

LIAISONS: LIFE IN A COLONIAL COUNTY

by DUNCAN DU BOIS

Westville: Reach Publishers, 2023

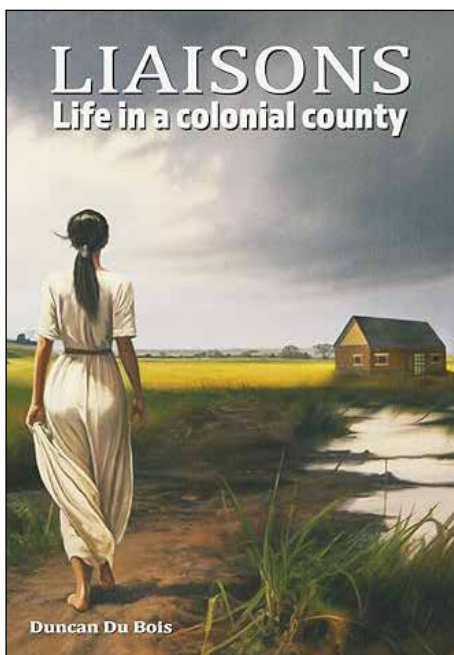
LIAISONS is a novel exploring the development of colonial Natal. The main theme of the story is the experiences of British immigrants. They were enticed by the offer of very reasonably priced Crown land, especially appealing because of the negative consequences of the European Industrial Revolution.

Previous immigrants are well-established when the Prescotts and Harrisons arrive around 1851. It is between these people that political, business and legal liaisons are established. The exploits and adventures of the seven children of these two families in their new communities constitute the main part of the story. Umzinto in Alexandra County is the focus, although Durban and Pietermaritzburg also feature.

The Prescotts' new life centres on sugar farming. The growing domination of a small number of mills enables discussion about sugocracy; likewise the 'problem' of indentured Indian labour working on the farms. The unacceptable behaviour and attitudes directed at these labourers expressed by employers and other locals were intentionally degrading. This is interestingly explored through the relationship between Michael Moodie, the magistrate's son, and Sakira, the daughter of a free man, now a dukawallah. Sugar farming is one of the casualties of an unstable economy, which greatly affects the community.

Victoria Prescott's voice is strong. She opposes immoral attitudes and is also a proponent of the Suffragette movement. Her marriage into a wealthy Durban family provides a canvas to contrast the more sophisticated lifestyle of some urban immigrants with that of the less affluent of Alex County.

Transport in all its forms significantly influences life along the Natal coast. Transport riding is vital for conveying humans and goods to and from Durban. The often-impassable rivers and absence of bridges were an impediment. Anne Prescott, one of the more interesting characters, just prior to her marriage almost



drowns when her coach ends up in the Mkomanzi River. Attempts to improve on this situation by developing shipping links were unsuccessful. To this day, inadequate bridges remain responsible for deaths, particularly of children.

The actions and relationships of the Prescotts are relatively more dominant than those of the Harrisons who run the post office and engage in dressmaking. The latter family's members' lives are largely mirrors of those of the former, although their romantic connections are unique. The book's title suggests that its story could centre on many male/female encounters. To some degree this is so, but the

title is in some ways puzzling as there is only one real liaison. All the other couples become permanently attached quite soon after first meeting one another.

Much passion is expended. There are multiple breasts and cleavages and many of the women are described as voluptuous. While there are frequent references of this sort, men tend not to be described in such obviously physical terms.

Duncan du Bois, as readers of *Natalia* will know, is a leading historian of the Natal South Coast and the sugar industry. He has used his extensive historical knowledge to insert into the record two fictional families. The major challenge of this type of writing is to provide sufficient contextual atmospheric detail and authentic dialogue without confusing the two. In some cases in this novel, the characters speak as if delivering small lectures directed more at the present-day reader rather than their nineteenth century contemporaries; while some of the background is overladen with facts and figures one would not expect in a novel.

This story no doubt reflects the everyday life of many settlers. It is informative, interesting and enlightening and noteworthy for its portrayal of female characters. But as a novel it might have benefited from greater concentration on and development of some of the stronger female characters to provide a stronger thread to the story. As it stands, it reads like a collection of overlapping cameos.

GLADYS FORBES

Duncan du Bois adds contextual comment on critical fabulation

Critical fabulation, a term coined in 2008 by African-American historian and cultural scholar, Saidiya Hartman, came about from her researches of the lives, conditions and experiences of slaves in the United States. Hartman's pioneering work has encouraged others such as Carole Boston Weatherford to apply critical fabulation in mining new insights of the history of African-Americans.¹ Derived from the Latin word *fabula* (story), fabulation involves the conjuring of elements and voices in recreating a lost narrative. Essentially, then, critical fabulation is the insertion of credible experiences in the gaps and silences of the archival record.

In a ground-breaking article, Hartman ascribed the name Venus to an emblematic figure of the enslaved women who crossed the Atlantic to America.² Of Venus she wrote that her fate was the same as every other black Venus: 'no one remembered their names or recorded what they said or observed.' Nothing is known about their actual circumstances, everyday life, thoughts and vulnerability.³ Apart from the bare reference in a ledger maintained by Venus's captors, there was no record of the degradation, abuse, beatings, violence and deaths countless black female slaves suffered: 'The account books identified them as units of value; the invoices claimed them as property.'⁴

Hartman's motivation was to 'loosen Venus's tongue after silent centuries' to resurrect disfigured lives from circumstances that were indifferent and callous in the extreme. She described her task as producing 'counter history' but qualified that by stating that she 'did not operate outside the economy of statements.'⁵ Through her writings she humanised the victims of appalling suffering and rendered deep understanding of circumstances that conventional historical accounts gloss over. At the same time, she has adduced numerous questions that have erected new frontiers of historical scrutiny and understanding.

Building on Hartman's research direction, Fanny Wendt Hojer has criticised conventional histories for reinforcing masculine roles in colonial accounts. By exploring acts of resistance by females she has opened histories to wider appreciation and the rethinking of alternatives.⁶ Other examples of the application of fabulations include Daniela Rosner. By reworking research methods, she challenges the dominant paradigms of history's landscape using computational systems in constructing critical fabulations.⁷

Haitian historian, Michel Rolph Trouillot explored two types of silence: the powers at work in making and recording history and those about which the official records are silent.⁸ He ascribes those to the failure of conventional Western accounts to acknowledge the

Haitian Revolution as the most successful slave revolt in history. Sarah Levin-Richardson and Deborah Kamen have applied critical fabulation in examining Greco-Roman sexual slavery.⁹ Their efforts have countered, to a degree, the absence of personal accounts of the sexual lives of slaves in antiquity. A collaborative research project by the Society of Australian Genealogists is focused on the lives of convict women in New South Wales during the colonial era. By reimagining their lives, the gaps and silences in archival records are illuminated.¹⁰

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Goldblatt have added another dimension to critical fabulation by seeing it as 'wringing insights from seeming incidentals.'¹¹ Their observation was very much at play in applying substance to the history on which *Liaisons* is based. A brief reference in one of the sources used noted fire, frost and flood as the great fears of sugar planters. That reference provided the opportunity to create a fictional scenario in which half the sugar crop on an estate was reduced to ashes. But there the fiction ended. The twenty lashes meted out by the estate owner to the fictional indentured labourer responsible for the fire was typical of what occurred in such circumstances during those times.¹²

Fabulations in *Liaisons* that proved useful in exploring thinking and in probing issues beyond their limited mention in official sources were: letters to the press, the Cutty Sark pub, public meetings and court room dramas. Each in their own way afforded opportunity to 'wring substance', as Gallagher and Goldblatt succinctly express it, from events or issues that conventional histories either ignore or gloss over.

NOTES

- 1 Carole Boston Weatherford, *Kin Rooted in Hope* (New York: Atheneum Books, 2023).
- 2 Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in two acts' *Small Axe* 12(2) 2008.
- 3 *ibid.*: 2.
- 4 *ibid.*: 3.
- 5 *ibid.*: 2–4, 13.
- 6 Fanny Wendt Hojer, 'The past isn't what it used to be: critical fabulation and remembering revolt' *TFL* 2020: 2–3.
- 7 Daniela Rosner, *Critical Fabulations: Reworking Methods and Margins of Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).
- 8 Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
- 9 Sarah Levin-Richardson and Deborah Kamen, 'Epigraphy and critical fabulation: imagining narratives of Greco-Roman sexual slavery' in *Dynamic Epigraphy: New Approaches to Inscriptions* edited by E. Cousins (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2022).
- 10 See ironcladsisterhood.sag.org.au
- 11 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Goldblatt, *Practicing the New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 124.
- 12 Duncan du Bois, *Liaisons: Life in a Colonial County* (Westville: Reach Publishers, 2023): 104–105.