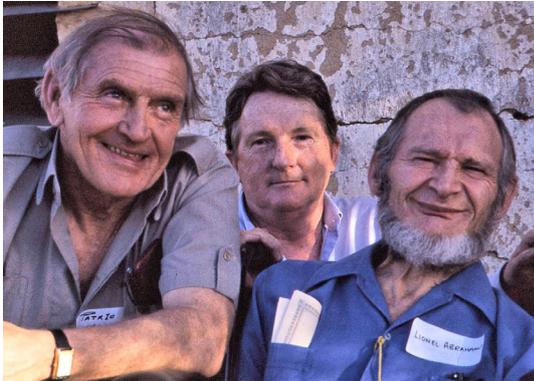


**Stephen Gray (1941—2020)****Craig MacKenzie**

Patrick Mynhardt, Stephen Gray and Lionel Abrahams in 1993 in front of the school where Herman Charles Bosman taught.
Photo: Anthony Akerman.

I first met Stephen in 1987 or 1988, soon after I started work at an institution (the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown) on whose board he served as an expert adviser. And expert he certainly was, but this was mixed with a peculiar perverseness and wilful blindness, as I was later to discover.

From this meeting of novice and expert, we went on to establish a literary partnership that extended from the early 1990s till the early 2010s. In 1991 Stephen hired me as a lecturer at what was then the Rand Afrikaans University (later the University of Johannesburg), where I became his successor as professor and head of department. We were in close contact until a few years ago. I therefore knew him well—or as well as one can ever know a person who will always remain an enigma. His death has left an emptiness in me that I cannot quite explain.

Gray is frequently described as South Africa's foremost literary historiographer, and few would dispute this. From the publication of his doctoral thesis as *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979) to *Freelancers and Literary Biography in South Africa* (1999) and on to biographies of Beatrice Hastings (2004) and Herman Charles Bosman (2005), he was an assiduous chronicler of South Africa's complex literary history.

His anthologies of South African literature were epoch-shaping. Here one thinks of the hugely successful *Writers' Territory* (1973, 1999), *The Penguin Book of South African Verse* (1989), and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary South African Short Stories* (1993), among numerous other anthologies that brought into public view major and emerging writers alike.

His own novels, plays and poetry collections number in the dozens, many of them reflecting his quirkiness as well as keen interest in local history and lore. His academic articles and more popular work (notably for the *Mail & Guardian*) constitute a massive oeuvre of scholarship and literary detective work. In this last role he was pre-eminent. I never met anyone who had spent more time and effort poring over documents in archives in South Africa and all over the world—from Australia to America and dozens of locations in between.

We collaborated for over a decade on the Anniversary Edition of the works of Herman Charles Bosman, a 14-volume set that appeared in pairs from 1998 to 2005, but that required years of preparatory work and led to spin-offs that lasted until *The Complete Voorkamer Stories* (2011), a project of mine, but to which he generously contributed.

I could devote many thousands of words to his massive output but want to pause on a word I have just used that no one would associate with Stephen Gray: generosity. His reputation is quite the opposite. He was often seen as mean-spirited, bitchy, given to fits of spite and feuding. And he was all of these things. But he also offered his time to me very selflessly—guiding me and introducing me to scores of writers and academics in South Africa and abroad.

Craig MacKenzie was Professor of English at the University of Johannesburg until his early retirement at the end of 2017. He was editor of *English in Africa* from 1995 to 2005 and with Stephen Gray edited the Anniversary Edition of the works of Herman Charles Bosman between 1998 and 2005. In 2016 he relocated to Somerset West, where he now works as a freelance editor.

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He was, to use a phrase characteristic of a bygone era (one in which he happily immersed himself), a ‘man of parts.’ Generous and petty, funny and humourless, immensely perspicacious and whimsically blind to the obvious, he probably infuriated as many people as he inspired.

I learnt that he often constructed a theory about something and then later sought the facts to fit this fiction. But he could also be devastatingly accurate about detail. So I had to pick my way through this literary minefield with immense care. He could be duplicitous (he hid from me the fact that he was writing a biography of the writer we had both spent decades working on) and vindictive (he tore into me if I collaborated with anyone he regarded as a rival). But he also taught me more about literary research than anyone I have ever met, and he casually tossed me the gift of editing one of the best-known and most-loved works in the entire canon of South African literature—Herman Charles Bosman’s *Mafeking Road*.

Why does his death leave me feeling empty? He was not a warm, empathetic person whose passing one mourns in an unambiguous way. The best answer I can come up with is that his death is also the death of an entire era for me—an era in which South African literature was largely uncharted and intoxicatingly open to discovery and adventure.

To the best of my knowledge, Stephen Gray never used a computer or cell phone. The internet and cyberspace in general were utterly unknown to him. His immense achievements were solely the product of energetic legwork, typewriting, posting and receiving mail and, most of all, being on the spot, whether this was visiting an expat South African’s residence in the south of France (my first assignment with him was to take some photographs there) or in the dust of the Marico on Bosman’s trail. This is how I choose to remember him.

Somerset West
2 November 2020