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**SERIOUS PLAY ON THE FRINGES OF EMPIRE:
ZOË WICOMB, THOMAS PRINGLE, AND THE
TRANSNATIONAL AUTHOR¹**

Simon Lewis

Despite having won important literary awards, Zoë Wicomb is still a long way from the globally celebrated writer that she deserves to be, and her latest book, *Still Life*, poses particular questions for the current moment in Scottish literary studies.² Some of her relative invisibility, both in Scotland and in the international literary market-place, may be down to the fact that her writing is intensely literary, marked with postmodern features of meta- and inter- textuality that can muddy narrative drive. More pertinent for readers of *Studies in Scottish Literature* may, I suspect, be the difficulty of fitting Wicomb into expected national and ethnic categories. South African-born in 1948, the year Malan's National Party gained power, but having lived and worked in Scotland for much of her life, Wicomb is no longer straightforwardly South African, and she could probably never be straightforwardly Scottish. As a "Coloured" South African, neither Black nor White according to that country's apartheid-era racial classification, much of Wicomb's work has been dedicated to unpicking simplistic notions of racial, ethnic, and national identity.

¹ Zoë Wicomb, *Still Life: A Novel*. New York: The New Press, 2020. Pp. 253 Hardback, \$25.99. ISBN 978-1-62097-610-4; also Cape Town, SA: Umuzi, an imprint of Penguin Random House South Africa, 2020.

² Wicomb's earlier books include: *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (London: Virago; New York: Pantheon, 1987); *David's Story* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2000; New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2002); *Playing in the Light: A Novel* (New York: New Press, 2006; Cape Town: Random House/Struik, 2011; translations into Italian, French, and Swedish); *The One That Got Away: Short Stories* (Roggebaai, SA: Umuzi, 2008; New York: New Press, 2009); *October: A Novel* (New York: The New Press, 2014); and *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990-2013*, ed. Andrew van der Vlies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). Recognition notably includes one of the inaugural Windham-Campbell prizes in 2013. For a recent career overview, see Andrew van der Vlies's introduction in *Race, Nation, Translation*, 3-33, and his interview with Wicomb, 242-281.

It is tempting to see her new novel as an exploration of these questions only in South Africa, yet throughout her career she has also been aware of their potential relevance to Scotland and Scottish literature. Her earlier books do indeed focus on the many and various manifestations of violence and victimhood stemming from South Africa's definitions of race, but Wicomb has found Scotland an equally curious site in which to explore the interplay of nationalism and imperialism. Her second novel, *David's Story* (2000), for instance, centres on an exploration of Coloured, specifically Griqua-descended Coloured identity, and how Coloureds and Coloured nationalism might fit into the "new South Africa" post-1994. However, the eponymous David has spent some of his exile from South Africa in Glasgow. With its history of labor-oriented politics and apparently shared consciousness of colonial oppression by the English, Glasgow ought to be a congenial shelter from the storm. However, in one of the novel's key passages, David finds himself in front of the famous Glassford family portrait, in which one of Glasgow's 18th-century grandees is depicted with his family. David notices the blur in the background of the painting where a figure had been obscured.³ He discovers that this ghostly manifestation was an enslaved African who had originally been included in the portrait essentially as a display of Glassford's status along with all of the other material objects in the painting attesting to his wealth. Glassford had in fact made his money as an imperialist/colonialist tobacco-merchant whose riches depended on enslaved labor in colonial Virginia.

In her 2006 novel *Playing in the Light*, Wicomb confounds issues of identity even further. Again the focus is on South Africa and the absurdity of the apartheid-era racial classification laws, especially the almost comically incoherent legal definition of Colouredness. The character most obviously "playing in the light" is Marion Campbell, the owner of a travel agency and daughter of a Coloured couple who had taken advantage of the lightness of their skin to live as "play-whites" from the late 1950s on. Marion comes to understand her true origins at the time when the Truth

³ The painting has of course been more fully researched and much discussed by Scottish historians since Wicomb was writing. Following its donation in 1950, the group portrait of John Glassford and his family, ca. 1765, by Archibald McLauchlan (Glasgow Museums Collection 2887) was housed in the People's Palace. When Wicomb wrote in the late 1990s, the image of the slave boy in the background was known but still obscured, and then often said to have been painted over. Nearly a decade later, following the Glassford portrait's transfer in 2007 to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, conservation treatment (cleaning) found that the boy's presence had been obscured by dirt, not paint. For a recent account, see Craig Lamont, *The Cultural Memory of Georgian Glasgow* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), ch. 4, "'That Barbarous Traffic,'" 87-113 (esp. pp. 106-108, 112-113).

and Reconciliation Commission was bringing to light all sorts of other, frequently more violent, revelations of the brutal apartheid past, a time indeed when whiteness wasn't quite what it used to be.

Marion's confusion about her identity—where she fitted into the old dispensation; how she can fit into the new—prompts her to avail herself of her own profession's service and take an extended holiday to Europe. In fact, she spends most of her time in Scotland, while familiarizing herself with her home country through some of its most celebrated literature, novels of Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee. In Scotland, she has significant interactions with two men: one a Scot called Dougie; the other a fellow South African called Vumile Mkhize, who claims to find Scots “generous beyond belief, and also like Zulus in other ways—immodestly keen on their own culture and traditions” (199-200). Wicomb's serious play is particularly evident here: the Scot Dougie draws attention to the fact that Marion's surname puts her in dubious company by referring to the notorious massacre at Glencoe. The fellow-South Africanness of Vumi Mkhize also resists being taken for granted, since as a Black person he experienced apartheid South Africa quite differently from the play-white Marion. To complicate things even further, Wicomb reveals that Vumi had grown up in a “coloured neighbourhood where no one was fooled by the family” (205), undercutting his Zulu pride and any putative authenticity stemming from indigeneity. If that weren't enough, the family had adopted anglicized versions of their names, or, to be precise, a Scotticized version: Vumile Mkhize had grown up as Victor McKee.

Wicomb's first book *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) had been a “novel” in the form of a collection of more or less connected short stories. With her fourth book, *The One That Got Away* (2008), she reverted to the mode with which she had started her career. Here, as in *Playing with the Light*, Wicomb plays once again with the difference difference can make. If in the later book Mkhize wasn't the real McKee, nor Marion Campbell a true Campbell, in *The One That Got Away*, the title story plays with another example of “passing”: the transformation of a book (or its cover, at least) by Helen McCloy entitled *The One That Got Away* into *Gold Mining in South Africa*. The real McCloy was a library book borrowed from Dennistoun Library in Glasgow on June 16th, 1976 (the day the Soweto Uprising broke out) that has somehow found its way to Cape Town and the hands of the story's artful forger Drew. He ascribes the “new” book's authorship to his former history teacher Gavin Wilton and, while on holiday in Scotland, duly returns the book to its home library; there it is now incorrectly shelved in the fiction section “between Wickham

and Witworth" (49), where, of course, novels by Wicomb would themselves appear.⁴

In *October* (2014), another South African Coloured protagonist with a Scottish surname, Mercia Murray, returns to South Africa from Glasgow after 25 years. She has been abandoned by her Scottish partner and tries to reassess her life. The process centers around figuring out what "home" might mean to such a person—never fully accepted as a South African citizen under apartheid, but never really accepted as a Scot for the bulk of her professional life. The two spaces are more closely yoked together than their geographical separation would suggest. On a trip from Glasgow to Edinburgh, Mercia passes through Falkirk, for instance, and is transported to her childhood; "Falkirk was the name stamped in relief on the three-legged cast-iron pots at home, pots manufactured for the colony, for Africans to cook their staple mealiepap over an open fire" (112).

All of these richly complex themes are exemplified once more in Wicomb's new novel. Like its predecessors, *Still Life* is an intriguingly metatextual novel that addresses some of the silences and omissions of South African history, and the broader relationship of historiography, reputation, writing and memory to power. Typically it does so in relation to the complex national, sub-national, and international web of interactions that draw attention to Scotland's complicity in British imperialism and the history of racial slavery.

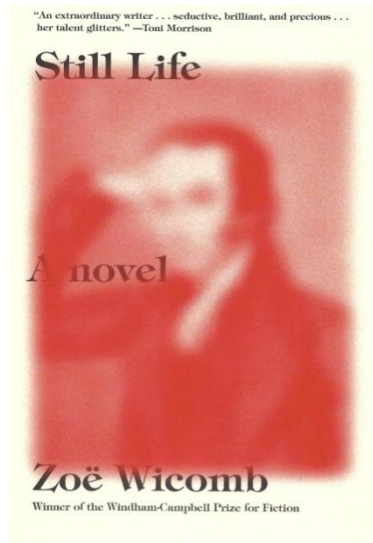
Deflecting her own authorial power, Wicomb sets the novel up within a frame-story involving a reluctant writer struggling to meet a commission to write a biography of the Scottish/South African poet and abolitionist Thomas Pringle (1789-1834).⁵ Somewhat intimidated by but disdainful of the agent who has commissioned the biography, the unnamed author cedes

⁴ On Wicomb's brilliant use of intertextuality in *The One That Got Away*, see David Hoegberg, "The Real McCloy: Fiction, History, and the Real in Zoë Wicomb's 'The One That Got Away,'" *Research in African Literatures*, 47.4 (Winter 2016): 54-70. Hoegberg's essay also illustrates the importance of Scottish settings and contexts to Wicomb's fiction.

⁵ For South African perspectives on Pringle, see, e.g., Es'kia Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Prager, 1962), 111-113; Dirk Klover, "Thomas Pringle," in Paul A. Scanlon, ed., *South African Writers [Dictionary of Literary Biography]*, 225 (Detroit: Gale Research, 2000), 370-381; Randolph Vigne, *Thomas Pringle, South African Pioneer, Poet, and Abolitionist* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press; Woodbridge: James Currey/Boydell and Brewer, 2012). On Wicomb's fascination with Thomas Pringle, see David Attwell, "Lost and Found: Zoë Wicomb, Thomas Pringle and the Translocal in Scottish—South African Literary Relations," in Kai Easton and Derek Attridge, eds., *Zoe Wicomb and the Translocal: Writing Scotland and South Africa* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 134-47.

her research to a group of ghosts, most of them characters drawn from Pringle's life but also including the time-traveling poet and Edwardian man of letters, Sir Nicholas Greene, from Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928).

Given this ghostly set of co-narrators it is appropriate that the cover design for Wicomb's new novel features a blurry reproduction of the subject of the commissioned biography. Thomas Pringle (1789-1834) is famous in South Africa—although he lived there for only six years in the



1820s—in two ways: as one of the men responsible for the Western Cape's "English" "liberal" tradition, notably manifested in principles of press freedom, and as the "father of South African poetry." His poems and prose descriptions are credited with being the first examples of English literary language to represent local South African flora and fauna and to depict the complex and violent frontier of the Cape Colony as white settlers occupied more and more of the land.

In Scotland, however, Pringle seems, at least according to Wicomb's narrator, to be scarcely known as a poet, despite having been an acquaintance both of Sir Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Rather

he is known, if at all, as one of the much-criticized original editors of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and for his abolitionist work as Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society (the "Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions"). In this capacity, Pringle saw into print *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), the ghost-written autobiography of Mary Prince (1788-after 1833), formerly enslaved in the West Indies.

The ghostliness of the cover image of Wicomb's novel therefore, is all the more appropriate as Wicomb's novel probes the gaps, omissions, and misrepresentations in Pringle's story, notably in relation to his adopted son Hinza Marossi, whom he brought back to Scotland with him on his return from South Africa in 1827. Wicomb plays with the fact that all we know of Hinza comes from one of Pringle's most famous poems, "The Bechuana Boy," an account that Pringle himself acknowledged blurred the truth in its considerable "poetic license." While Pringle claimed to have freed Hinza from literal bondage, Wicomb frees him from Pringle's literary

representation of him by reanimating him, along with Mary Prince and Sir Nicholas Greene, as one of the ghosts researching Pringle's life.

Hinza's research is of course deeply personal as it leads him to question Pringle's motives and supposed love for him as an adopted son. His research takes him to contemporary South Africa where he encounters a dreadlocked professor who dismisses Pringle as "no more than a cipher, constructed by liberal English South Africans intent on distinguishing their polite racism from the crass Afrikaner version." The professor's dogmatic skepticism leaves Hinza even more confused about his origins, a confusion that is compounded by his subsequent visit to the Eastern Cape where the historical Hinza had supposedly met Pringle. The tourist-lodge he stays at contrasts so starkly with the poverty of the local residents that Hinza gives up his research and concludes that he must "be content with what I do not know." On returning to London, however, Hinza tells Mary that he now believes that Pringle "deliberately misled" him and really "acquired [him] by means that he took pains to conceal." Hinza extrapolates from his own disappointment in Pringle a more thorough disparagement of the supposedly Christian beliefs that underpinned the colonial project in general, declaring them unambiguously "fraudulent to the core."

There is little truly unambiguous, though, in this multi-layered text. While Wicomb gives Hinza his own voice and frees him and the black South Africans for which he might be taken to stand from the textual imprisonment of white settler-oriented history, there is another silenced voice in *Still Life* whom Wicomb reanimates but keeps in the margins. Vytjie is a Khoesan girl/young woman who features in a couple of other Pringle poems. Never having been brought into the family circle in any way, when Vytjie appears in *Still Life* as another ghostly researcher-cum-witness who might shed light on Pringle, she maintains a highly skeptical distance, wary not just of Pringle but of white people in general. By referring to Pringle as "baas P" she highlights Pringle's complicity with the white overlordship of colonial South Africa, and by disparagingly calling Sir Nicholas "Sir Thingummy" and mocking his bushy eyebrows she undercuts English systems of authority and racist notions of physical norms.

Ultimately, *Still Life* ends with one final blurring of the edges. The reluctant author of the frame-story 'fesses up to her agent, the "beautifully shod" Belinda, that she has had to "abandon Pringle, or rather the Pringle characters have abandoned me." Over a delicious lunch in a Glasgow restaurant, she thus breaks her contract to deliver a book. If readers are left asking "So, what have I just read?," that is part of Wicomb's point, typifying her habitual avoidance of what this brilliant South African (South African-Scottish?) writer has called the "camouflage of coherence."

The novel raises questions for the wider study of Scottish literature and literary history that only Scottish literature scholars can tease out. The core of the teaching canon rests on works written by Scots, about Scottish life, normatively with at least some recognizably Scots linguistic traits, and normally by writers resident in Scotland and writing in relation to earlier Scottish writing. Pringle of course was Scots by birth and self-identification, and wrote about Scotland as well as South Africa. Wicomb's novel questions not only the neatness of ethnic or racial categorization but also the presence in the literary critic's mind of other witnesses, the ghostly half-awareness of intertextual dialogue, in all our reading, but especially in the critical reanimation of writers like Pringle who have faded out from the Scottish canon. This novel is richly rewarding in its own right as a playful but deadly serious examination of the arbitrariness and porousness of national boundaries. Those engaged in studying Scottish literature of any period will find it a stimulating prompt to thinking about literary categorization, including the category of Scottish literature.

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