

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photograph of Bessie Head sent by her to Langston Hughes in the early 1960s.

Bessie Head's Australian Interviews

Introduced and edited
by Dorothy Driver

Bessie Head's international reputation – as novelist, short-story writer, essayist and chronicler – brought her to Australia in 1984, primarily for Adelaide's Writers' Week but also to visit Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart. In Adelaide, in February, she was interviewed by Suzanne Hayes of the College of Technical and Further Education. The following month, in Launceston, she was interviewed by Andrew Peek of the Tasmanian College of Adult Education. Both interviews are re-printed here: first, Peek's, minimally re-edited (the original audio recording appears not to be extant), and second, Hayes', edited anew from its original recording. Over a third of a century has passed since then, but Head's voice rings out to us with a lamentably contemporary relevance: 'choked', as she tells Hayes, in a white-dominated South Africa, where she lived for the first twenty-seven years of her life, and then alienated in Botswana as a refugee and as a female writer of 'mixed race', 'deprived all round'.

*Yet, through her writing, Head created a very different kind of space for herself. Critics generally see her literary career as falling into two phases: first, the three novels, which Head spoke of as autobiographical, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973); and second, the two non-fictional texts, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind**

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(1981) and *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984), along with a volume of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Tales* (1977), which – though published earlier – emanated from the research conducted for the non-fictional texts. Although there is much to complicate such a neat division between the two sets of trilogies (including Head's own comment in the Peek interview), it draws useful attention to the overall shift in her writing from the autobiographical to the historical, the individual to the communal, in the course of which Head transformed what she called the 'shattered little bits' of her existence into 'a sense of woveness, a wholeness'.¹ From the vantage point of a literary career successfully created, two years before her untimely death in 1986, the Australian interviews give a sense of that 'wholeness', with only an occasional glimpse of the hurdles and cost it entailed.

Born from a non-marital union between a white mother and a black father, neither of whom she knew and who may not even have known one another beyond the moment of sexual union,² Head grew up in foster and orphanage care. After working first as a teacher and then as a journalist, she relocated in 1964 to the British Bechuanaland Protectorate, which became Botswana in 1966. She had longed to live in what she rightly called 'free Africa',³ but she instead experienced repeated sexist and racist antagonism in her new country, all the more acute for replaying the traumas of her South African years. She periodically tried to emigrate to a more hospitable clime, while nonetheless recognising the manifold advantages of Botswana, a country whose people had not been damaged either by what she called apartheid's dehumanising 'divisions and signs'⁴ or by a loss of land and cultural traditions. After ten years in her new country, Head finally felt able to call it her home.

The shift came with her historical research. She changed her mind about emigrating when she mailed the typescript of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* to her agent, telling him of her newly realised love for the place where she had lived and worked over most of the decade. Her work on Khama III, who reigned over the Bamangwato from 1875 to 1923, 'had the effect of pulling my life together',⁵ as she put it. This was largely on account of what she called his 'balancing act': the capacity to absorb foreign ideas without damaging established cultural practices. Such an act had obvious symbolic significance for someone like herself, educated in a largely Western cultural tradition and deeply influenced by Eastern religious thinking, and yet intent upon seeing herself – and being recognised – as African, or, rather, as what Head once called a 'New African', which she defined not in tribal or national terms but as 'wide, all-encompassing'.⁶ Moreover, her research into local social history – which issued in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* – gave her the 'means to pull together the whole southern African

¹ Introduction to *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (London: Heinemann, 1981), x. Whereas the title and imprint pages read 'Rainwind', the book cover reads 'Rain Wind', establishing a convention followed by later reprints.

² See Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears – Her Life and Writing*, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007), 8.

³ Letter to Patrick Cullinan, 10 February 1964, in *Imaginative Trespasser: Letters between Bessie Head, Patrick and Wendy Cullinan 1963-1977*, comp. Patrick Cullinan with a personal memoir (Johannesburg: Wits University Press; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 14.

⁴ Head, 'Some Notes on Novel Writing,' 1978, rpt. in *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Craig MacKenzie (London: Heinemann, 1990), 62.

⁵ Qtd. in Eilersen, 187.

⁶ Letter to Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 28 September 1964, in *Imaginative Trespasser*, 23.

experience'.⁷ We may take this as another highly symbolic moment, given the geographical trajectory of her life. In the second trilogy of texts she was able not just to weave together 'the shattered little bits' lugged from South Africa and projected back onto her during her first Botswana years but also to portray Botswana as the kind of political and spiritual world capable of evading damaging 'divisions and signs'.

Research for Serowe included interviews with a range of regional figures from many walks of life, many of whom did not read or write, and made manifest the immense importance to her of an entire community's uninterrupted relation to the land. Such cultural continuity was, as Head now saw it, the basis of her vision: 'It was this peaceful world of black people simply dreaming in their own skins that I began to slowly absorb into my own life. It was like finding black power and black personality in a simple and natural way.'⁸ The concept of dreaming, which has particular resonances in Australia, registers in Head's writing as a creative force emanating specifically from a people who had the capacity to retain what she saw as an 'ordinary' humanity, a humanity capable of revealing to white oppressors and their bystanders what it actually meant to be human. At the same time, blackness was seen as a power 'in which all mankind can share'.⁹

Without understanding the particular way she understood 'black power and black personality', readers may be puzzled at the way Head's Australian interviews address 'blackness'. Deeply influenced by the Trinidadian Pan-Africanist George Padmore, whose writing offered her 'a new skin and a new life', as well as by Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the South African Pan-Africanist Congress, who gave her 'a comfortable black skin in which to live and work', Head rejected 'blackness' as a category in a racialised colonial imaginary, as she also rejected apartheid and certain manifestations of African nationalism. The latter meant that she was uneasily received at African literary festivals and conferences, which in turn complicated her own sense of identification with a new generation of post-independence African writers. She also tended to be sidelined in South Africa by the Black Consciousness writers of the 1970s and 1980s. Readers will note slight contradictions in the two interviews regarding her relation to a black South African literary tradition: she is pleased about 'not fitting and belonging' and yet gratified to 'fit and belong'.

At Adelaide Writers' Week, Head felt that she stood out among the other invited writers – Angela Carter, Bruce Chatwin, Salman Rushdie, D. M. Thomas, Russell Hoban and André Brink – for she noted that her books sold more copies at the festival than theirs. She signed until her hand ached. Of her audience reception she wrote: 'It was the most tender and beautiful thing that has ever happened to me [...] My village created an echo that they wanted to explore.'¹⁰ 'The Australian audience loved me in a way such as I have never experienced

⁷ Qtd. in Eilersen, 307.

⁸ 'Some Notes on Novel Writing', 1978, rpt. *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Craig MacKenzie (London: Heinemann, 1990), 62.

⁹ *A Question of Power*, 135: 'Africa isn't rising. It's up already. It depends on where one places the stress. I place it on the soul. If it's basically right there, then other things fall into place. That's my struggle, and that's black power, but it's a power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all mankind can share.'

¹⁰ Qtd. in Eilersen, 319.

before.¹¹ In Melbourne, she met B. Wongar, the Serbian writer who married into an Aboriginal Australian community. He later suggested Australia as a new domicile for her, but she did not pursue the possibility; the trip as a whole had shown her a ‘white-dominated world’ which she found ‘closed and narrow’.¹²

Head’s invitation to Adelaide’s Writers’ Week had included the proposed title for her talk: ‘Living on the Edge’. Head changed ‘edge’ to ‘horizon’, following her early reading of Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk and disciple of the free-thinking nineteenth-century Indian mystic, Ramakrishna: ‘Frame laws, but frame them in such a fashion that when people are ready to do without them, they can burst them asunder. Our originality lies in combining perfect freedom with perfect authority. This can be done, even in monasticism. For my own part, I always have an horizon.’¹³ She proposed the same title for the autobiography Heinemann commissioned from her in May 1984, explaining that the term ‘horizon’ indicated her self-positioning ‘outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment but shaped by internal growth and living experience’.¹⁴ At the same time, as she told her agent, the years spent in Botswana would form ‘the bulk of her book’, for she had developed ‘a special and harmonious relationship’ with the place, whose rich learning manifested ‘both inwardly and socially’.¹⁵

However, as many of her readers have noted, Head’s Botswana was a re-imagined place, serving as the home she did not have but was now able to create. Showing ‘her characteristic faith in the writer’s subjective reclamation of the worlds she confronts and interacts with’,¹⁶ Head reveals that no one could have been more aware of this process than the author herself: ‘The least I can ever say for myself’, she wrote in 1975, ‘is that I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here, in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems.’¹⁷

Head left no evidence that she began writing the promised autobiography; she did, however, begin researching her South African origins. Perhaps this produced disturbing new information about her conception, her mother or the white family who had cast her out, for she entered a period of insomnia and heavy drinking – replacing beer, her standard drink, with spirits – so that when she contracted hepatitis she became seriously ill and died in April 1986, aged 48.

¹¹ Letter to Paddy Kitchen, 15 November 1984, in *Everyday Matters: Selected Letters of Dora Taylor, Bessie Head & Lilian Ngoyi*, ed. M.J. Daymond (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2015), 229.

¹² Letter to Kitchen, in *Everyday Matters*, 230.

¹³ Qtd. in ‘The Master as I Saw Him: Being Pages from the Life of the Swami Vivekananda’ (by his disciple Sister Nivedita), accessed 1 June 2019 from <https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/sisternivedita1910/1.htm>

¹⁴ Qtd. in Eilersen, 327.

¹⁵ Qtd. in Coreen Brown, *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 209.

¹⁶ Desirée Lewis, *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 294.

¹⁷ ‘Preface to “Witchcraft”’, rpt. in *A Woman Alone*, 28.

To hear Head speak is deeply moving: her rhythms and modulations, her hesitations and uncertainties along with her insistent emphases and drive towards precision. Peek refers to the 'lilting and graceful sound' of Head's voice. Little of this can be captured in a transcription, yet it has seemed important not to elide the oral quality by correcting syntax or excising repetitions, although on occasion I do add bracketed words to clarify Head's meaning. It has been tempting to include all the frequent murmurs ('hmm...') and to signal every one of the hesitations and re-directions with ellipses, to include unchanged every false start and incomplete or trailing ending. Instead I have included these selectively, as when they signal a particular emphasis or some difficulty with subject matter. Insignificant repetitions are deleted but the few grammar errors easily made in conversation are retained except where they are distracting. Punctuation is obviously editorial, but as far as possible it follows the modulations of Head's voice. Annotations are kept to a minimum.

Peek's interview is reproduced here in its original form but for minor (silent) changes to punctuation, paragraphing and obvious typos. Notes suggest possible transcription errors. Peek had already produced some research on Head, and his interview was well-directed and well-edited. Hayes' interview, on the other hand, was imperfectly transcribed and not well-edited. Hayes had little or no prior knowledge of Head's work. She acquainted herself neither with all the titles of Head's major publications, nor with the names of her publishers, nor with even basic facts relating to Botswana. Oddly, the CRNLE editorial staff did enough checking to produce a respectable brief introduction, but retained Hayes' errors in transcription and spelling in the text of the interview. Thus, apparently in Head's voice, the Bamangwato people become 'Bambawantu'; Head's novel Maru becomes 'Maroo'; her non-fiction Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind becomes 'Zarowah'; and the two local leaders Head so admired and wrote about so extensively in Serowe and A Bewitched Crossroad – Khama the Great and Seretse Khama – become 'Karma the Great' and 'Serebe Khama'. There are other fundamental errors, mostly of transcription.

Following Peek's interview, then, is an improved version of Hayes' interview, based on the original recording. This recording was held for some years in the Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide (I first listened to it in 2002, and know of one person who listened to it shortly thereafter) but it has now been apparently lost or discarded in the course of library renovations. Fortunately, a copy of the recording was lodged at Macquarie University Library, and my thanks to this library, and to Maria Albanese and Robin Secomb of the Barr Smith Library, Adelaide University, for going to considerable trouble in acquiring a copy. Acknowledgement is also due to the copyright holders, Bessie Head Heritage Trust, based in Botswana, and represented by the Johnson Alcock Agency in London. A copy of the recorded interview is also held at the Khama III Memorial Museum, catalogued at KMM 459 BHP Box H2, since Head was given a cassette when she left Adelaide.

Peek's interview is undoubtedly superior to Hayes' in other ways too, so why is the latter worth reading? For one thing, Head deftly steers Hayes' comment about 'someone like yourself' away from the personal racial assignation and instead generalises her position. And when Hayes tries to position Head's creative output in personal and autobiographical terms, Head insists on its political dimensions. Elsewhere, too, she politely resists some of Hayes' liberal assumptions. In addition, Hayes' interview elicits commentary that expands on what Peek drew from Head: most notably, the close connection between the life and the writing;

the attitude to populist 'protest' writing and African nationalism; the preference for a different route to liberation and decolonisation; and, perhaps above all, the courage with which Head held her line as a writer. Significant too is her repeated emphasis on Khama III and the mode of his political reforms.

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Interviewed by Andrew Peek, Launceston, 14 March 1984:¹⁸

AP: Why do you write? What interests you as a writer?

BH: Part of my work has been a kind of defining of goodness. I would like to compare this kind of search to some of the things Boris Pasternak has written. There's a particular poem which goes like this:

In me are people without names,
Children, stay-at-homes, trees.
I am conquered by them all
And that is my only victory.¹⁹

It is one of the most profound statements a man can make about human goodness, because one is always plagued by this question of suffering and torture, the amount of suffering and torture you can experience in life, the difficulties of surviving as a human being. The pain of so many experiences that you have been through. Someone once said: Very often those who write, if they hadn't that outlet, they would go insane. Some of my work has given me a sense of peace, of fulfilment and achievement.

AP: Do you see writing as offering you a type of therapy?

BH: It hasn't been therapeutic. It was like using my inner strength, having it tested, and having my experiences recorded, that was such great benefit to me. That is what I really mean.

AP: I wondered if you would comment on how you go about writing. When I read *Maru* I wondered if Margaret's furious bouts of activity – painting, and the way she clarifies her sense of reality through her painting – are in any way a reflection of how you wrote this novel?

BH: That is exactly how *Maru* was written. I have worked two ways. I like to say of *Maru* that it was a small masterpiece that stood near me and said: Type me. The three books that I really felt came directly out of my living experience were *Maru*, *A Question of Power* and

¹⁸ First published as 'Bessie Head in Australia', *New Literature Review*, 14 (1985), 5-13.

¹⁹ The poem, 'Daybreak', comes from *Doctor Zhivago*; in the last line Head changes the word 'this' to 'that'. She would have used the only English translation in print at the time, by Max Hayward and Manya Harari.

***The Collector of Treasures*. People often say: Do you work consistently every day? No. In *Maru* I had a definite feeling of living a certain experience and acquiring deeper insights into racial prejudice, going to roots and sources. One day, suddenly everything began to fit into patterns in my mind. I sat at the typewriter and I just started typing out the book as though it were writing itself. I sat there and I did not do any sort of rough drafts or anything. I was so excited by the insight I had acquired into racialism that there's a tremendous harmony and steadiness in the book.**

Later, I had an exciting experience. A student who was doing a paper on *Maru* came to visit me. We came to a point where I was about to explain to her how *Maru* should be read: the love story should be regarded as subservient to the work the book is doing. So I flipped open the book to show her passages into which my whole life had been channelled. One of them goes like this: 'How universal is the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man has said of every black man: "They don't think. They don't know anything."' ²⁰ It is those passages which are so majestic, there are so many of them, and when I flipped open the library book I saw somebody had read *Maru* the right way, those passages were heavily pencilled with annotations: Yes. Right. Right. As a writer, when you have an experience like that you say: So I'm right, so I'm right! *Maru* was typed out in three months with frantic activity.

The other book like that, going to sources and roots of good and evil, and the precarious balance between them, is *A Question of Power*. It was lived for three years, a whole chunk of living experience suddenly compressed into a short novel, and madly typed out in six months. I had lived so precariously, and if I could know how I survive, between good and evil, I would offer these insights to mankind. How I could survive torture and cruelty because this seems to be so much human history.

The third book that was typed out with high excitement and extreme happiness was *The Collector of Treasures*. I had lived and absorbed the life of the village and I'd lived together with people and thought together with people and all the stories are touched by daily village dramas. Suddenly I had my material, one story after another just peeled out on the typewriter.

I have worked that way; and then there are researched, studied accounts of village life, sifting all the beautiful things in the society. I have worked in a completely different way, painstakingly drafting out the book, chapter by chapter. I have done that twice, once with *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and again with my historical novel. So I have worked both ways.

AP: Would you say a little about how your interest in reading developed, and about your education?

BH: I just have an ordinary high-school level of education, but I never stopped educating myself and reading. I've always lived in that world. A person who tends to be very solitary

²⁰ *Maru* (1971; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1972), 109. The first sentence in direct speech actually reads: 'They can't think for themselves.' By 'Masarwa', a derogatory term, Head refers to the indigenous people of the region, part of the San, also known as Bushmen; correctly, the plural is Basarwa.

will fill in many lonely hours with books and things and that's always been a pattern of my life. I was partly reared by a foster parent. She was very poor, and this awakened an urge in me to want to take care of her and to do everything for her. So I was always cleaning and scrubbing the house. I would collect bones and sell them; and I would collect wild spinach in the field. But a friction developed between us when I started going to school. I was utterly fascinated because an English teacher each afternoon used to read us the story of a boy and his dog. I still remember the title of the book, *Shadow the Sheep Dog*.²¹ The way that she read the story and communicated it was like a kind of awakening in me. It meant if you had books you could get something as wonderful as this story. So I used to start begging her [my foster mother] for books. Poor people cannot afford to buy books, so I would nag and nag. One day we went up to town together and she bought me a book, *Fuzzy Wuzzy Goes to the Seaside* and I used to sit down and I would read *Fuzzy Wuzzy* and I longed to do all the things he did. I got another book, *The Adventures of Peter Pan*, and I read it over and over again. But a conflict developed between us because when she saw me sitting in the corner and reading she would rush towards me and snatch the book out of my hand. People who read books, she said, go insane. Books are not a part of the world of poor people.

Then I was removed from that world to the mission school. There were libraries and libraries of books. Two things happened to me. First I started to go through the whole library. I used to read and read until my eyeballs ached. I just read one book after another. Then the other thing that happened from this extra reading: I suddenly shot up right to the top of the class and I remained there throughout high school. When I was living with my foster parent, I was roughly at the bottom of the class, and then I reversed that. History, Biology and English essays were my top subjects.

AP: You've pointed out that the school you attended was a mission school. Was there any particular credo that you derived from it?

BH: You know how important your early training and background are. I was taught in a mission school; the missionary lady in *Maru* was actually one of my teachers. She was just drawn from life, and the things she did for me were all recorded in this novel. 'One day, you will help your people.'²² But this was said very lightly, in a very light-hearted manner. She was one of the major influences in my life but this is the general atmosphere of the mission school: that we are being given something and now we should serve our people.

AP: Later on, you became a primary school teacher.

BH: I didn't have a talent for communicating with young minds. I was so unhappy in the profession. What I have really enjoyed has been the experiments we had in Serowe with cooperative production. There I acquired quite a lot of skills as a vegetable gardener and I think that has given me more pleasure than anything, other than some of the books that I have enjoyed writing.

²¹ By Enid Blyton.

²² *Maru*, 17.

AP: In *Serowe* you mentioned you speak no Setswana. *A Question of Power* has a character who conveys the sense of anguish that can arise from not being able to communicate in the vernacular with fellow village dwellers. Does the fact that English is your working language give you a sense of alienation or the feeling of working at second hand in some way?

BH: First of all, it's easier for me to communicate with people in English. You know my background was of such a nature that I haven't a grounding in any African language. In fact, people speak a kind of Setswana English, but this is true of English wherever it has travelled. It takes on local colour. They translate Setswana thoughts into English and you get a new kind of English. I have a good ear for language, and I've used this Setswana English a lot, especially in *The Collector of Treasures*. There's something different about this English: it's absolutely clear, sharp and vivid but it's not textbook English that you will find there. It's an English that's just absolutely new, sharp, vivid, clear.

AP: Could you talk briefly about your contribution early on in your career to *Drum*²³ and could you tell me if there's any way in which it had a formative effect on your writing and whether or not you keep in touch with any of the old *Drum* contributors?

BH: I do not have any contact with them. I don't know if you know Lewis Nkosi's *Tasks and Masks*. He says I was never one of them, I was unique and alone in everything I did. There are some who could be grouped together as the *Drum* school, but not Bessie Head, he said.²⁴ I just don't fit in and belong anywhere and I tend to pride myself on not fitting and belonging. I am happy with the kind of freedom I have built up for myself. What was of great benefit to me when working on *Drum* was the kind of finger exercise a journalist goes through. You produce everyday short stories under great pressure. It sharpens your style. You have to be precise and accurate. I have a kind of journalistic style, and writing for *Drum* was a useful discipline. I'm not loose and baggy. When I tell a story I tell it as tautly, concisely and economically as I can.

AP: You sometimes allude to Victorian figures in your writing and in your conversation – Dickens, Tennyson – but you also cite twentieth-century writers as important sources of stimulus.

BH: You know that the Victorians were a part of my early background. But for the actual books I have written where facts and figures, cooperatives and where things like that are

²³ First in Cape Town and then in Johannesburg, Head worked for a magazine called *Golden City Post*, published by Drum Publications, which also published *Drum*, an independent magazine that gave voice to 'the *Drum* school' of the 1950s and early 1960s. Apart from any apprentice journalistic work, not published under her byline, she wrote columns for teenagers and helped a fellow journalist Dolly Hassim produce tongue-in-cheek 'True Romance' stories masquerading as readers' contributions; see M.J. Daymond, Introduction to *The Cardinals with Meditations and Short Stories* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1993), viii. Head was not formally employed as a journalist on *Drum*, although she socialised with the *Drum* writers, and may possibly have done some ghost-writing for the magazine. Her only publication in *Drum* was in 1982, well after its heyday.

²⁴ See Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981), 99-103.

incorporated into the novel form, I'm indebted to Brecht, for that. When I was twenty-three I read a biography of Brecht, *The Choice of Evils*.²⁵ The biography divided his life up into three phases. There was the early phase where the carefree young man could turn the whole of Berlin upside down and he produced the light-hearted opera, *The Threepenny Opera*. There was the middle phase, the convert to Marxism after he had read *Das Kapital*. He then began writing the didactic plays but it was Germany between the two world wars, and there was great poverty. He was impelled to do something to change his society and to impose his religion, Marxism, on it. So he went about in great earnest creating the didactic plays. He set up a certain method behind them, employing research done for him by university students. Each student would be assigned to do research for him and then he would sit in a home full of students and they would read out their research material and he would make a consensus; this builds up his play. That was the period of Brecht's life that impressed me most. The latter part was his exile when he wrote the poem, 'We change our countries more often than we change our shoes.'²⁶ But it was the middle period that was so fascinating to me. He'd say things like: Artists should not write poems about roses and sunsets, there's real work to do. These sorts of things go into the back of your mind; *everything* works to shape what you will eventually do. Brecht gave me the licence to put facts and figures into the novel form.

AP: Is that true of your early novels in particular or later writing, for example *Serowe*?

BH: The novels that have this kind of work in them are, first: *When Rain Clouds Gather*. What dominates in this novel is a farming cooperative and the shift from subsistence agriculture to cash-crop farming. The next novel that has a cooperative as the central part of the work is *A Question of Power*. You begin at the very beginning when the cooperative starts. As the book proceeds you are given everyday facts about how the people helped to build up the cooperative, how they share their produce and their money. Those two novels specifically are an illustration of what I mean, but there's always a feeling of a sort of busy workman in me that loves the everyday life and loves the everyday work of people.

AP: You'd consider yourself not to be a political animal so it's not Brecht's Marxism which stimulates you.

BH: Not really, it's just that he said this is what artists should do and I have a kind of horror of belonging to camps but not a horror about caring for my fellow man.

AP: I know that you have expressed an interest in Lawrence. One of the things that impressed me when I read *Maru* was that you wrote in a very expressive way about human relationships and about intimate feelings about people of the same sex, man and man, woman and woman, and also about triangular relationships in your novels. That's something which I

²⁵ Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (1959).

²⁶ Head may have said 'the line' rather than 'the poem'. She quotes a line from Brecht's poem, 'To Posterity'; the line is usually translated as follows: 'For we went, changing our country more often than our shoes.'

associate with Lawrence as well. I wonder if you'd care to talk about the way you write about these relationships and about what Lawrence has meant to you.

BH: You felt with Lawrence that he was opening doors, at least, so that people could see what was behind those doors that was normally taboo. When I was young he was a very rich reading experience for me. I think it was the sense that Lawrence had a big horizon and that he had dared to explore things, particularly if society kept them hidden. When you are young, Lawrence is a kind of tough reading experience. He used to make me miserable because there was a feeling of malice and hate for mankind in almost everything he wrote. What is so shattering about Lawrence is his view of evil. The feeling that he had a control over it, the way in which he could see it in people and the way he represented it. Sometimes a book by Lawrence is quite awry. One that is written in such an upside-down kind of way is *Sons and Lovers*, dealing with his passion for his mother. But he doesn't skimp and lie. He tells you he loves his mother and he shows you all her faults and her horrors, but he shows you everything, his own feelings, and his feelings towards his mother, with absolute truth. There is something wrong with this woman; there is something wrong with this boy. But what you appreciate is that the wrongness is exposed. I think that kind of reading background, the training Lawrence gives you, is necessary. Eventually, you know, he passed out of my world. I got sick of him. I began to summarise him and his characters. They seem to be living in dark dungeons where one demon holds down the soul of the other demon. But I do not regret having had a passion for Lawrence at one stage and wanting to read nothing but Lawrence and absorb him.

AP: You lay great emphasis on your independence and your loneliness, your feeling of being by yourself, and that reminds me of the phrase that Lawrence uses, *noli me tangere*, don't touch me. Is there any sort of commonality there?

BH: I cannot help the loneliness that I do live in, but I'd like to explain this kind of loneliness in a more triumphant way. Not 'don't touch me', but, in the words of the Irish mystic A.E. (George Russell) I read when I was young: What is your own will come to you.²⁷ It was something I never forgot. I wouldn't anxiously go out and look for anything from life. I would wait for something beautiful to come to me. I would keep a door open because one day something would make sense. When I was young, George Russell's book *The Candle of Vision* deeply attracted me. And these things that stay in your mind are huge guidelines for your life.

AP: You have an eclectic range of reading. You have mentioned an interest in Asian philosophers, could you briefly talk about that?

BH: Yes, for two years I restricted myself only to reading philosophies of India, but the reason I went along that path was the library situation in Durban. We had a municipal

²⁷ In *The Candle of Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1918), speaking of his strong attraction to the divine, Russell writes: 'That which was my own came to me as it comes to all men' (30).

library and it was for whites only. But there was a wealthy Moslem man, and on his death he donated a library to the black community. In high school we had a teacher and she said: There's nothing of greater benefit to your life than the fact that you always have reading as a part of one of your activities. I would advise all you students to go to this library. She knew we couldn't go to the white library. So when I went in there, there were rows and rows of Hindu philosophy, for the Moslem's interests were mostly Asian. For two years I lived in that section, not only philosophical ideas, but the way the everyday life of India came through with the lives of these men. What was fascinating to me was that these holy men – about whom most of the books were written – were highly vivid and original and unpredictable men. A man would come to a kind of crossroad in his life which was called giving up the world, and he would wrap a *dhoti* around him and he would have a begging bowl and he would sit in meditation and devote his life to God.

AP: At Writers' Week in Adelaide, Salman Rushdie impressed me by his belief in the modern novelist's responsibility to keep abreast with writing around the world. He's a friend of Nuruddin Farah and is interested in Achebe and Ngugi in the African area, though his backgrounds are the Indian sub-continent and England. Do you share this priority, or not?

BH: The way I live I haven't access to modern trends and modern literature. Occasionally a friend will send me a book and so on. I live rather as old favourites.²⁸ There are books that I go back to because they will never fail to enrich my life. To keep up with the trends you really need a city life, newspapers, book reviews. What I have been able to do in my youth I am not able to do now. I am not able to be a wide and indiscriminate reader, so I settle down to things that I love most and I can go back to. Books that I return to again and again. I think it's partly due to my living circumstances.

AP: What sort of books are you talking about?

BH: Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. I love it so passionately that parts of it are typed out and put above the kitchen sink where I work. Communication between mortals is immortal, what lifts man above the beast is not the cudgel or the whip, but an inward music.²⁹ Lines like this I need for my very survival, so Pasternak is stuck everywhere.

AP: Tolstoy, is he another person that you return to?

BH: You outgrow him. You know, *Anna Karenina* I read twice. When you go into Tolstoy's essays and his obsessions with eternity and things like that, he begins to wear you down and you outgrow him, but you don't outgrow *Anna Karenina*. I can read it again.

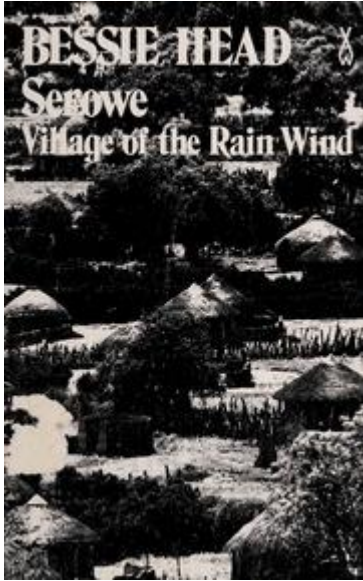
²⁸ Head may have said, or may have meant to say, 'on old favourites'.

²⁹ In Book 1, chapter 2, section 10, of *Doctor Zhivago* (1957; trans. 1958; rpt. London: Folio Society, 1997), Boris Pasternak's character says, 'if the beast who sleeps in man could be held down by threat [...] then the highest emblem of humanity would be the lion tamer in the circus with his whip, not the self-sacrificing preacher. But don't you see, this is just the point – what has for centuries raised man above the beast is not the cudgel but an inward music: the irresistible power of unarmed truth, the attraction of its example' (33).

AP: Are there any other particular favourites that you have apart from Pasternak?

BH: Pasternak is so specific because when things seem too dark, those passages I have above the kitchen sink pull me back again. Many favourite books just stay there in the house, but I think it's Pasternak's poetry that I would return to more often than any other book I have.

AP: What were the intentions behind writing *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and did oral literature have any part to play in it?



BH: Not oral literature as such. The work I did for *Serowe* derives from oral history. The technique I used was to tell the history of Serowe in the form of people's life stories and the contribution they made to the community. So out of people's life-stories a history is formed that is informal and chatty and easy to read.

AP: Are there traditions of folk tales that are still current in Botswana?

BH: Yes, I have some of that work with me which was done by somebody who worked together with me. I have a set of those stories. They were printed by Oxford for the little libraries in the primary schools. The stories that everyone has about the fox and the hen and how Mr. Hen and Mr. Fox outwit each other and things like that. I have a set of those things.³⁰

AP: In relation to *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, your novels and short stories, have you had clear views about an audience you were writing for?

BH: I like what a black American professor has said about me: It is difficult to know which audience she is addressing. And I like to leave it vague like that. I don't see myself declaring myself passionately pro-black, I just want to work at a story the way I want to work at it. To feel that I'm telling the truth. I wouldn't like the thought of a book like *Serowe* to be regarded as a nationalistic work. It is merely the way I am balancing out history. The history of Botswana is unique because it was one country that did not experience the destruction of the colonial era because to the colonists it looked so dry and unproductive. Out of this, then, you sift out such beautiful patterning. Whereas black people were so destroyed in other parts of Africa by the colonial era, what you get in Botswana is a selective choice

³⁰ Head refers here to the Leopard series published by Oxford University Press (Cape Town), and probably specifically to "The Cock and the Jackal" in *Folk Tales from Botswana* (1976). (Thanks to Tom Holzinger for this information.) However, neither this volume nor another like it is listed in 'Books and Magazines from Head's Private Library', *Catalogue of the Bessie Head Papers deposited at the Khama III Memorial Museum, Serowe, Botswana*, 2 vols., June 2007.

people made. Having been left undisturbed, they absorbed Western civilisation without pain and suffering to them.

You get writers so virulently wanting to assert blackness; I prefer a more easeful road where I am careful about what I do to people. I am careful about what I write, that it is not petty and mean. One of my books, *A Question of Power*, no publisher wanted to print it because they thought it was unprintable. Heinemann had a look at it and they said: We don't understand it but it is big. It's this bigness and generosity that I prefer to anything petty, small and mean. So I just produce my books and I do not calculate on an audience, I'm not directing my work at black nationalism or the black skin.

AP: One of the reasons I ask about your perception of an audience is that I'm interested in the sort of feedback that you get or you don't get from those who read your novels.

BH: I get the most feedback from *A Question of Power*. University students feel it a challenge. It distracts them and it engages them so that most university students feel they should write a paper on it. The result is a pile of letters and a pile of papers. The pleasure you derive is that you feel that the book is written in such a way that it is appealing to people right across the world. Each student wants to offer a new interpretation of the book. I have enjoyed that experience.

AP: Do you feel at all paradoxically about the value and role of tradition in African society? In some ways perhaps as a woman writer you'd feel it's good that things change, in other ways obviously you'd lament change, it has involved so much loss for Africans, too.

BH: I cannot say that I haven't engaged myself about this because I have just completed an historical novel which deals with this very question of the role of tradition and custom in society. I live in a particularly interesting part of Botswana. There was a chief called Khama the Great. He was called this by the missionaries because he made this complete and dedicated conversion to Christianity. But in doing so he performed a delicate balancing act. There was no way in which black people were going to keep out Western civilisation, it was coming at them. When he accepted Christianity, he accepted Western civilisation and began reshaping his society to conform with his Christian ideals. But he retained the strength of tradition and custom and removed many parts of it that would not stand the light of day.

I would like to give this example. A lot of mankind's early religions were based on ritual murder and this is true of Europe before the Romans brought Christianity. It's true of South American religions and it is also true ... I can only speak with certainty of southern Africa. There was an initiation ceremony for men, part of which involved the ritual murder of one of the initiates, but that six-month period spent in the bush was also a process of character training for the youths and a school where they were instructed in how to conduct themselves as men. Khama kept the basic character of this, which was very important to the society. Young men would be grouped into an age regiment group, and be given a name, and so would the young women. When they were needed to perform a community service, those six months would give that group an identification, a sharing and comradeship. So the idea was you may look after your family but you have to look after your community as well. Khama removed the ritual murder of the initiation and the secrecy

in the bush. Everything was brought out into the daylight. Now the missionary would stand there, the chief would stand there, and the elders, and they would go through the process of talking to the young men and informing them about their new responsibilities now that they had reached puberty, and the missionary would say prayers.

Khama did this sort of thing with all custom and tradition, modifying it, changing it so that there was a blending. Eventually what people automatically do is, they make blendings of everything, so that traditional ceremonies are part-Christian, part-Setswana. This 'part-part' makes for a beautiful harmony in society. I do acknowledge the value of tradition but have been fortunate in having lived in an environment where these things have happened like this.

AP: In talking about your life, Bessie, you seem to see a high degree of continuity and structure emerging as time goes by. If you look back over your books, do you feel that there's a strong degree of structure and continuity there? Critics have seen your first three books as representing a trilogy, for instance. Would you wish that people looked at all the books you have written so far (and the one you are publishing) in relation to each other, as part of a large, structured series?

BH: Yes, they are. The first three novels definitely are autobiographical. Everything that was of value to my development and my experience went into the first three novels and I would agree that they are a trilogy. Subsequently *The Collector of Treasures*, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and the historical novel will become another trilogy. The historical novel grew directly out of the work I did in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. I elaborated things I had referred to briefly in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. The impact of Christianity, the tribes, the scramble for southern Africa and just the general effect of the coming of Western civilisation. The work in these last three books is tightly knit and concentrates on Serowe.

AP: Thanks very much, Bessie.

* * * * *

Interviewed by Suzanne Hayes, Adelaide, March 1984.³¹

SH: Why did you leave South Africa?

BH: I was married for two years and the marriage broke up. The Bamangwato Tribal Administration which is the area in which I eventually settled had applied for teachers in South Africa. I wanted to build up my life again so I applied for the job as a primary school teacher and I was given the job. A little complication arose out of that because when I applied for a passport it was refused and I left on an exit permit. So the main motivation was to get away from a marriage that didn't work out.

³¹ Originally published in *CRNLE Reviews Journal*, 2 (1991), 1-7. Recorded by CALS Media Unit, Adelaide College of TAFE, 1984. Broadcast on Radio Adelaide (then SUV) in a program in the series Conversations.

SH: But you were not a writer when you were in South Africa, were you, or were you a writer who didn't publish?

BH: I would tend to agree that the first three novels of a writer's life can draw very deeply on a writer's living experience so when people ask me, you know, 'When did you start writing?' you'd say, also, 'When did you start living your books?' 'When did you start living your books?' So I've often had to explain that I would live a book for three years and then type it out in six months, but then I have gained so much control over my living experience. My first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* was published in 1968. It's full of the preoccupations of the South African refugee.

SH: The reason why I am asking is that I would think that for somebody like yourself who is a person who needs cherishing it would be very difficult to write in South Africa, actually to settle yourself down so that you could write.

BH: The problem was more acute than that. The best way I can explain it is in the words of an industrial millionaire who used his money to conquer the interior of southern Africa. His main area of conquest – and he waged two wars against the people – was Zimbabwe, which formerly had his name, Rhodesia. When he waged the last war of conquest in 1896 he said, 'I have taken everything from them but the air.' The problem is more acute in South Africa. You look across the land as a black person and you feel choked. You feel that even the air has been taken. Because so many vast areas have been reserved for white occupation only, there is nothing there for black people. What I had sort of faced, obsessively, in regard to writing in South Africa had been the relationship between the writer and his environment. There was just nothing I could draw on to use as a background for my work. One of the most acute problems ... you know, it's always the sense of divisions, people being cut off from each other. One of the problems I couldn't cope with is the fact that they had succeeded in putting people into racial slots, so that one race found the other race inaccessible. And you would even have found this among black people, so that you would find that there was a white experience completely isolated from you. A few pathetic white liberals would smile uneasily over the barrier but you never communicated with white people as human beings and had a proper human relationship with them.

Then you would have slots for all the other races, so that people consciously thought of themselves as 'Coloureds', 'Asians' and 'Africans'. A writer can't work with material like that. You can't work with 'race'. You work with people. All these problems, these basic problems, were resolved for me but I know that I am speaking in a certain generation. There's a huge outburst of literary activity in South Africa today, vigorous and so on. Corresponding to that are a number of publishers who encouraged this literary birth. I couldn't cope with problems because I just want to have my people, and I want them to work for me and do things for me.

When I moved to Botswana I looked over the landscape and everything was there, the air, the people; everything had been left untouched by the British. I could just look across the landscape and incorporate any view into my work – anyone, I could incorporate anyone, whether white or black. There was just a generosity in the society that made it possible. My people were just people who would work for me but not race groups. There's

a kind of death in South Africa that you can't work with. That's the problem. I faced it as a writer.

And other writers make some effort in some way to write their books there. Like Nadine Gordimer and Alan Paton, and so on. I have an active hostility towards the land, a kind of rejection, but mostly it was that sense of being choked: there was no air, there was no air. Cecil John Rhodes said that he had left the air in his Rhodesia, which is now Zimbabwe. [Wry laugh] Maybe, maybe, but they take the air too. They take the air too.

There's just one thing I want to tag onto that. I'm speaking in a certain generation group. And then I tend to fall back. I've tried to pinpoint this outburst of literary activity in South Africa. Partly it coincided with the arrival of two new publishers on the scene, who were prepared to promote black writing in particular, Ravan Press and Ad Donker.

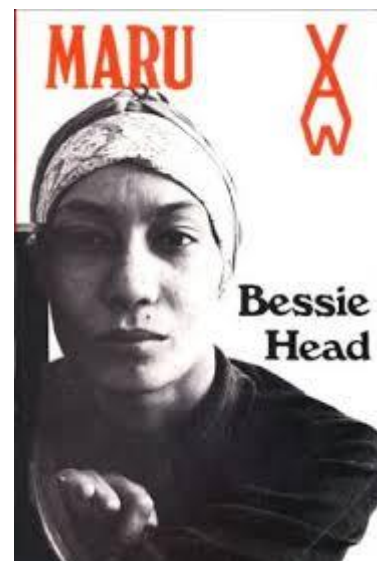
You know, sometimes ... I think the problem would be ... for instance, we African writers, you know, formed a completely new generation of writers only with independence. It would appear to me it is only when you can have avenues that would accept your work that the literature begins. We are living in a world like that where literature is not very established. But there has definitely been a change in South Africa. That I am aware of, because I am kept in touch. They always include my work in an anthology, so I get to know all the new writing. And I am kept in touch in various ways. They continue printing me on the understanding that I fit and belong with South African writers.

SH: My impression is that you are a person, the sort of person yourself, that just as you want to talk to people, face to face, so you want to write for people. And whoever picks up your books you are writing for, aren't you?

BH: I haven't got the 'my people' flag, but I would hope – because I have worked that way – I have faced questions of [it]. If you have read *Maru*, you would know it probes racialism almost to root sources, and it is not limited to white people. It is something that is inside mankind, that makes them cruel too, if they can get their fellow man, and make their fellow man inferior. Racial hatreds and prejudices are not restricted to the white race. Black people are equally capable of racialism. It's a universal thing.

SH: Yes, *Maru* reminded me, with the hatred for the Bushmen, of Chinua Achebe's book *No Longer at Ease* in which the hero wants to marry an outcast, an Osu, and his friends all are absolutely horrified about this.

BH: What I would like to make clear is that *Maru* tackles a similar theme to *No Longer at Ease*. But it's a completely different approach. It works on the inner life. What is new about it is that what is offered to the reading public is the inner life of the characters. It's always working on internal feelings and internal perceptions, so it presupposes that a man like Maru has the strength to move over a very extreme barrier, because the Masarwa people have slave status. And they're completely ... he's a king or a chief, and the lady is a slave.



Then that is not the main issue. The main issue is the inner qualities of the people. So the whole story depends on whether the internal rules that are presented to you are valid and beautiful. If you believe in the man's strength and his uniqueness and unpredictableness and originality.

SH: But the way in which Seretse Khama also picked a wife who people did not want him to pick showed that inner strength, didn't he, in that direction?

BH: Yes, that – yes, he is admired for standing by his wife when there were hostilities at home and hostilities in Britain. He is greatly admired for that gesture.

SH: I think the hope for the world is that black people are more generous than white people and don't hate them, but with the history of people – such as the current regime in South Africa – it would seem to me very unsurprising for the hatred to be turned back.

BH: Yes. You know, what you sort of rebel against are situations that are full of hopeless despair and destruction, because eventually, you will remember, in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* the girl, the Osu girl, commits suicide. What you rebel against is the fact that human beings are often in these dark dungeons, where death is the only alternative, where hate is the only alternative. You know, the whole of South Africa could be considered a dark dungeon from which people cannot escape, and cannot seem to find release.

SH: Turning back to Botswana, do you think there's something in the historical past which allows the people who live there now not only the air to breathe but the land to live from.

BH: Oh, very much so. Very much so. I came there just before independence. Independence was 1966, and I came to Botswana in 1964. The British flag flew over the village, at the police camp, but the British presence was almost non-existent. They had a form of indirect rule. They ruled through the people's traditional leaders. Indeed, when they first claimed it as a Protectorate this was openly their policy, but in the 1920s a certain Lord Lugard came out with this term, Indirect Rule. So they tended to have that, you know, what they would do like is ... if ... there was one chief in the area of the country where I live who continually tried to assert his rights as a traditional ruler, and he propelled them into passing certain laws, to remove some rights from the traditional ruler. But you can say that what you have in reality is a country that's almost ancient Africa intact.

You know, I have so much more confidence now because of the historical research I have done. I feel so much more confident about putting pieces together, because I not only wrote my own books, I went out and I worked together with people and collected oral data from them so that thought patterns in the people are very ancient ones. You know, history can be mats and cups and things people make for themselves, but in so many overtones of the, you know, 'My grandfather did it this way, this is our traditional way of life,' but not something that hurts, something that's just there, it's just there for you.

So all these things I had absorbed into my own writing. I'm not dependent on an environment, but at the same time it's there for me, like a prop to lean on.

SH: I feel it very strongly, even when it's not nominally the subject of what you're writing, so that a character in a book as in – I'm picking up the book – *A Question of Power*, she walks down the village street, and she sees the people doing the traditional things in the traditional way and that is strength. But there's also this non-fiction book which you call *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* [Head helps here with the pronunciation of Serowe], that has been compared by the author of *Akenfield*³² to *Akenfield* itself, the picture of a village through which one sees a world. Was that your intention when you wrote this book?

BH: It could possibly look like that, but my main intention was to write a history of educational achievement over a period of one hundred years. People have, there, a long record for self-help activities, but these self-help activities are rooted in African custom and tradition. That's why with the village you can pick up the past and the present and you can make sense of them; hopefully the future would be beautiful but what you can certainly do is you can link past and present in African custom and tradition. You not only took care of your family circle. You had to take care of your community too, and this was done by the creation of age regiments. At the time of puberty, the young people went to initiation schools, then they were given an age regiment with a name. When some service was required, it was said *that* age regiment should come forth, maybe to dig a well for the village, [or] to go and catch a wild animal. You had to – men and women had to – be prepared to offer community service as well. So that's why what my real intention was, was a record of this type of activity.

The missionaries came in, and they wanted new services. They wanted schools, they wanted to bring learning in a new form to the people. So you would often find the regiments volunteering to build the mission wall, a part of the mission school, and so on. So that the tradition of self-help goes back very deeply into the culture and the society.

That was one of my intentions. The other intention was to indicate the way in which the society was transformed by one of the traditional rulers known as Khama the Great. So it was a kind of history of social evolution and educational progress. People did something with what the missionaries had brought in because they brought in new forms of learning. You know, this is particularly a bitter thing to black people, their relationship to missionaries. A missionary often had a political role. He learned the language, he translated the Bible into the local African language, and he taught the people in that local language. When there was this violent scramble for Africa, he was enmeshed in it.

But many of us had started our education and our learning. The missionaries initiated schooling, hospitals, and things like that, on donations and grants. Later, governments took over, but all the base of education was introduced by missionaries. In South Africa, you know, [there] used to be the saying: first there came the missionary, then the trader, then the soldier with the gun, and they took our land. People would write to the newspapers and

³² Head's literary agent suggested Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (along with Jan Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village*) as a model she might use for her book on Serowe. Blythe wrote the Foreword to *Serowe*.

say, 'Oh no, the missionaries, they helped us to save our land, you know, and we should put up a statue for these missionaries, and these missionaries ...'³³

You know, the attitude is completely different in Botswana because the people were not trampled by a colonial power. Whereas you would find that the very people who brought in learning and Christianity in other parts are spoken of with great bitterness, although those were people's first schools, of a new kind of learning.

SH: I understand that, but it seems to me that very often in other parts of Africa the missionaries not only brought the new learning but had very little respect for the old learning and tried to smash it, whereas what you're describing is something so much more productive, that the old customs were absorbed so that there was no breaking of the initiation ceremonies and so forth.

BH: Not entirely so. Not entirely so. I will give you an example. This particular reformer – his life spanned quite a time, quite a number of years, a span of ninety years. But he lived long enough to remodel and reshape his society along Christian lines because he was a great Christian convert. He was known as Khama the Great, only because his dedication and commitment to Christianity was absolute. But he had this beautiful balance and harmony in the society. First of all, people had a choice as to whether they wanted to be Christian or not, which I feel is very important. But they had to conform to certain reforms he introduced. The old school – the initiation schools at puberty time – had some dark things in them. Young men and young women were taken into the bush and they were ... the overall pattern was [that] it was a school that was in use for six months, and it was run by the older men. You would find there that they ... it ... the accent really was on character training. Character training. So that youths were beaten and beaten, and then they had to stand up to it and not cry out. They were instructed about sex, reproduction, it was a whole complicated process of instruction for six months.

That was basically the traditional school. But there was a belief that if you took parts of the human body and mixed them with medicines and gave them to initiates to either eat or rub on parts of their body it would bring power and strength. It was a mystical belief that, you know, parts of the human body then conferred power and strength onto those who ... So it involved ritual murder. I have been told by old men, one or two. So what he did, this particular chief who was reforming his society along Christian lines, he abolished the initiation ceremony, the secrecy in the bush. He said, it's done in open. I'll stand here with my missionary. We will then ...

Most of the things that were normally done were still done: the instruction in sex – about sex – and your responsibilities and so on. But the actual ritual of beatings and things, and ritual murder, he took them out, but what was valuable to the society he retained. He still called it 'regiments'. But what was the most valuable to the societies [he kept]; the young men and women initiated at those times and given a name [i.e. their regiment] were still needed for community service.

³³ Head appears here to be imitating a white or at least official voice.

SH: This all sounds very positive. What is your attitude towards living in Botswana?

BH: You know, I think, eventually when I write lines like, ‘Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land,’³⁴ too much of my strength has been needed to survive in the country. I simply feel that I have done the superhuman, that I’ve just been deprived all round and I’ve tried to produce work that is as beautiful as I could possibly make it.

Dorothy Driver taught for many years at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, where she is now an emeritus professor. From 2005 to 2016 she held a professorship in the Discipline of English and Creative Writing at Adelaide University, where she continues to publish as an adjunct researcher. She recently completed a substantial essay on Bessie Head for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia, due for publication in 2020.

³⁴ A *Bewitched Crossroad* (Craighall: Ad Donker, 1984), 196. This is the final line of the last book Head wrote.