

Bessie Head: A Writer Ahead of Her Time

By Sandile Ngidi, 07 July 2006, *The Financial Mail*

Journalist, novelist, rebel, mother and sister, Bessie Head would have turned 70 on July 6 2007. That she is dead today and is not part of a liberated SA is a sad reminder of our country's recent and inhuman history.

Thanks to some of her friends and admirers around the world, Head will be honoured in July next year with a series of conferences and other activities. One of the core objectives will be to set up a permanent Bessie Head Heritage Trust to guarantee the future of her house in Serowe, Botswana, and her literary papers. There is huge interest already in Gaborone, Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town for festivities to be held in Head's name, says one of the author's friends, Tom Holzinger.

With her death on April 17 1986 in Botswana, Africa and the world of letters lost a committed writer. Hers was a potent pen that ferociously spoke to the tragedy and dilemmas of human pain, more so under apartheid. Hers was a lone and anguished voice — she had directly felt the psychological trauma of racial tyranny. To those closest to her, Head's outbursts and impulsive traits captured the unfortunate and trying circumstances of her tortured childhood and deep sense of personal alienation.

Often harshly and unjustly dismissed as politically naive by some critics, she believed in a land free from racial bigotry. In this new world great leaders would arise to "formulate a common language of love for all people". Her progressive vision is clearly spelt out in *A Question of Power*: "I don't like exclusive brotherhoods for black people only ... I have got my concentration elsewhere. It's on mankind in general." One wonders if Head would have returned to SA had she lived long enough to witness the victory in her motherland.

Born a child of an "illicit" relationship between a Scottish woman and a black man in Pietermaritzburg, Head lived her early life in a foster home, attended missionary school and later qualified as a teacher.

Her adopted coloured parents were extremely poor, yet did what they could to make Head's life tolerable. In Maru, she recalls her anguish at her mission school.

She describes her main character's awakening to the harsh reality that "something was wrong with her relationship to the world".