

BLUE HILLS

by DAVID MOON (1938–2019); edited by SHELAGH MCLOUGHLIN;
foreword by CREINA ALCOCK

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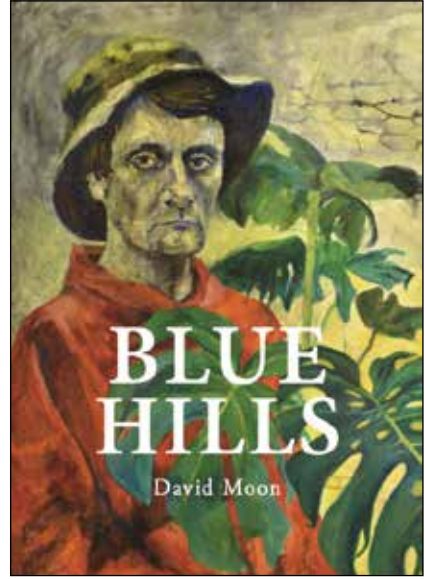
180 pages, family tree, curriculum vitae

DAVID Moon's interesting collection of vignettes, which range from histories of his Cornish and Scottish ancestors in the Colony of Natal to accounts of his own life and career, his struggles with his sexual identity, and his journeys as an artist, teacher and landscape gardener, is named after the house designed by his grandmother (Ivy Moon) and built on his paternal grandparents' estate at Manderston.

In Moon's book, *Blue Hills* becomes an important metaphor for the central themes that help knit the vignettes together: white working-class origins and consequent upward social mobility in Natal, closely allied to land and home ownership, wealth and education.

The political implications for the colonisers' descendants can readily be inferred from Moon's accounts of his teaching career at Ndaleni and Indumiso during the violent civil war in the Pietermaritzburg district in the years preceding 1994 (pp. 133–139), in contrast to his career at Michaelhouse (1969–1976), then a cocoon of white (and expatriate) privilege (pp. 99–101).

Built as a guest house offering 'townspeople' (p. 34) a retreat in the country, *Blue Hills* fell victim to the Great Depression: Moon's grandparents were unable to meet their bond repayments and the property was eventually sold in 1938. The family had to relocate to a rented property in Pietermaritzburg where his grandfather (Sidney Moon),



who had received a 'top-class classical education overseas' (p. 37), had to contend with overseeing the rubbish removal division of the Pietermaritzburg Corporation.

Many years and many owners later, Moon, tempted to buy *Blue Hills* after the 'traumatic experience' (p. 60) of the forced sale, in 1997, of his Clayton Avenue farmhouse, which had important familial associations, revisits *Blue Hills* only to find 'despair and melancholy everywhere' (p. 61). The view of the blue hills and the burnt orange aloes was hidden by bramble and wattle; 'in the disintegrating and dusty interior, where beloved objects once held pride of place, only abandoned remnants remained' (p. 61). A final visit, a few

weeks later, finds the house vandalised beyond recognition: even the slatted bench, which gave Moon an important sense of space, belonging and continuity, had been stolen (p. 63). Moon decides that resurrecting Blue Hills was not a mission he had to fulfil.

Moon is disarmingly honest about the 'flawed dynasty' John Moon, David's great-grandfather, created and the destructive effect his frontier masculinity had on his male descendants (p. 9). He also makes interesting connections between his own need for education and financial security and the needs of his Cornish forbears: transforming the African landscape with his grandmother's amaryllis seeds (p. 16) and refining the indigenous plants on a lavish scale (pp. 6–7) suggests the kind of ambiguous colonial identity which he explores in perhaps the most psychologically revealing vignette in the book – his 'pilgrimage of sorts' to Cornwall (pp. 117–125).

Moon's poorly educated great-grandfather, who arrived in the Colony of Natal in 1879 was an agricultural labourer from Cornwall, who had worked since the age of 12 and whose passage to Natal had been paid by a sponsor (p. 19). By dint of hard work and thrift, he bought the farm Thorner (at Manderston) in 1906 where he lived with his wife (née Hosking, from Truro in Cornwall) and nine children, and eventually ran a profitable maize farm of 26 000 acres (p. 21). The internationally renowned Maize King, as he was known, could afford to retire to Durban in the 1920s.

So highly did John Moon value the importance of a 'gentleman's' education that, when the Moon family returned to England in 1901 for a visit, the two sons, Sid and Bertie, were left behind in

a school in Cornwall, an experience that was profoundly alienating for them both (p. 23). Back in the Colony of Natal, Sid, who never referred to his English educational experiences, established himself as a successful maize farmer on a farm adjoining Thorner named Treeve (after John Moon's home town in Cornwall, p. 121). When his father retired, the farm, which belonged to the wealthy patriarch, was sold and the Blue Hills venture was conceived (p. 26). Sid's struggle with debt and alcoholism eventually resulted in his early death (p. 37) and David Moon attributes his own father's ban on alcohol in the family home to memories of Sid, his alcoholic grandfather (p. 51).

Moon's account of his mother's family (the Munros) traces a similar trajectory. By the age of eleven, his maternal grandfather (Arthur Munro), who was born in Pietermaritzburg, had lost both parents. At the age of 14, Arthur, who had received no schooling at all, returned from Kimberley to Pietermaritzburg, where he worked as a 'cook-housekeeper' (p. 83), eventually marrying Annie Young (born on a farm at Cato Ridge) in the Dutch Reformed Church in Reitz in 1895. She was eighteen; she went on to bear and raise 16 children and died at the age of 54. Her remark that 'she would rather attend a girl's funeral than a wedding' (p. 83) reveals a great deal about the roles of colonial white women of this class in the early twentieth century. The possible suicide of his great-grandmother, Elizabeth Moon (the patriarch's wife), who was reported to have drowned at Cave Rock (pp. 31–33) on the Bluff in Durban in 1927 can also be interpreted as a grim comment on women's lives, even of wealthy ones, living in retirement with the Maize King.¹

At Reitz, Arthur worked for one of the branch stores of Oxenham's: inevitably, the Munro family, members of the small English-speaking community in the Boer-dominated town, had to be moved to a tented camp at Harrismith during the Anglo-Boer War. Moon's account of the experiences of the Munro and Young families during the war and its aftermath makes interesting reading (pp. 83–84).

After the death of Annie in 1931, Arthur lived with David's mother (Sheila) and it was there that David, as a young boy, received from his maternal grandfather his 'first silent lesson in gardening' (p. 67). Before his ill-fated rush to the Kimberley diamond fields, Arthur's father, Hector, a horticulturalist born in Rosskeen in Scotland (p. 67), had been in charge of the gardens at Government House in Pietermaritzburg; it is thus not difficult to appreciate the continuity, through his maternal line, in David's own gardening achievements.

Because of the lack of documentary evidence, Moon's researches into the Munro family and the fates of his maternal great-grandparents (Hector and Elizabeth Munro) present more problems than his paternal ancestors. Moon's account of his journeys, to Kimberley and the old Dutoitspan Cemetery in search of Elizabeth's grave, and to the Northern Drakensberg near Winterton to find the 'final resting place' of Hector, are amongst the most memorable and moving vignettes in the book (pp. 67–77).

What distinguishes David Moon's vignettes from a run-of-the-mill settler family history is his frank account of his homosexuality and his painful journey from his adolescence and the 'lonely plateau, separated from others of my kind' (p. 41) to his troubled relation-

ships with women (pp. 47–48), and, finally, to marriage to his partner, Mark Laing: the links Moon makes between this journey and his creativity as an artist, shaped at one stage by the British artist, Maggi Hambling (pp. 103–107), are revealing.

Framing his account of his journey to Cornwall as a 'mythological pilgrimage' (p. 117), Moon catches the train to Penzance: he describes the journey in meticulous detail, observing the scenery with his painterly eye, evident in many other vignettes, and focuses, rather inconsequentially it seems, on three fellow travellers (a father and his two children).

When Moon finally reaches Treeve Farm and Connor Downs, where John Moon was born, he has a cathartic experience, provoked by the children on the train, in which he recalls and lays to rest his childhood dreams of having three children to inherit the Moon properties in Natal (Thomer, Treeve and Blue Hills): 'I wondered at the quirk of fate that had made me John Moon's grandson, the first born of the first born, before fate ensured that I would not be a father to the next generation' (p. 125).

Although the role of fate is questionable, Moon's final acceptance of his homosexuality in the very heart of heteropatriarchy, where the Moon dynasty was conceived, brings with it a 'strange sense of belonging' (p. 125): he feels accepted 'into the family of ghosts'. Moon concludes the Cornwall section with: 'after a long, long journey, I had finally come home' (p. 125), which suggests the kind of ambiguous identity forged by many white South Africans with British colonial roots.

For Moon, as many of the vignettes and photographs confirm, 'home' was in KwaZulu-Natal, where he lived with his

husband, Mark, and contributed richly, to education, art, diverse South African communities and to the transformation of the landscape he loved. Born, bred and educated in Pietermaritzburg, he nevertheless conceived of a mythical Cornwall in which he, as a childless homosexual, would be welcomed 'home' by his familiar 'shades'. Here Moon forces the reader to interrogate the notions of 'home' and 'belonging', especially in relation to white English-speaking South African identities and inherited settler masculinities.

The book is lavishly illustrated with family photographs and many reproductions of Moon's and colleagues' artworks.² Also incorporated in the collection are reflections by David Moon's sister (pp. 45–46) and a very insightful account, by his partner of 41 years, Mark Laing, of the genesis of his own gay identity, which was publicly valorised by his marriage to David in 2009 (pp. 109–113).³

MICHAEL LAMBERT

NOTES

- 1 Although a dubious spiritualist experience with a medium conjures up the spirit of Moon's great-grandmother, who refutes the suicide allegation and provides an alternative account of her drowning (p. 147).
- 2 Including two fine portraits of David Moon by Heather Gourlay Conyngham and Louisa Eriksen-Miller.
- 3 I noticed the following errors: Indumisa for Indumiso (p. 2); 1879 not 1880 (p. 15); Queen Victoria had been on the throne for 42 years (not 41) when John Moon arrived in the Colony of Natal (p. 19); 1992 (p. 79) is obviously incorrect and, if Sheila Munro (David Moon's mother) was 12 at the time of the move, should be 1924; Dioderus (p. 121) should be Diodorus.