

Margaret Daymond: Bessie's Enduring Greatness

[Invited comments given at the initial launch of *Imaginative Trespasser*, 12 July 2005, at the University of Cape Town. Read on behalf of Prof. Daymond by her colleague Margaret Lenta. Remarks generously supplied by the author].

When **Bessie Head** died in 1986, only six of her works had been published; they were all quite slender volumes, but their quality was such that readers worldwide lamented the sudden silencing of a unique writer. In one sense her readers were wrong, however, for silence has not ensued. In the past twenty years, five further works by and about Bessie Head have appeared — I include Eilersen's biography in this count but not the critical monographs and articles on her work.

Tonight we are gathered to celebrate a sixth posthumous volume of Bessie Head's writing: *Imaginative Trespasser, Letters between Bessie Head and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 1963-1977*. Some of the earliest of Bessie Head's surviving letters written while she was still in South Africa are here, while those written a few months later give us a glimpse of what she thought of the apprentice writing she produced on first arriving in Serowe, Botswana in 1964. These early letters contain a piece sent as a gift to Patrick and Wendy Cullinan. Called "This is the House that We Built", it is published here for the first time.

Imaginative Trespasser is B Head's own phrase about herself, one in which she asserts that whatever might be done in a material sense to limit her participation in the world, nothing would or could hold back her mind, her imagination. When she made this claim, Head had already chosen exile in Botswana in preference to an life without freedom in South Africa, and her wording indicates both the courage with which she faced her lonely life and the pathos of being a vulnerable refugee — always a trespasser.

"Its meaning shifts uneasily all the time"

Like so much of Head's writing, the phrasing is extraordinary: apparently familiar and stable, but its meaning shifts uneasily beneath one all the time. It is not likely that she would have allowed herself to use wording of such mixed import had she not trusted the friends to whom she was writing with her life. That may sound extreme, but that is just what Bessie Head felt she was doing early in her correspondence with Patrick Cullinan. Her first letter is playful, purporting to come from her three-month-old son and thanking Patrick for a "pretty toy".

The second is quite different. It is dated early 1964 and, having left her husband, she is penniless and living with her mother-in-law in Atteridgeville near Pretoria. She describes herself as "at the edge of despair and terror" and "agonised and terrified at the abyss that now confronts me" as she appeals to Patrick to help her find a job of some kind so that she can care for her young child. She had already been denied a passport, and so, as you probably know, this appeal led to Patrick's helping her to get an exit permit so that she could go with her child to a teaching job in Serowe.

As these huge swings in the tenor of her missives indicate, Bessie Head's letters are not for the faint-hearted, but they make compelling reading. This collection will intrigue anyone who enjoys the tugging intimacies and exclusions of someone else's letters; it will engage anyone who has thought about the emotional pain of relocating and then rebuilding a life in exile; it will fascinate anyone interested in the genesis of a writer — the relentless development from self-discovery to self-criticism that must occur even in one who, as Cullinan puts it, was "a born writer".

"My whole life presses in a blind and agonized manner"

Here I should add that Bessie Head herself characteristically represents the gift which guided her life in much more dramatic terms: she says in a letter to Wendy that she has "the sense of a great burden being laid on me — something I must do and my whole life presses toward that end in a blind and agonized manner" (page 26). Lastly — and perhaps at this stage in the creation of a public understanding of how the woman and the writer may fit together, this is the most important feature of all in the collection — the contents of these letters require us to engage with her psyche as she wrestles with her demons, with creative but also destructive forces which at times she believes are external to her being, but which at others she fears as coming from within.

It is not easy to admire Bessie Head as a writer. For all the delight offered by her vision of the world and the ideals by which she and we dream of living, her narratives are challenging rather than comforting, her mode always defies pigeonholing, her vision eludes complete understanding, she relishes being disturbing and even, sometimes, cruel. Still less could it have been easy to know the woman and to have been chosen as one of her intimates. These letters are an exchange that begins in trust, as I have said; they chart a friendship; they record assistance given and affection enjoyed; and towards the end they confront us with Bessie's wanton — I think it must be called wanton — destruction of all these noble and rare qualities.

And this is perhaps what is most special of all about the book we are launching tonight; Patrick Cullinan has not shirked any of the pain of Bessie's sudden and seemingly unwarranted repudiation of his friendship and help that happened in the mid 1970s. Not only are we compelled to come face to face with Bessie Head's inner torments and her way, on occasion, of inflicting them on others, but we are granted access by Patrick to what it was like then to be sucked into those torments, and what it means now to try to understand what happened.

Bessie's betrayal of a friendship

This brings me to the last and perhaps most special feature of this edition of letters. It is a three-way correspondence which lasted almost fifteen years, but it is also an account in the present of what that correspondence, including the betrayal of friendship, now means. The quarrel concerned publication rights and royalties; it was always a bugbear for Bessie, and like many writers she often felt herself to have been wronged.

But in this particular instance Bessie's fears and her accusations seem to have been groundless. If I may bring in a personal note here: I was in Serowe when Patrick discovered what Bessie was capable of saying about him and Wendy and how cruelly she could, in letters to others, traduce their mutual trust. And so I have witnessed something of the anguish and anger that a revelation of that kind brings. I also know how hard Patrick then tried to do justice to Bessie Head's letters, and her point of view, in the years immediately after his discovery. And I remember that in the 1990s he could not do it to his satisfaction. He needed more time. Well, he has taken the time he needed to complete what, in the book he says is "one of the hardest tasks I had ever set myself" (page 259).

The concluding paragraph, which I will leave you to read when you buy the book, is one of the most moving, courageous, and honest that I know in the matter of examining oneself in relation to another with whom things have failed.

Ultimately, a testimony to friendship triumphant

But it would be inappropriate to the book to end on a note of pain, even if it is pain that has led to growth.

I began by saying that the book we are celebrating now is the sixth Bessie Head text to have appeared posthumously — which is as many as were published in her lifetime. Posthumous publication on this scale must be unusual in any writer's fortunes. It must give us pause for Bessie; if only she could have known how much her writing would mean to so many people! But that is to sentimentalise the matter; let us instead concentrate on this splendid book and welcome it as a testimony to friendship triumphant.

Friendship is, as Patrick says, "never flawless" (page 258), but the best has prevailed. It is a great record of three people, two of whom are writers. Its publication now, in 2005, is a sign of the enduring greatness as well as uniqueness that a worldwide readership now finds in Bessie Head's writing.

¹ *Imaginative Trespasser, Letters between Bessie Head and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 1963-1977*. Compiled by Patrick Cullinan, with a personal memoir. Johannesburg: **Wits University Press**, 2005. ISBN 1-86814-413-5. May be ordered via <http://witspress.wits.ac.za>. Alternatively from co-publisher **Africa World Press**, P.O. Box 1892, Trenton, New Jersey, USA 08607. ISBN 1-59221-392-8. Telephone +1-609-695-3200.