

*Boerejood* by Julian Roup (Jacana)

6 February 2005

Julian Roup left South Africa in 1980, at the age of 30, convinced that there was no future for him or his children in South Africa. Indeed, he was convinced that there was only a very dark future for South Africa itself, apparently irredeemably committed to Nationalist rule, with an entrenched minority in power, a “bull-necked tribe of biltong and boerewors eaters, worshippers of rugby players” determined to fight it out to the last drop of blood.

Roup now feels that he made a mistake – not necessarily in emigrating, but in anticipating such a dark future. “I was wrong in my analysis,” he writes. “I had been wrong about [the Afrikaners] and as a result my life was now in England, my children English.”

Of course, he was not alone in his emigration and in his mistake. What makes him uncommon is that he has come back to enquire into, as it were, the roots of his mistake: why did the Afrikaners, with their backs to the wall, opt not to fight it out but to negotiate?

Roup’s interest in this question, indeed his focus on the Afrikaners as the agents of transition, is by his own admission a matter of his dual identity as Boerejood. Son of an Afrikaans mother whom he idolised and a Jewish father whom he reveres, he is fascinated by the dynamic that brought such an apparently intransigent “tribe” to the negotiating table, and, once there, to accept terms that many of them now regard as too conciliatory, detrimental to the ultimate destiny of the Afrikaner.

Roup devotes the first few chapters of his book to tracing his own family line, a vigorous hybrid of Paarl farming stock and Lithuanian trading stock. His mother was clearly in almost all respects a woman of her time and place, a conservative Christian; her one apostasy was falling in love with a Jew. Roup affectionately, almost reverently, recounts her ancestry and early life – at times, one feels, somewhat gullibly, in accepting as literal truth what most Afrikaners would regard as rural legends (the story of the boy trapped in a crevice and having to be shot by his own father has made more than one appearance in Afrikaans literature).

The book does not purport to be “representative” in any way. Roup consciously omitted to read Herman Giliomee’s comprehensive *The Afrikaners*, fearing that it would dominate his own more modest project. *Boerejood* quite frankly focuses on the Western Cape, because that is the area Roup knew as a young man; and even here, it unapologetically confines itself, with rare exceptions, to a few white Afrikaner intellectuals. Stellenbosch features rather more prominently than its national significance merits, and the beauties of the Western Cape are extolled to an extent that its northern neighbours may find trying.

But Roup is not conducting a head-count or compiling a tourist guide to South Africa: he is giving us, as faithfully as possible, his impressions of a few individuals whom he found interesting and enlightening. Certainly the statements he elicits from them are, if not necessarily authoritative or representative, intriguing as debating points.

It is quite clear that Roup does not always agree with his interlocutors, but he rarely finds it necessary to say so. His interviewees, in any case constantly contradict each other: his

aim is not so much to manufacture consent as to construct an informed debate. Nor does he interview people in order to expose them to the world: he is genuinely interested in what they have to say, and if he disagrees with them, does not make his disagreement the point of the interview.

His title, like Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*, signals a certain self-consciousness, even self-centredness; the focus is emphatically a personal one. He says, debatably, "The first rule for a writer, it seems to me, is a certain amount of self-indulgence and inward focus." This does not prevent him, however, from keeping his eyes and his ears wide open, and he does not impose his preconceptions on the people he talks to and the places he visits.

It is not always clear who the book's intended readership is. At times Roup seems to want to inform his readers of quite basic facts about Afrikaners; at other times he seems to be assuming that he will be read mainly by Afrikaners: he does not, for instance, translate the many Afrikaans words, phrases and sentences in the book, and ends on what would appear to be a plea addressed to Afrikaners.

No doubt the book could serve both to inform the uninformed and to interest the interested; its value lies in its openness to experience and its sincere desire to learn.

Whereas, as quite a few ex-pat novels have demonstrated, it would be all too easy to search for confirmation of his decision to leave, Roup is wide open to regret and reconsideration. Having made his life elsewhere, he does not exactly decide to come back, but he is honest enough to count the cost of what he has lost, and generous enough to declare it. As an account of one man's return to his native land, it is moving and engrossing.

The book has its editorial lapses. Roup, no doubt absent-mindedly, calls Herman Charles Bosman an Afrikaans author, and, less seriously, confuses Oleander with Pittosporum, which he spells Petisporum.

Perhaps more damagingly, he is shaky on the spelling of many of the names he invokes so confidently. So Etienne Leroux becomes Ettiene le Roux, and his trilogy *To a Dubious Salvation* becomes simply *Dubious Salvation*; George Weideman becomes George Wydeman, Thinus de Jongh becomes Tinus de Jonge and Jannie Gagiano becomes Gaggiano throughout. These things are not critical, but they do detract from the concern for accuracy and respect for his subject that characterise this thoughtful and entertaining book.