With *Hazara – Elegy for an African Farm* John Conyngham (a featured author on the KZN Literary Tourism website) has broken the long silence following the publication in 1998 of his novel *The Lostness of Alice*; the final book in a thematically connected trilogy, its predecessors being *The Arrowing of the Cane* and *The Desecration of the Graves*.

The epigraph to *The Lostness of Alice*, drawn from Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa*, ‘If I know a song of Africa does Africa know a song of me?’, could also apply to *Hazara*, an exploration of white identity and belonging in Africa, more specifically that of the English-speaking South African. Part memoir, part history, part personal meditation, *Hazara* is the story of a sugar farm north of Durban and the family who lived on it for five decades during the last century.
The Arrowing of the Cane was set on the same farm, or if not the same, certainly its palimpsest, where owner James Colville, haunted by a colonial past and a claustrophobic present, knocks back the J&B as cane fields burn in the night and he feels compelled to write a first-person account articulating his predicament.

The Arrowing of the Cane, which won several awards, and in its British edition drew praise from, among others, Colm Tóibín, was dedicated to ‘Mia Woollam, in memory’. When Mia (née Keith-Fraser) married James Woollam in 1924 her father bought her a farm as a dowry. Its undulating hills planted with vivid green fields of cane were offset by the blue of the Indian Ocean in the distance. James named the farm Hazara as a reminder of his service in the 106th Hazara Pioneers during World War One; the Hazaras being one of the peoples of Afghanistan drawn under the umbrella of the British Raj.

The shadow of the imperial project is ever present in Hazara, as Conyngham explains in an author’s note: ‘(Hazara) is also the story of a diaspora of men and women who were borne across the globe on an imperial tide that has since receded. As a child and youth I caught the era’s afterglow, as one sees at twilight the salmon-pink suffusion of a sun that has already set.’

In time, Mia and James’s ownership of the farm was passed on to their adopted daughter Anne and her husband Mick Conyngham, the author’s parents.

The story of Mia and James, Anne and Mick, and their extended families, provides the warp and weft of time and memory at the heart of Hazara. Yes, there are the drinks on the veranda and the tennis parties, but behind such surface distractions Conyngham details the accidents, happy and tragic, that make up the real work of living: childhood deaths, abandoned marriages, adoptions, fractured families. Hopes, dreams, lives abruptly ended by two world wars. The relentless harvest of time.

Meanwhile the farmhouse stands silent witness to the comings and goings within its walls but it too is not untouched, morphing over time from a colonial affair with corrugated-iron roof and veranda to an architect-designed structure emblematic of seemingly contented success.
Change is always the imperative in life and the Sixties and Seventies found Mick Conyngham (the likely model for James Colville in *The Arrowing of the Cane*) contemplating 'the prospect of a liberated Africa’ and how rising anger in apartheid South Africa ‘was finding expression in arson, for each night … banks of orange would be seen advancing menacingly through the darkness.’ Succumbing to his fears and intuitions, Mick sold the farm in 1977.

The story is book-ended by Conyngham’s recollections of his last farewell visit to ‘what I had always considered my home for life’ and an epilogue featuring a present-day trip to the ‘environs of Hazara’; emphatically not the farm itself, as ‘the real farm would contaminate the mythological one that for years I had been piecing together.’

That careful ‘piecing together’ – Conyngham’s painstaking research – shines through in every sentence; lyrical sentences to linger over, and complemented by photographs which atmospherically interact with the text. Clear-eyed, unsentimental but nonetheless poignant, *Hazara* is a consummate elegy for a home and a family, and a valuable contribution to the South African story.

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*Hazara – Elegy for a South African Farm* by John Conyngham was first published by the [Natal Society Foundation](http://natalfoundation.org.za). It is now available as a paperback published by Shuter and Shooter.