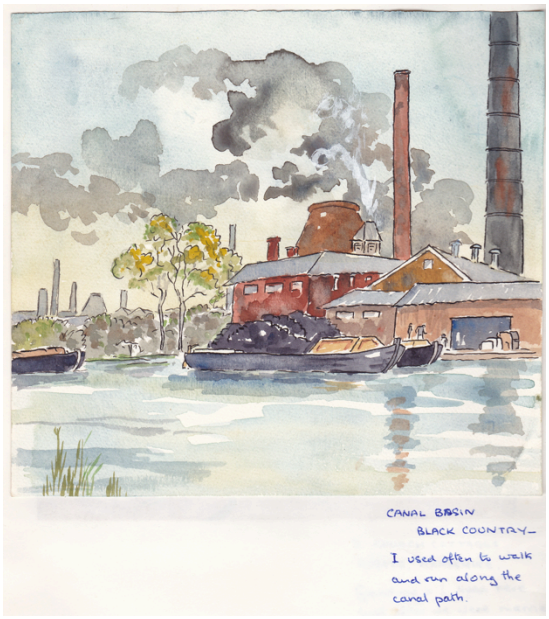
Forever conscious of his English origins, yet scorched and watered under an African sky, Brettell the poet was driven by the feeling of being *'crucified between two countries.'*
He felt simultaneously alienated and at home in a land that was very different from the one he had previously called home. For, as he once noted: *'I have chiefly attempted to resolve in my verse the contradictions and dilemmas of a man born and bred in England, but whose life has been spent in Africa, and to whom nostalgia for one country has sharpened awareness of the significance of another.'*

This assertion is, however, an inadequate description of his work, which often achieves a universality of poetic imagery. Through the merging of English and African landscapes in his poetry, Brettell fuses his contradictory feelings of alienation and belonging.
The result is English poetry with a distinctly African flavour.

'Arcadia of Jacaranda and Sunshine'

In the early 1930s, Noel Bretell was a member of an unbeaten Birmingham University team which won the British universities cross-country title. Brettell claimed only to have had 'modest success as a runner' and there is no further record of his competing in his adopted land.

Noel's athletics mentor in the English Black Country was Jack Price, a former Olympic marathon runner.



Watercolour: Canal path in the Black Country by Noel Brettell (courtesy of Rob Brettell)

'Like all good Black Countrymen he was given to truculent declaration' and quotes him as pronouncing, '*The running-track is our only democratic institution – the only place where a chap from the steel-works and the noble Lord Burleigh can meet on an equal footing'*. Brettell continues in tribute to Price, *'When I got to know him, he was getting on for 50, and still, in an aura of local fable and hero-worship, a splendid runner, and training and exhorting some of the best runners of the day…and I know that in the dark days of the Depression he helped many a hopeless young man to self-respect by making a runner of him.'*

'I discovered by another chance that I could run. The school steeplechase at the end of the Spring term was an event into which we were all press-ganged. I won and became, with all the absurd and sublime seriousness of youth, the dedicated athlete, austere and sexless as a monk.'

'Once or twice in my university vacations Jack invited me to join in his training runs. We would set out from his cottage… in the winter twilight we would stride up the dark embowered tunnel of Ullmoor Lane, past the little Saxon church of St Kenelm, crouched among black yews on the lip of a high valley, and so, stumbling and plunging up the steep backwoods, out on to the shoulders of Clent, starlit, cold, mysterious. It was magnificent; the wild dark, the wind in the teeth, the hot smell of strenuous muscles, the beat of the pace. I would be thrilled to hear beside me the almost noiseless padding of the great man himself, lighter on his toes than we less than half his age'.

'The blood singing through the veins like sap through a tree.'

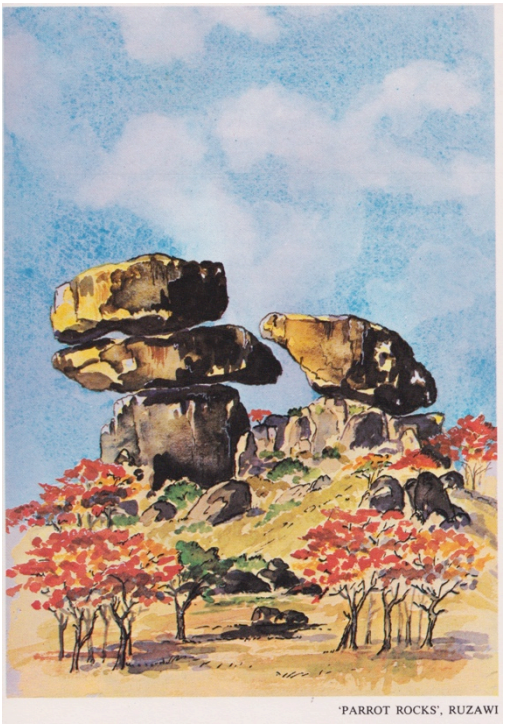
Brettell's farewell to track athletics was a splendidly bucolic one, as he describes: *'In the incredibly prolonged and holding summer of 1930, as charmed a summer as any of the mystical days of childhood, a disaster to the farmer and a benison to the idler. We trotted behind an old draper's van through lanes of honeysuckle and elder from one village sports meeting to another, making a clean sweep of the long and middle distance events and having a cheerful go at the sprints.'*

Thence to a country of which he had hardly heard –

Jobs were hard to find when Brettell graduated and he accepted a teaching post at Ruzawi, near Marandellas admitting that *'coming to Rhodesia I did so with no ideals, to a job I was ready to dislike, to a profession I more than half despised, to a country I had hardly heard of and was not particularly interested in'.*

The British Empire, Brettell bemoaned, '*was already a conscience-stricken embarrassment'*. He returned to England a couple of years later and resignedly went back to Birmingham University to acquire a teaching diploma. There, he says, *'I ran again for the university, and in a match against Reading I came in 1st of the field – for the only time, so far as I can remember'.*

Perhaps Brettell's teaching appointments and responsibilities in remote rural areas meant it was difficult to continue athletics; he mentions his occasional runs to stretch his legs and a much later letter to Hugh Finn praised *'our barefoot princess'* Zola Budd's 3000-metre triumphs at the Olympic Games.



'PARROT ROCKS', RUZAWI

In this letter, **'You asked me why I came to Rhodesia'** written to his university acquaintance Bill (A.E.) Berry, Noel Brettell reflects upon the splendour of his new life in Mashonaland -

YOU ASKED ME WHY

I CAME TO RHODESIA

headman of the tribe. I am an independent citizen with a regular income - for the present: not a tax payer, because there are no taxes in this God's Own Country.

I am not writing this at Ruzawi. I am 50 miles away, right in the heart of loneliest Africa - on a cattle and dairy ranch where now & then fierce bright leopards have leapt out of the thickets & left a half devoured calf to be found in the morning. Instead of a writing pad I am writing on "The Farmer & Stock-Breeder"; I am sitting in a basket chair on the wide stone flagged verandah - the "stoep" we call it. There are great trees gossiping mightily in the breeze & twinkling in the calm of the Sunday afternoon sun. There are rich red and orange flowers flaming in the garden, there is a murmur of insects in the wind. The house is smothered in creeping flowers - one rich orange & black & a pale mauve intertwisted round the pillars; & the doorway is hung with jasmine - a plant more beautiful even than it's name. If I wasn't so triumphantly fit, I should

While blissfully embarking upon his lifelong partnership with Eva Scovell, in his letter he also observes that the African herdsman had to scrimp and save to raise £5 *lobola* or bride price.

Without a shadow of doubt, Noel's spirit born of his humble origins, and nurtured during his earlier runs with Jack Price remained all of his life:

"Vox Populi" *by Noel Brettell*

The night is full of noises: shrill
With prophecy or dull with doom,
The ghostly tongues of Babel fill
The corners of the quiet room.

The night is restless: turn the knob
From news review to song request,
Symposium grave and jigging mob
From Hilversum to Budapest.

The roar of crowds at the ring-side
That breaks like surf on reef and skerry,
And tossing down the frothy tide
The helter-skelter commentary.

The rain is drumming on the roof
And mutes the feeble spurt of morse,
The lonely voice of ships, aloof
The wind is rising: change the tune
From metre band to metre band,
From acid quip to oily croon –
Till, with a chance turn of the hand,

The tail-end of a piece of Brahms
Mounts the last stair and sudden stops,
To strand us with uplifted palms
Dumbfounded on the pinnacle tops.
Outside, the rain has stopped. The gutter chimes
Its falling cadence, resonant, melancholy;
The stir of crickets hails the fatted times
Come with the rains, the end of avarice.
And underneath the dripping orchard tree
The lonely dikkop, calling once or twice,
Bodes ill, they say, to some, but not to me.
Across the rise, our neighbours headlights play,
The voice comes, far and faint, of welcoming dogs,
And pulsing from the resurrected vlei,
The many-mouthed democracy of frogs

Assimilation to Noel Brettell's adopted country was a process that took time.
In exchanges with his contemporary Guy Butler, he described the difficulty of finding new words and forms for new times, places, and experiences. He did not want to give his poems a superficial 'African' flavour by simply inserting words that are linguistically and/or culturally specific to Africa. While he was prepared to use local dialectal expressions, the essence of his difficulty lay deeper. *'Form,'* he once said,
[...] and hesitation about form, was one of the obstacles. New times, new land, new language: I baulked before the obstacle like a reluctant horse before a fence. My acquaintance with the past was too ingrained to abandon.'

In the course of his headmasterships at Enslindeel and Riversdale schools, Noel made a remarkable impact. The Rev. Jeffrey Fenwick, one time chaplain at Gatooma wrote in the *Blackcountryman* (1992, vol 25) *'he instilled in those backveld children a love of the English language and their performances of Shakespeare were famous. Most of his pupils spoke a rather poor dialect of Afrikaans as their home language. He went there in the thirties when the country was still slowly recovering from the slump which hit Rhodesia very hard. There was a good deal of poverty about at that time, and Enkeldoorn was in any case considered the back of beyond by the rest of the country.'*

RIVERSDALE SCHOOL

'The high veld of Mashonaland was a kind enough soil to foster an English transplant; but exotic birds and beasts, nameless flowers and trees with an alien name, a people aloof and inscrutable, a climate bland but fickle and sometimes cruel – all this needed the years of waiting and expectancy.'

At the outset of World War 2, Noel presented himself for recruitment, but as he was deaf in one ear, he was declined by the military on health grounds. The authorities decided that he was needed in Rhodesia as a teacher; *'in any case,' Rob Brettell suggests, 'the authorities struggled to find people to fill the role in rural Charter. Meantime, Dad (John Brettell) was at school at Ruzawi and I can recall him saying they had evacuation drills and so on, primarily for fear of attack by the Japanese!'*

Later, Noel Brettell spent many hours voluntarily tutoring African students in Literature, hence it is most likely the position of observer closely reflects his own. In his poem **'African Student'** he questions the relevance of Western set books such as Shakespeare foisted on African learners and disrespect for their heritage.

Extract; African Student
(Shakespeare for A-level)

Boy now no longer. Eye for Eye we stare
Into he dark that tilts towards some dawn.
Can we accept these half-surmised replies,
That benign irony that still could make
Its chorus of the necessary clown,
Strolling aloof through knt-garden and gallery,
Accosting duke and dunce indifferently –

Accept the final self-withdrawn surrender,
The grim staff snap, the ruthless hands recall,
The god-like hands that jerked the puppet strings;
Could you, or I, with honesty endure
That golden franchise that embraced them all –
The knave, the gull, the Jew, the blackamore?

By now long since enthused with educational fervour, Brettell had met *'the most remarkable man ever to cross my path.'* He was the reclusive and eccentric poet-missionary, Arthur Shearly Cripps (1869-1952). Brettell learned that Cripps, too, had been a three-miler while at Oxford University *'when the record for the mile seemed fixed for ever at four minutes twelve seconds'* – which places Cripps's efforts precisely in the late 1880s.

Rob Brettell points out, *'my grandfather was not keen on the abrasive activism of his friend Arthur Shearly Cripps and chose instead to weave some criticism of society into his poetry. Though Brettell admired The Bard's work, even as the Empire crumbled, the incongruous appearance of medieval English characters in the curriculum seemed sometimes demeaning and irrelevant in the African context.'*

Noel Brettell and Arthur Shearly Cripps

The two poets, Arthur Shearly Cripps and Noel Bretell were brought together by their love of literature. Together, they shared their appreciation for the life and landscape of Africa in quite distinctly differing poetic manners:

Nay most for all the weariness —
The homeless void, the endless track,
Noon-thirst, the wintry night's distress —
For all tense stretchings on the rack —
That gave me my lost manhood back.

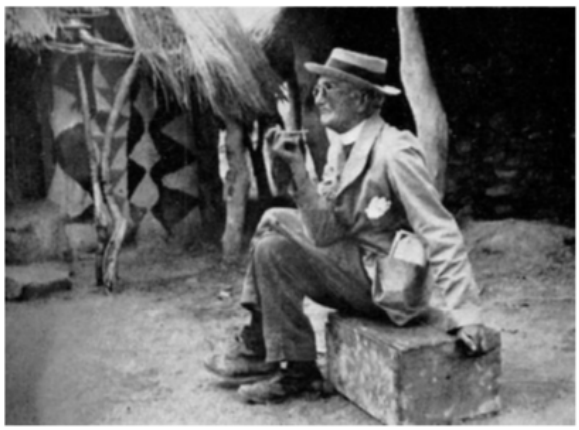


Photo: Arthur Shearly Cripps c. 1940

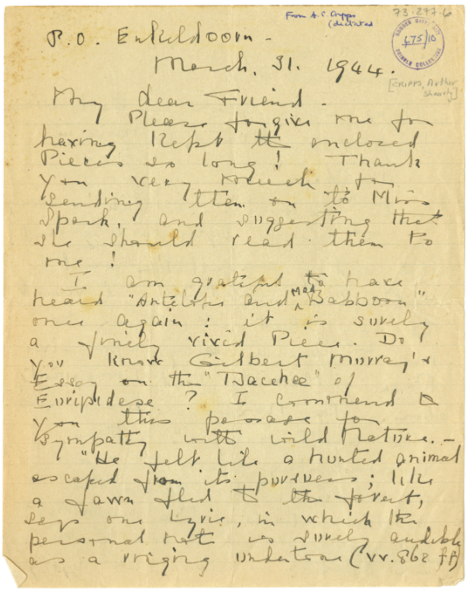
The movements of labourers in the fields, the shrilling of women, the shapes and colours of the bush provide the central background and action in the missionary poet's **'The Way in Africa.'**

Great gold vleis, and granite hills
So far and blue, she'd have me see,
But underfoot her deep sand sigh'd,
'Better is yet to be'.

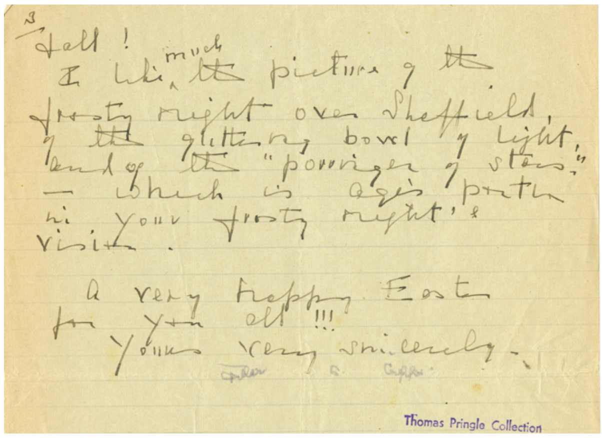
Cripps had been sent in 1901 to preach the gospel and established his mission at Maronda Mashanu a few miles from Enkeldoorn. He strived to identify himself with his people and he took an austere pleasure in making no concessions. He fed only on the coarse food the people would give him –

Trudging her hill-paths,
From sun-up to sun-down,
Gnawing her corncobs
And munching her groundnuts.

Letter dictated by Arthur Shearly Cripps on 31st March 1944 to Noel Brettell –



P.O. Enkeldoorn -
March. 31. 1944.
My dear Friend -
Please forgive me for having kept the enclosed Pieces so long! Thank you very much for sending them to Miss Spark, and suggesting that she should read them to me!
I am grateful to have heard "Antelope and Mad Baboon" once again: it is surely a finely vivid Piece. Do you know Gilbert Murray's Essay on the "Bacchae" of Euripides? I commend to you this passage for sympathy with wild Nature. – "He felt like a hunted animal escaped from its pursuers; like a fawn fled to the forest, says one lyric, in which the personal note is surely audible as a ringing undertone (vv. 862 ff)



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Hell! I like much the picture of the frosty night over Sheffield, of the glittering bowl of light, and of the "porringer of stars," – which is again prettily in your frosty night's vision.
A very happy Easter for you all!!!
Yours very sincerely, -
Thomas Pringle Collection

(Courtesy of Amazwi, South African Museum of Literature, Grahamstown.)

'Dear friend, Please forgive me for keeping the enclosed pieces for so long! Thank you very much for having sent them to Miss Spark and suggesting that she should read them to me! I am grateful to have heard 'Antelope and Mad Baboon' again.'

This tropical ballad Brettell sent Cripps was reworked and published six years later in his 1950 OUP edition '*Bronze-Frieze.*'

Antelope and Mad Baboon

Every sultry afternoon
Antelope and mad baboon
Mock me with their far disdain,
Knowing well that all my pain
Pain or joy or labouring thew
Never found the avenue,
Never threaded through the woods
To the inmost solitudes
Where I cannot follow

The monkeys are afraid of me,
Setting sentries out to see
Where my clumsy foot advancing
Sets the forest leaves a-glancing,
And each unsuspected place
Stirs with insult and grimace,
Yell and yoick and hollo;

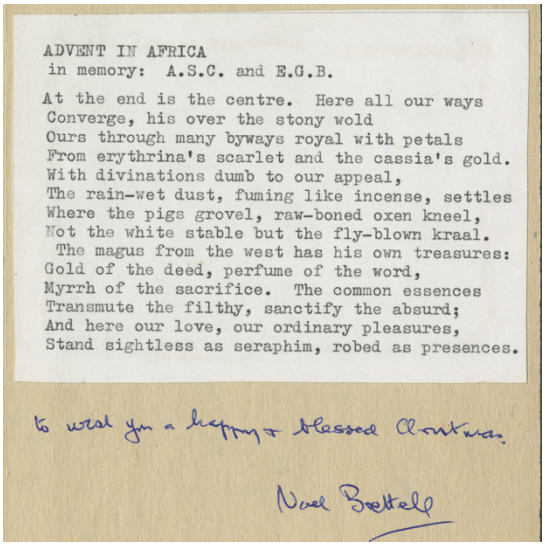
Fainter through retreating woods
To the echoing solitudes
Where I cannot follow.

Little steenbok, russet red,
Tosses up his princelings head
For one poised uncertain glance –
Then like sunlight on a lance,
Springs away in swift alarm
From my half-intended harm.
Never dolphin of the sea
Leapt he waves so sure as he
Breasts the ripples of the grass;
Never bird whose sudden pass
-Leaping on the startled sight –
Loops a silken skein of light
From river's brim to river's brim,
Not so lithe or blithe as him,
Kingfisher or swallow

But still I walk each barren slope,
And still I nurse the craven hope
In the dovecotes of my mind –
I will up and I will find
Some forgotten secret track

Smothered up with bush and brack,
Threading through my baffled moods
To those secret solitudes.
Preen the quills of my caprice;
And I'll find at last, at long,
Something deeper than a song,
Hidden in the darkest hole
In the crannies of my soul

Below: Brettell watercolour of Maronda Mashanu, A. S. Cripps' church near Enkeldoorn.


ADVENT IN AFRICA
in memory: A.S.C. and E.G.B.

At the end is the centre. Here all our ways
Converge, his over the stony wold
Ours through many byways royal with petals
From erythrina's scarlet and the cassia's gold.
With divinations dumb to our appeal,
The rain-wet dust, fuming like incense, settles
Where the pigs grovel, raw-boned oxen kneel,
Not the white stable but the fly-blown kraal.
The magus from the west has his own treasures:
Gold of the deed, perfume of the word,
Myrrh of the sacrifice. The common essences
Transmute the filthy, sanctify the absurd;
And here our love, our ordinary pleasures,
Stand sightless as seraphim, robed as presences.

to wish you a happy + blessed Christmas.

Noel Brettell

Above: Christmas card with a Job Kekana woodcarving of a Madonna and child. Brettell was a great admirer of the sculptor and his typewritten poem 'Advent in Africa' is pasted on the back. The suspended crucifix in Harare Anglican cathedral was carved by Kekana. (Courtesy of Amazwi, South African Museum of Literature and Rob Brettell)

The hardships encountered are repeatedly identified with those Christ suffered and become the mystical way to Cripps' spiritual destiny:

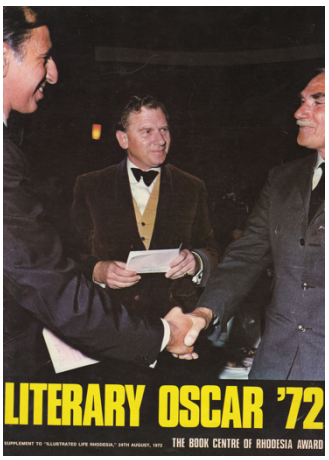
> *Now go, a veldsore in each lifted hand,*
> *Go with two blistered feet your altar's way,*
> *With pity's wound at heart, go, praise and pray!*
> *Go, wounds to Wounds! Why you are glad today*
> *He, whose Five Wounds you wear, will understand.*

The failure of the mealie crop becomes a symbol of the stoicism Cripps fought to attain; the toiling natives and village dance represent to Cripps the unspoilt Arcadia he tried vainly to defend from the encroachments of civilisation. Noel Brettell used to ride over on horseback to see him in his later years and he recalls that they '*read everything from Chaucer to Gilbert Murray's translations*'. It was mostly reading, very little talk. This was

because Cripps did not seem interested in discussing theories of poetry. He had already made up his mind, as on so many things! In his preface to John Snelling's anthology of Rhodesian verse, Cripps confirmed that the Bible was at the heart of his literary inspiration, enabling him '*to see the sacred beauty around me in African life.*'

When the government closed down Riversdale School in December 1958, Brettell took his pension and seized the opportunity to retire to his plot in the Eastern Highlands. He built his own house in Inyanga stone and timber. This retreat was his paradise: he grew his vegetables, tended a lovely garden, planted trees, avoiding dependence on anyone. Most invitations were rejected and he shunned publicity, even when it was to promote his work.

Official recognition by his peers



Now, at the age of 45, Brettell had found his way, albeit (in his words) *'tardily and diffidently,'* to a poetic diction that satisfied him. While it was *'founded on the past and enlivened by the random reading of isolation,'* he did not identify himself with any particular school of poetry. *'I have kept myself on the edge of things,'* he noted, while teaching in *'as remote a part as I can find.'*

Photo: Brettell received the Rhodesian PEN award in 1972 and again in 1978

The most obvious thematic concern running through Brettell's poetry is his treatment of nature and the natural environment. Both the English and African countryside feature prominently, as does the wildlife.

The owl is an ominous presence, with those fierce, astonished eyes. Indeed these eyes transfix Noel Brettell, confronting himself, his own vulnerabilities and inadvertent cruelty. His poem **'Wind and an Eagle-Owl'** begins with the poet-speaker riding out into the hills in the wake of a stormy night's quarrel with his wife, nature itself reflecting his mood, only to make a shocking discovery –

'Wind and an Eagle-Owl'

We quarreled overnight, about
A blunted pin, a threadbare toy;
I blew our timid candle out,
And you to corner, I to wall,
Turned like sullen girl and boy,
Denying all, denying all

And all the wakeful night, like bird or mouse,
The wind went on its business stealthily
And crept around the angles of our house,
With cunning orthopaedic fingers flouting
Malignant dreams. Till, lustily, healthily,
Dawn came, with the cock on his finger shouting,

And brought each separate shadow back
To vase and wardrobe on the wall,

And doubled each familiar shape
With counterchange of heart and mind,
Colour and contour gave to all –
And you were kind, and you were kind.

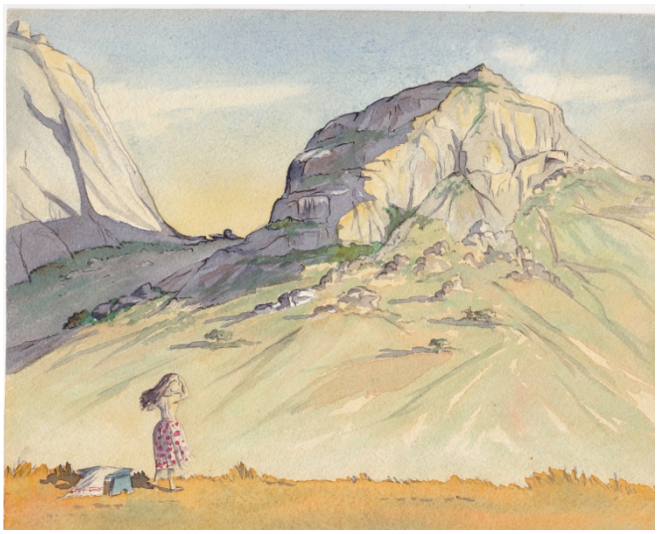
We rode out with the pealing day before us,
Down plains all wind and woods in trouble,
With the first tooth of winter in the air:
All the world's doors flew open for us -
Crippled and craven, the plovers scattered crying
On the shouldering air, peevish, lamentable:
And in a fence, the great bird trapped and dying
With splintered scapulae spread eagled there.
You luckless fellow of our night of wind,
Who through the breathing solitudes had hunted,
And blindly struck, like us, pinned
And broken on the barbs that we had blunted.

I tie my timid filly up
To get a stick to kill you with;
With pity brimming like a cup
I came deliverer in disguise:
Your great beak gaped in savage grin,
Your great stare narrowed to a frith
Of gleaming horror and surprise –
And oh the walls of hatred in
Your wildwood eyes, your wildwood eyes.

(Courtesy of Amazwi, South African Museum of Literature, Grahamstown.)

'Isolation lends a hand, solitude be it the solitude of city traffic or fields and woods, is the necessary matrix of a poet's integrity.' *Noel Brettell on life in the Eastern Highlands*

When recalling the move to Inyanga, Brettell referred to *'our holiday in the Highlands.'* He and Eva also accepted a variety of tasks at Bonda Mission - both taught voluntarily. Noel helped with some maintenance, Eva helped with accounts and therapy for TB patients.



Alas, Brettel prophesied, it is dangerous to say you are a totally happy man. He wrote it – and the gods didn't like it.

The world came to him, brutally on 12th February 1979. That night, Noel and his wife were attacked as they slept by twenty armed men with machine-guns and rockets. In five minutes, their house was in ruins and their way of life was gone forever. The poet – a man of peace, a natural hermit – was obliged to fire back and put the attackers to flight. For years, the Brettells had helped Bonda Mission, tutoring students, doing running repairs, auditing finances and supporting the Church. Eva and Noel were not bitter; they seem instead to have taken on a new lease of life. Now, with what they had salvaged, they moved to a cottage in Gatooma, close to their family: Dr John Brettel and his family

1979 – 89 extracts from NHB correspondence housed in the South African Museum of Literature, beginning with his account of the Juliasdale assault.

To Bill and Irene Berry, from Gatooma, March 9th 1979
'How one manages to survive with only a few scratches and bruises when one rocket bomb explodes against the wall at your feet and another a yard from your head, well I don't know, but so it was. I stumbled through the ruins and fired a magazine from the Sten-gun, a few rounds from the rifle and a few cartridges from the shot gun and the assailants were off, leaving us to make a cup of tea and ruefully decide (after putting out a fire in the bedroom) that our twenty year holiday in the highlands was over.

The house was uninhabitable with half the roof blown off and all the windows shattered. We packed everything we could – we lost astonishingly little – and came down here to Gatooma.'

'God has preserved us to do some other of his works. Having stood together, so close to the ultimate brink, we are more deeply in love with life and with each other than ever before. It's a humbling and exalting thought to know you are married to a heroine.'
'We still face, of course a confused and uncertain future – we are well and alive and in love and ready to accept anything now, and, surprisingly without any rancour against our assailants, craven though they were.'

Arson

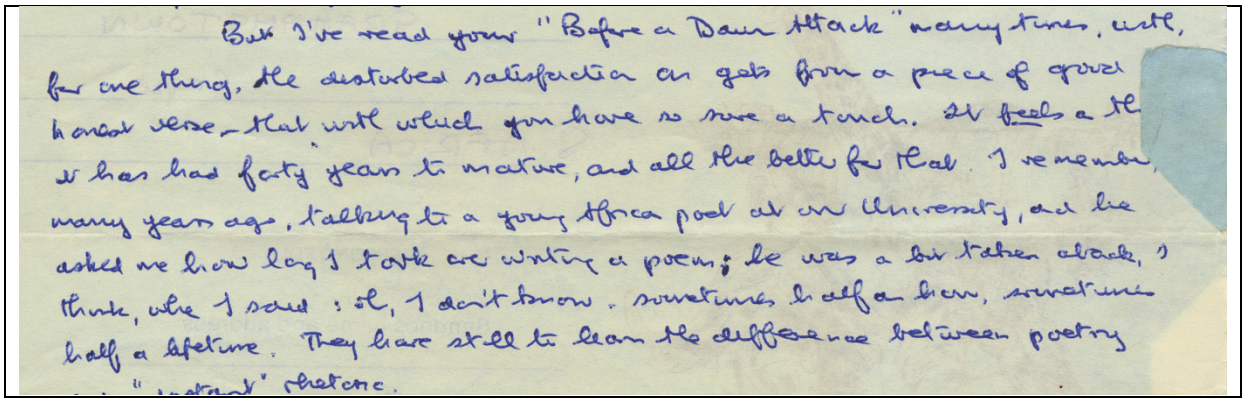
Before the black still fuming ruin
The molten panes dripping hot icicles,
The scorched wisteria draping
Forlorn festoon of purple in the morning,
We stand, guns useless under the armpits;
Like mimic shots, the msasa pods split and burst.

To Hugh and Betty Finn, from Kadoma May 16th 1982

'I just listened to a radio programme by Chennells, he was dealing with Samkange's 'The Mourned One' and Mungoshi's 'Waiting for the Rains.' The danger is to treat these things as social documents rather than art.'

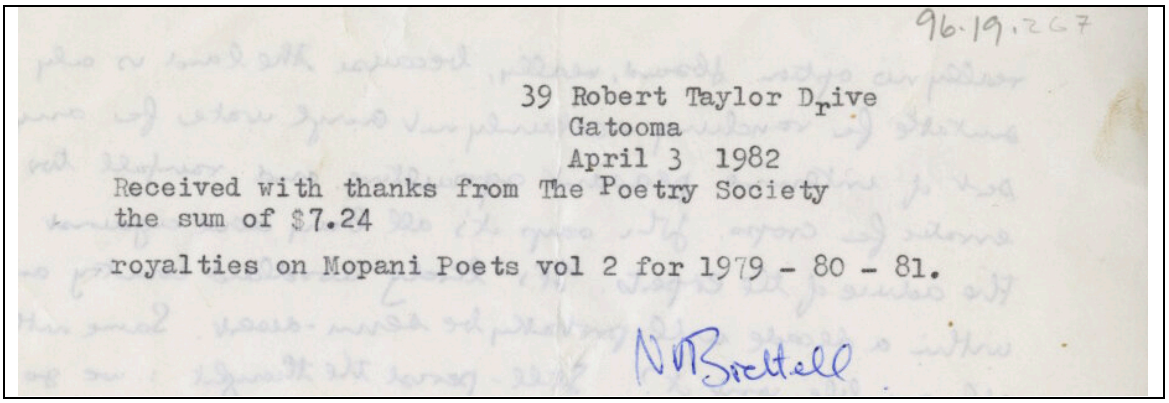
To Hugh and Betty Finn, from Hagley (UK) 30th June 1982
describing a trip to UK: *it has been memorable – in spite of the delightful and heart-warming welcome of my family and Eva's I feel a stranger here, bewildered by the crowds and cars, benumbed by the cost of everything, repelled by the portly affluence of everybody, and now just about brute* (sic.)

To Guy Butler, from Kadoma December 1985



'I just read your 'Before a Dawn Attack' many times with, for one thing, disturbed satisfaction. It feels like it has had forty years to mature. I remember talking to a young African poet at our University, and he asked me how long I took over writing a poem; he was a bit taken aback when I said – 'Oh, I don't know, sometimes half an hour, sometimes half a lifetime.'

To Hugh Finn, from Gatooma April 3rd 1982. A receipt for royalties and Brettell's humorous addendum.



96.19.267

39 Robert Taylor Drive
Gatooma
April 3 1982

Received with thanks from The Poetry Society
the sum of $7.24

royalties on Mopani Poets vol 2 for 1979 - 80 - 81.

N M Brettell

'Many thanks – a new typewriter ribbon would be a good idea. You'd better sell a few more copies because what I really need is a new typewriter.'

From NHB to Guy Butler, from Kadoma March 4 1987
'My assumption is that Lear was not mad, but rather distraught - hearing Cordelia's declaration "I love your majesty, according to my bond, no more, no less." I don't think that I more easily dissolve into tears than most men, but that scene always raises the waters. But you academics are always looking for ways of making Eng. Lit respectable enough to be recognised as a subject for a degree course.

Poets here? About as plentiful as blackberries. We did have a few brambles in the Eastern Highlands (Inyanga) but none elsewhere. I do look forward to seeing you somewhere, somehow.'

To Hugh and Betty Finn, recalling a **visit to Peterhouse**, 27th October 1989
On meeting Andrew Hall, an English 'A' level teacher who was taught to read by Eva at Bonda Mission.

'One of the staff, at the sundowner and supper (before my talk,) a bearded young man, said – 'you don't recognise me, of course: your wife taught me to read!' They were then, I suppose 5 or 6. I remember she was – with the phonetic method, saying 'n-o-d nod, g-o-d god, p-l-o-d plod and so on and asked for more. One of the brats volunteered s-o-d sod.'

Kadoma: the car crash and loss of Eva

His grandson recalls, *'after moving to Kadoma (formerly Gatooma) their volunteering and philanthropic focus shifted to Jairos Jiri School for the blind, on the fringes of Rimuka township. However, their advancing age meant they did not have the same energy levels to devote to the place as they did at Bonda. Eva died in the wake of her car crash in 1984 and this, I think, again had an impact on the time Noel could devote to charitable activities, though he continued to tutor Literature from home.'*

'The crash was the result of an overloaded bus losing its brakes at the robot in Kadoma, which took out their car as they crossed on green. Noel and Eva had been returning from a regular check-up at the doctor's, having been given a clean bill of health.

'Despite being on the side of the vehicle first impacted, Noel sustained only bruises, but Eva was in a bad way. My mother was first on the scene, as she had coincidentally been chatting to someone at the petrol station at that junction. Eva died a few days later in Parirenyatwa Hospital ICU.'

'It hit all of us hard, Eva and Noel had played a significant part in our lives since they left Juliasdale, but understandably he was absolutely bereft and it took him a long time to find his feet again. That said, family, friends and neighbours all rallied around him, I know he was very grateful for the support, friendship and company. He determinedly retained his independence and remained extremely active and fit for the rest of his life. In reality though, nothing could ever compensate for the loss of his beloved Eva.'

In his poem **'The Elephant'** Brettell observes the force of the great creature, likening its advance with the destructive forces of the modern, industrial world.

Slowly the great head turned,
And the late sunlight slept on massive flanks
Like the still slabs of riven krantz,
Immovable, and nonchalantly bearing
The burden of the old enormous lies,
The load of legendary centuries,
The mighty turtle and the seas of milk
On which the Old World swam;
And slowly folded back the fluted ears
Like pterodactyl wings drooping to roost.
Slowly the giant limbs moved:
The monstrous pistons in the wrinkled sheath,
Unflurried and unhesitating, lift
The huge façade across the afternoon:
Like a great engine, headed norh,
With the deliberation of the six-foot wheels
Slides from the vaulted terminus
Down miles of metals through a continent.
Behemoth, baron, lord,
In trigger-fingered world, one creature left unscathed;
Away from us, over the burnt earth, under the prostrate branches,
Casually stripping the green crown from a tree,
Going oblivious, the invulnerable beast.

Noel Brettell lived to the age of 83, dying in 1991, and so he experienced many of the radical changes in his adopted Rhodesian homeland at first-hand; detailed academic analysis of his written work was to describe his poetry as *'contemplating the life and landscape of Africa through the eyes of an Englishman in love with but not un-critical of its harsh contradictions'*.

Shortly after Brettell passed away, a Rhodes graduate, Greg Hacksley was the first academic to collect and order Noel Brettell's extensive personal correspondence and notes. With the Brettell family's permission, it was decided to place this archive in the South African Literature Museum, Grahamstown. The foremost contemporary authority regarding Brettell's legacy is Professor Dan Wylie, of Rhodes University, and he has concluded; *'I suspect that Brettell may seem a little old-fashioned for the modern taste in his forms – tight stanzas, strict rhyme schemes, sometimes vocabulary a little archaic. But he was a close and compassionate observer of the critical world, even quite a tough one'.*

'*His honesty of contemplation, his poetic skill, his broad-mindedness, his attention to detail and his descriptive writing make Noel Brettell one of the finest poets that Southern Africa has ever produced.'*

Acknowledgements

This article could not have been envisaged without the collaboration of Noel Brettell's grandson, Rob Brettell who kindly shared family photos, memories and other documents.

Dr Beth Wycliff, curator of Amazwi South African Museum of Literature has assisted me tirelessly, despite the Covid lockdown and uncovered hidden gems of Noel Brettell's correspondence housed in the Grahamstown archives.

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