Going on (literary) pilgrimage: constructing the Rider Haggard literary trail

Lindy Stiebel, English Studies, UKZN

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages

(Chaucer 1970:1)
Though Chaucer, in this extract from the General Prologue to Canterbury Tales quoted above, is describing the excitement of people in the fourteenth century going on a religious pilgrimage; there is something similar in the anticipation with which people today embark on the secular pilgrimages that are literary trails. Such journeys to visit a place linked to a writer, or which features in his or her writings, are certainly not a new phenomenon and can be understood as a form of homage, a paying of tribute by literary pilgrims to works of fiction and writers within landscapes or settings they have made famous.

Literary tours understood very broadly as journeys inspired by books can be thought of as dating from the fifth century BC with Herodotus and The Histories, a work which inspired many Greeks and, later, Romans to visit the shores of the Nile River in search of the wonders described. In the sense in which literary tourism is understood as visiting the homes and haunts of literary figures, it is more common when tracing its development to look at late eighteenth and particularly nineteenth century England with the popularity of the Grand Tour to classical Europe for eighteenth century travellers, and, in the nineteenth century, the interest focussed on the Lake District and Romantic poets; together with the attention given to George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens and others. Pamela Parker, who has a special interest in Victorian women writers, notes:

By the late nineteenth century, literary tourism flourished throughout Britain. With the rapid growth of international print culture in the nineteenth century, British women writers were increasingly defined as literary icons, and their homes became popular destinations for a rising number of British and American visitors. Literary pilgrims from around the world invested the British landscape with a literary significance that publishing, transportation, and related travel industries were only too happy to exploit. Popular print media published portable memoirs, guidebooks, periodicals, postcards, postcards and maps to an increasingly literate and mobile reading public.

(Parker 2005:1)
Christina Hardyment’s recent book Literary Trails: British Writers in their Landscapes (****) consolidates the position of Britain, not surprisingly, as the primary locus of literary tourism concerning writers using the English language – her chapters range from Glastonbury Tor linked to the Arthurian legends, Hardy’s ‘Wessex’/Dorset, Wordsworth’s Lake District and Cornwall, the setting of Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca – among many other places. In the English-speaking world more widely, however, a cursory trawl through the internet will give a hint of how widespread literary trails have become in the First World: I will only mention – to show global range - the Literary Tour of Scotland, the Aotearoa New Zealand Literary Map and, my current favourite, the Literary Map of Manhattan, amongst many others on the web. All link writers and specific locations or areas, some constructed as a sequential trail with a beginning and end, or as isolated single locations.

Literary trails, however, wherever they are located are not restricted in contemporary times to trails about works which have been judged ‘classics’, in the sense of ‘great’ literature. The recent craze for Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code, for example, which combines strands of historical fact and fancy in a thriller format, has led to a number of packaged literary tours including a “Cracking the Da Vinci Code” tour of the Louvre, a “Secrets of the Da Vinci Code” tour through the Louvre and St Sulpice, and yet another tour to the seventeenth century Chateau de Vilette near Versailles at $4500 for five nights in the chateau. The British locations of this bestseller are catered for by a tour through the book’s London locations. Similarly popular, the Harry Potter books have inspired a number of tours titled Harry Potter Fan Trips which take in Oxford and London filming locations, treasure hunts and quasi-scientific wizarding options.

What prompts people to go on literary pilgrimages? In Chaucer’s poem, pilgrims have Canterbury cathedral, the final resting place of St Thomas Becket, a saint with healing powers, as their goal. They are en route to give thanks for perceived favours bestowed, to pay homage to a great man in their estimation and to enjoy doing this in the company of others like-minded
(though, in reality, Chaucer describes a great many representatives of English society of his time thrown together, not all as focussed as others on their pilgrimage).

The starting point must be the book (or nowadays perhaps the screen adaptation of the book) and behind the book, the writer (see Stiebel 2004:33). However, occasionally, with universally recognised names like ‘Shakespeare’ perhaps the book is unnecessary as an introduction – Shakespeare as originator of the collection of places and cultural practices that make up ‘Shakespeare’s World’ is enough. Literary tourism, being predicated on reading at a fairly sophisticated level is automatically aimed at a fairly select kind of tourist: in Fusell’s terms the “traveller… positioned more in bourgeois nostalgia” rather than the “tourist” who is more low-brow, positioned more in the “moment” (Fusell 1980:****). Robinson and Andersen remark too on the primacy of reading, a generally solitary act, for literary tourism:

Literary tourism, it might be argued, is based on the subjective act of reading, an initially intimate and private activity where the reader engages in ‘self-making’. Such ‘self-making’ is echoed in the tourist’s search for the sites, symbols, places and experiences encountered in literature.

(2003: 52)

With those books which particularly resonate with readers - which are meaningful because they capture experiences, events, characters which mean something to their readers - the desire to visit sites linked to the writer or the book can assume the purpose of a pilgrimage as discussed earlier: to pay homage to the writer or to recapture a moment from the book, to ‘find’ oneself in the way described by Robinson and Andersen above. Such secular pilgrimages are tied to place in the same way as religious ones are – the abstract reasons for making the journey find
concrete expression in reaching a specific site; which is imbued with semiotic and symbolic significance. Religious pilgrims as those described by Chaucer are heading to the cathedral which houses the mortal remains of St Thomas Becket; their goal in reality a mass of stone block and some bones but invested with significance beyond these mundane realities. So too the bed that Emily Brontë slept in is just that – a rather uncomfortable-looking bed, probably restored – but to the literary pilgrim it signifies a) that she existed at all b) that she too slept like us despite being the creator of a work like Wuthering Heights and c) that we, ordinary mortals, might also have creative potential. I’m sure there are other ‘signifieds’.

Physical literary sites, especially homes filled with domestic objects, convince us of the physicalness of the authors that used them and, therefore, of our link to them no matter how complex or ethereal their prose, or their temporal distance from us. Herbert captures this kind of literary tourist well:

Visitors to literary places come for a variety of reasons. Some are genuine ‘students’ of an author or a text and gain a great deal of pleasure from sight of a writing table or a lock of hair; for such people the visit is experiential and they look at, and feel in awe of, the setting in which they find themselves and the ‘meanings’ which that place possesses.

(Herbert 1995: 13)

Sites on literary trails need not only be domestic, though there does seem to be a particular attraction for the private spaces of writers – the home, the study, the bed, the clothes:
The home of the writer provides a focus for pilgrimage because it is assumed to have been a central influence on the generation of the writer’s creative works, almost as a reflection or extension of their character.

(Robinson and Andersen 2003: 16)

Authenticity is important here – it is important to have these domestic sites presented as authentically as possible, to be presented “faithfully and to convey the ‘atmosphere’ in which the writer lived” (Herbert 1995: 13). This is ruined by the literary pilgrim’s suspicions, when for example a number of supposed competing houses ‘where X lived’ are offered up like so many fake ‘pardons’ offered by Chaucer’s Pardoner, or so many pairs of Sheba’s breasts in Africa (six at last count).

Beyond the domestic sites are geographic areas described within books as ‘setting’ or whole areas which become identified with a writer – such as Wordsworth’s Lake District or the Yorkshire moors of the Brontës. Faulkner’s Yoknapatawa has the additional complication of being a fictional area and name, yet based on known locations in his home state of Mississippi. South African examples of ‘worlds’ or extended settings might be Herman Charles Bosman’s Groot Marico district, and the writers of District Six in Cape Town, and Sophiatown and Soweto in Johannesburg. In all these locations literary pilgrims look to match writer to locations depicted in their writing:

We increasingly come across tourists exploring the world as depicted in literature, discovering real locations used in fiction and seeking to correlate fictional locations with some markers of
Literary trails like this depend on the kind of writer (or group of writers) linked not only to one specific spot but whose writing has conjured up for readers an area, a world, a coherent space. Such a region is frequently viewed with nostalgia: the adult remembering favourite childhood books or recalling the pleasure derived from a book with characters and a landscape that 'spoke' in some way to that person. Readers moved in this way by their reading may want to visit the landscape they have read about in the book – an example would be to visit the part of Botswana that is the domain of Mma Ramotswe, lady detective in Alexander McCall Smith’s popular series; or when it comes to a group of writers an example might Bloomsbury in London. A literary trail in such an area or ‘world’ will inevitably be a construct; in effect a strung together narrative linking places sequentially in an environment which may in fact have had a far less seamless coexistence with the writer. Robinson and Andersen note the desire in trails for a sequence which makes ‘sense’:

…the tourist trail gives order (often an artificial order) to a sequence of locations, which are selected for inclusion in the trail because together they will make sense, form a whole.

(2003:9)
Literary Trail, which is included in each conference pack. For the rest of my talk I would like to look at two issues concerning the construction of this trail, in the light of the general points made above.

The first issue to consider is the choice of subject: why a Rider Haggard trail? A few reasons spring to mind: the quick and glib answer is that Stephen Coan and I who together drew up the trail pamphlet both have an interest in, and much information about, this writer, both of us having published a book apiece on Haggard in relation to his years spent in South Africa and the writings which resulted from this period. In summary, you can read that Haggard visited South Africa three times on British government business. Most notably, his first visit to South Africa from 1875-1881 featured KwaZulu Natal prominently and it is this period that provided the information and inspiration for his subsequent bestseller ‘African’ texts (such as King Solomon's Mines (1885), She (1886), Alan Quatermain (1887) and Nada the Lily (1892)).

Secondly, Haggard is a writer closely tied to ‘place’, setting. He is potentially an interesting candidate for literary tourism in KZN as his reputation was made from his African romances, which are very closely tied to the exotic African landscape he created (see Stiebel 2001), much of which was bound to romantic evocations of Zululand. That Haggard’s ‘Zululand’ is a blend of fact and fancy has not stopped various establishments linking themselves to his writing and settings. Because of his link with Isandlwana and the Anglo-Zulu battle that took place there – about which he wrote in his diaries and which features in his novels The Witch’s Head (1884), Black Heart and White Heart (1896) and Finished (1917), the final volume of his trilogy dealing with the history of the Zulus in the nineteenth century – there is a good chance of battlefield tourists taking an interest in Haggard and such a trail.

His popularity as a writer in his day and the ongoing sales of his works (King Solomon’s Mines for instance has never been out of print) speak for a resonance with Victorian readers eager to read adventures set in colonial ‘exotic’ Africa, and nowadays suggests a nostalgia for a bygone,
romanticised, wild ‘Zululand’ of childhood reading, the setting of farfetched imperialist tales. However, lesser known details about Haggard’s life – such as his meeting with John Dube, first president of the ANC, and their discussion about the plight of the Zulus – also give weight to an author who to some might seem only a boy’s own adventure story writer, and an imperialist at that.

Lastly, the few, disconnected efforts by tour operators (some poorly informed) to capitalise on ‘Haggard links’ means there are already some sites which could be linked together but with a pamphlet wherein writer and place/s could be authentically brought together.

That there has been in the past interest in visiting ‘Haggard’s South Africa’ expressed by the Rider Haggard Society in England also leads one to believe there will be those who specifically wish to embark on such a literary pilgrimage, as well as more broadly cultural tourists who might go on the trail or parts thereof whilst primarily visiting KwaZulu Natal for its battlefields or culture.

The second issue I would like to raise is to look at the constructed nature of this trail, true - it is suggested above - of all literary trails. In effect, we have, as Robinson and Andersen suggest, created a narrative of our own which gives a circularity and neatness to Haggard’s time in KZN which it certainly didn’t have in reality. The trail lends a sequence to Haggard’s life that is in the interest of the tourist who is taken on a more or less circular route around the province stopping off at places with a ‘Haggard link’.
The trail leads one from Durban, the port town and obvious beginning for Haggard arriving by sea in 1875 and tourists arriving by air in 2005 (or already living in Durban for locals keen to try this out). We dispel the myth of the Rider Haggard house on the Berea beloved of estate agents (he did not own property in Durban) and point out it was Allan Quatermain, Haggard’s fictional hero, who was said to keep a house on the Berea. From this starting point the route leads to Pietermaritzburg, the administrative capital of the region in 1875 where Haggard as an employee of Sir Henry Bulwer stayed at Government House (now part of UNISA). From there we proceed to Estcourt where one of several pairs of Sheba’s breasts can be seen – we use the word ‘allegedly’ to indicate doubt on this issue. Newcastle is a natural night stopover as Haggard’s farmhouse Hilldrop is maintained as a B&B establishment replete with Haggard memorabilia. This house is renamed Mooifontein, referring to Haggard’s novel Jess (1887) and was a place of marital happiness as it was here that his only son Jock was born. From the homestead, Haggard could hear the battle of Majuba fought and it was in this house that the peace terms of the First Anglo-Boer War were negotiated and signed, the house having been rented from the Haggards for this purpose.

The next day could see the traveller moving on to the battlefield of Isandlwana featured, as mentioned earlier, in some of Haggard’s novels and a popular tourist attraction in its own right. The stop at Mkuze where Tshaneni or Ghost Mountain, featured in Nada the Lily, is found highlights the constructed nature of the trail plus the power of the creative imagination – as powerful as Haggard’s description of the mountain and surrounding terrain is, he never actually visited the area. The local hotel Ghost Mountain Inn will not be pleased to have this pointed out as they make much of the association with Haggard as a physical visitor to the region (“This is the desk that Haggard sat at”), whereas here in fact is an example of a writer creating an environment in his mind, presumably reconstructed from accounts he had heard during his young adult days in Natal. Zululand he only visited in 1914, some years after writing his novels about the area. The good news for this hotel, however, is that it would be a good overnight stop on the route, with the third day bringing the constructed loop to a close in Durban, via Eshowe – featured in Finished.

In terms of layout the creative designers of the trail, in collaboration with ourselves, aimed for a ‘bookish’ feel to the pamphlet. In appearance the desired look is that of a book dustjacket with ‘typewriter’ lettering, running red dots like ellipses, further reading suggested, a map of the routes and information on suggested accommodation listed on the back cover together with
acknowledgements as in a dustjacket. The Zulu Kingdom logo is that of the provincial tourist authority, Tourism KZN – which itself trades on a nostalgic construction of the region as a royal ‘romantic savage’ stronghold; well in keeping with the appeal of Haggard to his first (and perhaps even ongoing?) audience. This perhaps lends some weight to the pamphlet as an ‘authentic’ tourist guide. Though Tourism KZN has not financially supported the making of the pamphlet and have not even seen it yet, they will allow us to leave copies of the Trail in their central information office. We will distribute the pamphlet to the various lodges and hotels mentioned and also to the Rider Haggard Society in England, the most likely target groups of fans or literary pilgrims.

So much for the Rider Haggard Trail which will hopefully be the first of others in a series. Which other writers are likely candidates for a literary trail in this region? An obvious candidate in terms of his high profile both internationally and nationally is Alan Paton, known primarily as author of Cry, the Beloved Country (1948). Carol de Kock, who is doing her doctoral work on Paton has in mind to construct such a trail. But how about widening the subject beyond the dead white male category – perhaps here is where ‘constructing’ trails becomes especially significant because part of a trailmaker's brief in KZN might be to foster a tourism interest where one doesn't seem 'obviously' to reside: instead of working on ‘famous’ standalone writers – inevitably in South Africa during apartheid those who had access to educational and publishing opportunities – who are few and far between; how about selecting an area where a number of linked (or not) writers might have lived, live or write about? An area like Inanda for example already has a heritage trail for tourists but could make more of the writing of John Dube, Credo Mutwa, and Mewa Ramgobin, even of Mahatma Gandhi given the heritage site of Gandhi’s printing press en route. Pietermaritzburg could feature Bessie Head’s birthplace, places linked to Tom Sharpe, James McClure and the Dhlomo brothers, HIE and RRR, born nearby. The Grey Street area in Durban could have a wonderful trail that links together apartheid history, the mosque (already a tourist site), Aziz Hassim, Pyllis Naidoo and Fatima Meer. Similar links could be made in ‘Cato Manor’ area for writers like Ronnie Govender, Mi Hlatswayo and Kessie Govender – again a museum of Cato Manor has been established in the area which provides added interest and historical background for the tourist; if not specifically literary pilgrim.

But this is all in the future which may or may not come to pass – readers with enough enthusiasm for writers whose works they like remain the driving force: the literary pilgrims, like the assorted band of in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales with which my paper began. Positively
speaking, literary tourism – using a combination of websites, films, literary museums and festivals (all of which we have in this province but could further foster) – might become a part of what Robinson called a ‘new’ literacy wherein “new audiences for creative writings are being forged, arguably reflecting new ways of storytelling and a shift, not back to the oral traditions whose passing was mourned by Benjamin (1936) and Ong (1982) but forward to a genesis of multimedia, hypersensory ‘traditions’” (2003:73).

The work of the NRF Literary Tourism in KZN project with its linked writer/place website, documentary films, student projects and now first trail might be seen as a step in the direction of such a ‘new’ literacy with its next generation of literary consumers who wish one day to visit places because of what someone once wrote about them.

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