

Chapter Four:

A relationship over many years: Stella Blakemore and J.L. van Schaik Publishers

Introduction

Stella Blakemore was a prolific writer. Her letters to her publishers are generally written in a conversational style and sometimes contain fairly personal information. The tone of the letters she received from various persons at J.L. van Schaik, however, is far more guarded, restrained and formal. Countless of the publisher's letters include a paragraph or sentence to explain an unnecessary delay in responding to a letter or request from Blakemore, contributing to an impression that they were continuously falling behind in replying to the sometimes unstoppable flow of letters from their author.

Records show that Blakemore had corresponded with at least three persons in the Van Schaik firm. For many years, she corresponded solely with the head of the firm, J.L. van Schaik. He was also the person she liased with when she was living in Pretoria from 1935 to 1947. During that time, she got to know the Van Schaik family, including J.L. van Schaik's wife and his sons, fairly well. On financial matters, she sometimes corresponded with Mr Bosman, the firm's accountant, but these letters were very formal and official. From the early 1950s, when she and her husband already lived in Kumasi, she intermittently corresponded with J.L. van Schaik and his son, Jan van Schaik, but from 1954 she writes exclusively to Jan. The first recorded transaction between Blakemore and J.L. van Schaik is confirmed in a letter, dated 19 January 1931, from J.L. van Schaik to Mrs Emma Blakemore, in which Van Schaik accepts for publication Blakemore's play, *Die Goue Sleutel*, for which she was to receive a cash payment of £12.10.0.

On the surface, it seems peculiar that her correspondence with the firm was conducted solely in English, given that Blakemore was an author of fiction in

Afrikaans and that the firm specialised in the production of Afrikaans literature.¹ However, Blakemore's first encounter with the firm was with its founder, J.L. van Schaik, 1931. J.L. van Schaik was a Dutch speaker. Blakemore could speak and write Afrikaans, but not Dutch, since she completed her schooling in Natal. Afrikaans became an official language only in 1927. Before that, English, but also Dutch, were the two languages used in the ZAR for business and professional purposes. Blakemore's mother, Emma, too corresponded with J.L. van Schaik in English, and indication that, as the child of a very prominent member of the ZAR society, she too had her schooling in English. These reasons may explain why J.L. van Schaik and Blakemore would have corresponded in English. When Jan van Schaik took over from his father, he may for professional reasons have decided to continue communicating in the language in which she always communicated with his father. But, by that time Blakemore had been away from South Africa for many years, and from the exchanges in letters, particularly on the quality of her written Afrikaans, it would seem that to Jan van Schaik, Blakemore was an English speaker who wrote fiction in Afrikaans.

It is clear from the outset that the firm maintained a very professional relationship with their author. For example, in a letter dated 20th September 1932, she is informed by Mr Bosman from J.L. van Schaik that a play she had entered for the Krugersdorp Dramatic and Operetic (sic) Society, entitled *Blind Birds*, had won a prize. He also forwarded to her copies of positive reviews her plays *Die Goue Sleutel* and *Die Toweruur* received in the *Kristelike Skoolblad*.

In some ways, the Van Schaik's firm represented far more to Blakemore than her publishing house and became a link with her country of birth. As a result, the way in which she related to the firm and maintained relationships with its employees resembled a family relation. For many years thereafter, the firm would diligently and professionally fulfil the many requests they received from Blakemore, always faithfully reporting on the successful accomplishment of the task and the date on

¹ Once, on 17 August 1958, Blakemore wrote a letter to Jan van Schaik in Afrikaans. However, the Afrikaans letter was accompanied by one in English, and was clearly marked: 'Lees eers die ander brief asseblief [please read the other letter first]. Both letters were about the poor editing of a Keurboslaan manuscript, *Gevare op Keurboslaan*. Blakemore was distraught about the incorrect changes and errors that slipped into the print version. Since Keurboslaan was written under the pseudonym Theunis Krogh, Blakemore seem to have written the Afrikaans letter with the idea that Jan van Schaik will be able to show it to his reviser, since she didn't want the Afrikaans reading public to know that the author of the *Keurboslaan* books was Stella Blakemore. In the first letter she writes: 'I am enclosing a letter in Afrikaans, which you may think fit to put before your reviser. I beg of you to read that letter yourself, and to look up the indicated passages.'

which it had been completed. Requests included sending presents on her behalf to relatives and friends, tracking down the whereabouts and address details of someone who used to live in Pretoria, finding out information from various South African government departments, ordering and posting books, obtaining specific official forms from educational institutions or government departments in South Africa and sending those to Blakemore, and so forth.

Yet, not all her manuscripts were accepted by J.L. van Schaik. Her manuscript, *Die Hoek by die Skoorsteen* was turned down in a letter in 1931, with no reason being offered for this decision, besides stating that 'we could not decide to publish [the manuscript]'.² A year later, in a letter dated 1st November 1932, Blakemore wrote that she was submitting *Die jongste meisie in Maasdorp-skool* and enquired about a play that she had earlier sent to J.L. van Schaik for publication, *Wedstryd in Droomland*. She receives a reply from J.L. van Schaik in January 1932 that confirms the firm's acceptance of the second *Maasdorp* manuscript and also informs her that neither the play nor the selection of poetry that had been submitted on her behalf by Miss Kriegler could be accepted for publication as 'the demand for both is so very little indeed, that we feel not justified to publish them... especially not at the present difficult times, in which people do not seem to spend too much on books'.³ In 1939, Nasionale Pers published *Katrientjie*, a humorous adult novel first submitted to J.L. van Schaik in March 1935. So it would seem that J.L. van Schaik had also turned down this novel, though there is no correspondence to confirm this. In 1948, she is requested by J.L. van Schaik to start a new series of 'avontuurverhale' with the Gold Coast as backdrop.⁴ The request to write an adventure series set somewhere in Africa was repeated in 1949 by Jan van Schaik. He suggests that she 'could introduce ivory smuggling or something similar' and that the series be published under a new *nom de plume*.⁵ The result of both these interventions is that she starts work on *Uiltjie*, an adventure book set in the Gold Coast, but when she submitted the manuscript, it was rejected.⁶

² Letter to Stella Blakemore from J.L. van Schaik dated 26 November 1931.

³ Letter to Stella Blakemore from J.L. van Schaik dated 4 January 1932. He further adds that of the 780 copies printed of *Die Toweruur*, 730 were still left; and of *Die Goue Sleutel* they had sold 135 out of 1000. At that time, they still had 1878 copies out of 2000 of the first book in the *Maasdorp* series available, but as this was intended as a series, they indicated that J.L. van Schaik would accept the risk and publish the next book. For that manuscript, *Die jongste meisie in Maasdorp-skool*, she received a £20 cash payment.

⁴ Letter to Stella Owen-Blakemore from J.L. van Schaik dated 30 January 1948.

⁵ Letter to Stella (no surname) from Jan van Schaik dated 6 May 1949.

⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 16 June 1949.

In many of her letters written after she had left South Africa in 1947, Blakemore refers to the sometimes strained relationship that had always existed between her and Mr J.L. van Schaik. Though she was of the opinion that she and Jan van Schaik, J.L. van Schaik's son who took over her affairs in the 1950s, had become friends over the years, her relationship with the publishing firm never ran smoothly. From the correspondence it seems apparent that the root of the difficult relationship between her and Mr van Schaik was the way he treated her as an author and the apparent disrespect he showed for her work. However, there were three further reasons that can be advanced to help explain the complicated relationship between the author and the publishing house. These are 1) Blakemore's financial situation and commitments, 2) criticism from the Afrikaner establishment about her Afrikaans writing skills, and 3) aspects of Blakemore's personality, in particular her self-admitted distrustfulness. Compounded, these reasons resulted in a permanent power play between her and the publishing house. These four issues are discussed in more detail below.

Blakemore's financial affairs

The state of Blakemore's financial affairs was always of grave concern to her and at times when she was experiencing financial difficulties she sometimes tended to be unreasonable, anxious, and quick to make decisions. In much of the correspondence between Stella Blakemore and J.L. van Schaik publishers – and sometimes between her mother, Emma Blakemore, and the publishers – a tone of anxiety about the acceptance of manuscripts and the speediness of decision-making and payment is notable. Some of this may be ascribed to the difficulties of communication, as Blakemore was on the move all the time and it was therefore easy for her to lose track of what has been happening with a particular manuscript, but this does not explain entirely the amount of space devoted to discussions about money in her correspondence with her publishers. Money matters feature prominently in many of her letters and this is, as least in part, the motivation behind the close tracking and many follow-ups regarding the whereabouts of a particular manuscript, which the following extracts from letters show:

Will you be able to let me have the cheque for Stella for *Eerste April* to be able to send by this mail? 'Alle bietjies help!'⁷

and

We are anxious to know whether you have accepted for publication *Die Wedstryd in Droomland* and the sequel to *Die Meisies van Maasdorp*.⁸

When she adopted two South African children after having had miscarriages previously, Blakemore's financial situation further deteriorated. From her letters it would seem that she and her husband had come to some kind of agreement that they could adopt the children on condition that Blakemore herself would take full responsibility for all the children's financial needs:

After all these years of doing business together, it is unnecessary to tell you that I am anxious to have the advance! I have just had to pay terminal school fees for two children, a quarter's electricity bill, two tons of coal, and my annual rates! It all adds up, as you can imagine. I leave my husband free of all these things to make up for foisting two adopted children on him! It was our agreement at the time. But I must say he is a very good father, very interested in all their doings, kind and humorous, and wonderful at Arithmetic, which is a great blessing!⁹

She adopted the children in the 1940s, when she was still living in Pretoria. This was a period during which book sales in Afrikaans boomed, and for this reason Blakemore felt that she was in a position to accept such an agreement.

In addition to the responsibilities she had towards the children, Blakemore was also the sole provider for her mother and supported a couple of poor elderly Afrikaans-speaking relatives in South Africa.¹⁰ An anxiety about the graveness of her responsibilities and an urgency to settle her financial affairs sneaks into many of her and her mother's letters to her publisher:

⁷ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 26 June 1934.

⁸ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore, no date but ostensibly written towards the end of 1932.

⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 1 November 1957.

¹⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 3 June 1955. She writes: 'I am a person of many obligations, not only toward the two children I have adopted and regard as quite my own. Before I took either of them, I assumed some charitable obligations towards one or two families of old Afrikaans people, and these are proving surprisingly long-lived. One, who had cancer of the face, has lasted over ten years since I first found her, with the disease, though not cured, being kept at bay! Naturally, I am delighted about thus, but 'darem'!.'

I feel like a murderess asking for advances on so many [three books], but unless the December royalties are better than they usually are, I shall have to, in order to carry out my plans next year. I am responsible for my own support from the moment I leave here [Gold Coast] until I join my husband – also, all the time, for the support of my mother and the two children, in addition to degree fees, coaching, etc.¹¹

and

I sincerely hope the royalties will be good in June. Heaven knows, I am going to need it.¹²

The tone Blakemore (and sometimes her mother) used in letters to J.L. van Schaik Publishers alternated from expressing their gratitude towards the publishers for all that they had done for her to making thinly veiled threats to take her manuscripts elsewhere or appealing to the deep and long-lasting friendship and association between Stella and the Van Schaiks to persuade them to accept a particular manuscript. For the publisher, it was a delicate situation too. On the one hand it was clear that they did not want to lose Blakemore as an author, but at the same time both J.L. van Schaik and Jan van Schaik wanted to retain a position of power. Moreover, there were restrictions in place during the Second World War on the number of manuscripts a firm could print. In the last instance, not all of Blakemore's work sold equally well, so there was a strong element of calculation of financial risk on the firm's side. The following three extracts are examples of the different strategies the Blakemores employed in their letters.

In 1933, on receiving news that Stella's works were not selling especially well, Emma Blakemore responded by warmly thanking the firm for its support of her daughter:

You have been very kind to us and given Stella a chance with her Afrikaans writing, and I hope, for your sake too, that she will make good here, so that her work will sell better.¹³

¹¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 11 November 1947.

¹² Letter to J.L. van Schaik by Stella Blakemore dated 28 March 1948.

¹³ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 24 January 1933.

When her mother fell ill in 1950, Blakemore wrote to J.L. van Schaik about her financial woes, calling him an old friend, despite the fact that the relationship between them had always been strained:

Now, however, the state of affairs is much more urgent than it was when I wrote. My mother has become seriously ill and had to undergo an abdominal operation... As she is not a contributor to the national Health Scheme, nor a true visitor, everything has to be paid for. There is no one to do it but myself. I cannot let her want for anything now. I do not enlarge on my own feelings at this time, but you, who are an old friend, and who knows what my mother and I have meant to each other, will understand.¹⁴

One last example of this phenomenon is that when Blakemore receives some criticism about the manuscript of *Niggies op Maasdorp*, she responds immediately, as she often did, with a veiled threat:

Please can you let me know about the *Maasdorp* book now, as soon as possible? I have to get my writing arrangements sorted out quickly, since I just had an extraordinarily encouraging and quite unexpected account from one of the old publishers whom I had given up for dead. So, if you can't use *Niggies op Maasdorp*, I can put it to another use, and write a fresh one for you.¹⁵

It was not so much that Blakemore was entirely unwilling to accept criticism of her work, but rather that she always had a need to get and keep her books in circulation, as she was relying on the income derived from that to cover her expenses. So, when a manuscript was rejected, she had to act swiftly – either to persuade J.L. van Schaik to reconsider the manuscript, or to get it to another publisher – so that it could be published as quickly as possible.

At times it is clear that her financial needs lead to an incredibly high level of creative output. In 1933, her mother wrote the following in a letter:

The TOV wrote us last year to send contributions for a new series of 'leesboek' they are contemplating. Stella sent the poems and play you have had for consideration, and historical plays on 'Adam Tas' and 'Die

¹⁴ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 6 June 1950.

¹⁵ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 7 September 1955.

Trekkers in die Skemering'. Also a sketch of 'Mussolini', and two small plays'...¹⁶

From the above extract it can be seen that Emma Blakemore was also using the opportunity to let Van Schaik know that if they were not interested in her daughter's work, there were other firms and institutions that were keen to take it. This is a strategy that Blakemore was to take over from her mother and use on numerous occasions. At times, the Blakemores would put direct pressure on the firm to accept a particular manuscript. In the same letter to J.L. van Schaik, Emma Blakemore again requests the publisher to accept the play, *Die Wedstryd in Droomland*, even though it had been rejected earlier, pleading with him that she believes that something good will come of it.

There is another peculiar element to the correspondence between the Blakemores and the firm. Besides putting pressure on the firm to accept manuscripts from Blakemore, her financial difficulties ensure that Blakemore and her mother become involved in actively trying to create a market for her books.¹⁷ To this end, it is clear that both Stella and her mother tried to keep their fingers on the pulse, by regularly checking up on what is happening to their interests while they are away from South Africa. For instance, Emma Blakemore informed the publisher that South African friends were not able to obtain some of Blakemore's books when they went to town for some Christmas shopping in 1932, and she reminded the publisher that having Blakemore's books on the shelves was 'to your advantage'.¹⁸

There can be no doubt that financial problems were often uppermost in Blakemore's mind. At times, she tended to get very depressed about the state of her financial affairs. However, her letters often reflected her excellent sense of humour, even in difficult times. For example, in 1959 she writes that:

¹⁶ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 9 March 1933.

¹⁷ In a letter to J.L. van Schaik dated 24 January 1933, Emma Blakemore suggests that specimen copies of Stella's books be sent to schools, that the books be published in a cheaper way, and that the possibilities be explored to publish Stella's (rejected play) and organise that it is used for the Junior Certificate Examination. To this end, she asks him to send a copy of *Die Toweruur* to the secretary of the 'Kunstwedstryd' in Cape Town.

¹⁸ Undated letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore, written towards the end of 1932.

[i]f I have not been able to send my poor little bank manger some comfort for him to put before his directors on July 1st, I shall have to enter Ulster disguised by a false beard and wig.¹⁹

In 1956, when she requested that her half-year royalties be deposited into her Volkskas account, she comments as follows:

The family in Ireland are full of demands at the moment, and the bank there is tending to write sad, head-shaking letters.²⁰

Blakemore took her responsibilities towards the children very seriously. In this regard, the agreement that she made with her husband seems to have been uppermost in her mind many times. She often writes about the possibility of her dying. If this should happen, she urged Van Schaik's to keep the fact a secret so that it would not affect the sales of her books, since she believed that the royalty money would cover the children's education costs.²¹

Stella Blakemore and J.L. van Schaik: A strained relationship

Her dire financial position was not the only reason why Blakemore often responded poorly to criticism and rejection notes. From the correspondence it is evident that Blakemore was sensitive about her writing and felt a bit insecure in her relationship with J.L. van Schaik. The origin of this insecurity is explained in a letter to Jan van Schaik, after he had criticised her latest *Maasdorp* manuscript, provisionally titled *Reina keer voor*:

Your father, who has always been my very good friend although we do not always agree, tends to think that writers need to be slammed down and slightly discouraged to keep them humble and prevent them from asking for too much. This is a theory shared by most publishers – but as a matter of fact writers are sensitive folk, who will do better work for you and themselves if in a state of encouragement. Sometimes it takes months to throw off a mood of depression caused by a single destructive remark.²²

¹⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 June 1959.

²⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 8 July 1956.

²¹ See for example the letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 12 June 1959.

²² Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 13 August 1955. The manuscript, *Reina keer voor*, was later published with the title *Niggies op Maasdorp*.

It was this attitude of J.L. van Schaik's coupled with her need to get as many of her manuscripts as possible in print that persuaded Blakemore to offer some of her *Keurboslaan* manuscripts to J.L. van Schaik's rival, Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel (APB). This soured the relationship between herself and the firm. In the extract below Blakemore explains why she decided to take this step:

When I spent that very pleasant evening with you and Herma at your home, you told me that your father had felt very bad when I gave some of the *Keurboslaan* books to Sarel [Sarel Marais from Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel] and that you could not help agreeing with him. I told you then that I had felt obliged to spread the books out between several publishers, because at the time, during the War, each firm was allowed to publish only a certain fixed number of books a year, while I desperately needed the advances for as many books as I could write. This was perfectly true, but if I had not been very tired that night, and furthermore unwilling to embarrass Herma by a Business-argument, I should have added another truth, which is that during all the years I wrote for van Schaik's I never had a word of approval of anything I had written. I do not blame your father for this. Experience has taught me that publishers consider it a duty to take a writer down several pegs at every interview. One's greeting is usually: 'Your last book is not selling at all well. We are going to loose money on it.' Or 'So-and-so has written a much better children's book than yours' I should not complain of the latter remark, because it was one such from your father about 'Jong van der Byls' that made me turn stubborn and start the *Keurboslaan* series. It is grim to have to admit that the series that gives me so much personal joy, should have started from such an unworthy motive!²³

Blakemore and the firm eventually came to an agreement that the firm would take over from Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel the *Keurboslaan* books and some other books written by Blakemore.²⁴

In South Africa, Blakemore also had relations with another publisher. She dealt with a Mr Hutton at Unie Boekhandel and gave him the manuscript of the first title in a new series for boys. However, Blakemore always indicated that she much preferred her relationship with J.L. van Schaik, since she felt that the professional conduct of the firm and the high quality print work they produced could not be compared with the cheap and shoddy productions of Afrikaanse Pers

²³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 17 August 1958.

²⁴ Letter to Stella Owen-Blakemore from J.L. van Schaik dated 30 January 1948.

Boekhandel.²⁵ When Mr Hutton too displayed what she regarded to be unprofessional conduct, delaying in letting her know whether he was accepting the manuscript for the series for boys, Blakemore was quick to sever ties with this firm too and gave J.L. van Schaik authority to take over manuscript.²⁶

Nonetheless, as part of the ongoing play of power that took place between the two parties, when a manuscript was rejected both Stella and her mother were usually at pains to explain in what way they would use the rejected manuscript, so that it would never appear that she was crushed about the rejection or that the piece of writing was not good enough to do something with. Informed about the rejection of the poetry and play submitted to J.L. van Schaik by Miss Kriegler, Emma Blakemore writes that '[t]he poems will be taken by periodicals singly and the play will always come in useful for our own pupils'.²⁷ At times when Blakemore feels that the balance of power is more on her side, she sometimes tries to call the publishing house's bluff. This was, for example, the case when she wanted J.L. van Schaik to pay her a bigger advance than usual on her next *Maasdorp* manuscript:

I have drafted a new *Maasdorp* book – one of the last two. Before I commence with the finishing off, I should like to know whether you will give me £100 advance on it. The *Maasdorp* series has done well for you and me and merits a little more than the ordinary book. If you cannot do this, don't worry, as then I shall use it for a serial in a *Hollandse* youth magazine, since it has a big musical and overseas interest, and I'll complete some of the other serials first for the ordinary £50 advances.²⁸

When the unthinkable happened in 1968 and a *Maasdorp* manuscript – *Ontgroening op Maasdorp* – was rejected²⁹, Blakemore once again resorted to the tried and tested strategy of threatening to move her work to another publisher. Part of the way in which she usually phrased these threats was to explain that she had 'suddenly' received a request from someone to publish her work. In reply to the letter informing her that the *Maasdorp* manuscript had been rejected, Blakemore writes that '[t]he news that a *Maasdorp* MS has been rejected, seems

²⁵ See for example letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 21 January 1961, letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 2 January 1961, and letter to Jan van Schaik dated 6 September 1961.

²⁶ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 11 September 1947.

²⁷ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 24 January 1933.

²⁸ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 20 January 1949.

²⁹ Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 23 July 1968.

to have got nicely round, because, also by yesterday's post, I received a suggestion that I might, in the circumstances, like to place my work elsewhere'.³⁰ She asked that the manuscript be returned to her.³¹

The stand-offs and difficult times despite, it is clear that there was some affinity between her and the senior Mr van Schaik. At times she shares very personal information with him. With reference to the manuscript for the next book in the Maasdorp series, *Kobie regeer*, Blakemore writes: 'I hope you will be able to accept it. On practically the same day as you get it, I expect a very important event, and your taking the book will be a good omen!³² However, in a follow-up letter, after being congratulated on the upcoming event by Mr van Schaik, she reports that 'unfortunately, the event which I was anticipating so happily has ended in disaster, for my baby was still-born, and came very near to costing me my life'.³³ She further writes:

Your letter was the first bright spot in weeks of unhappiness, for it reminded me that whatever happens, I have my work. I had almost forgotten that... I shall use the money [for the manuscript of *Kobie Regeer*, which was accepted by the publisher] if I am strong enough by February, to give a recital of German Lieder in London, so you see you are helping to further my career.

The tone in her letters was often dark and gloomy, signalling that Blakemore herself went through many difficult periods. However, her mood could change rapidly from one letter to the next, and sometimes her letters were very cheerful indeed:

Please, when you write, give me some news of your family, in whom I am always very interested. My daughter is going to be four in May and my son will be three in September. I should like to adopt three more, but my husband feels that we have enough responsibilities.³⁴

Blakemore felt insecure in her relationship with J.L. van Schaik and angry about the way he had treated her and her work in the past. Nonetheless, she always

³⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 28 July 1968.

³¹ The rejected manuscript, *Ontgroening op Maasdorp*, was eventually published in 1972, but there is no correspondence or records explaining how this came about.

³² Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 28 June 1934

³³ Letter to J.L. van Schaik signed Stella Blakemore (Owen) dated 21 August 1934

³⁴ Letter from Stella Blakemore to J.L. van Schaik dated 21 March 1949.

took a sincere interest in his family and was very fond of his wife and his son, Jan. Blakemore was therefore rather delighted when Jan van Schaik took over responsibility for her affairs in 1954, as she felt that they had a better relationship:

Dear Jan

Thank you for your letter and cheque, and all the explanations. It was a very nice, pleasant letter, such as a writer likes to receive from a publisher! I have often wondered whether there is a special handbook of instructions to publishers, advising them, among other points, never on any account to encourage their writers, and never, ever, to write a letter without a sting in it somewhere!³⁵

Even though Blakemore was of the opinion that she and Jan van Schaik were friends, Jan van Schaik's letters to Stella were mostly rather stiff and formal, much like his father's. Ever so often, though, a tiny personal tit-bit would slip into one of his letters, signalling that there may have been at least a little warmth in his feelings towards Blakemore. For example, in a cheerful note on 11 April 1962, Jan van Schaik writes to Stella to wish her well on her birthday. He stipulates that it is the first time that he does so. He also wrote extensively about his father's illness.

In the 1950s, Blakemore's spirits were high and this was reflected in her correspondence. Even when she wrote about money, she did not seem to be depressed. The relationship between her and Jan van Schaik seemed to be steadfast and relaxed:

Please will you send the most luxurious-looking children's book... to Mariette Eitner, Alphen Huis, Malmesbury, C.T. and put in it a card With love from Auntie Stella. This young creature is turning six, and is very near to my heart at the moment, as her father has just died. The fact that he should not have been her father does not affect the issue, I feel. He worshipped her, and she is going to miss him terribly. Anyway, blameless though my own life is, I have gone far beyond judging other people. I think we all are just a lot of 'Sukkelaars' doing the best we can against the odds.³⁶

By the late 1960s, Stella was heading for difficult times again. By this time, she had already written twenty volumes in the *Keurboslaan* series and fourteen in the

³⁵ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 23 November 1954.

³⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 24 August 1958.

Maasdorp series. She wanted to continue writing books in both series, but from the correspondence it seems that the quality of her work was wavering a bit and there was concern within the firm about the sale possibilities of more books in the series. This period thus signals a definite shift in the power balance between the firm and the author in favour of the firm. During this period, she wrote a letter to Jan van Schaik in which she stated that she would love to write more (*Keurboslaan* and *Maasdorp*) books but that she has not done so because 'I feel I embarrass you by doing so'.³⁷ She sometimes hinted that the relationship between herself and Jan van Schaik was so special to her because he had defended her interests when there was tension in the firm.³⁸ However, as always, her letter is packed with the same punch – a threat to move her work elsewhere. By this time, though, her threat must have sounded hollow to Jan van Schaik:

You have always, so often, operated under great tension in the firm in standing true to my interests. I know that, and I don't want to torment you with further negative [word illegible] so that if you said that you could not publish for me any more, I should accept and understand it. You know that I should find another publisher without much trouble. However, I am not too proud to say that I should hate to see my books produced as some of the others produce their works.³⁹

Her personal interests aside, Blakemore deeply appreciated her relationship with the younger Van Schaik:

I want you to know how much I have appreciated your friendship and help through the years, ever since you father, God rest his soul, wrote to me in Kumasi: 'You and Jan seem to like each other, so I am handing all your business over to him!'⁴⁰

Although J.L. van Schaik had criticised her work on many occasions, this did not mean that he never paid her a complement. When writing to her about J.L. van Schaik's plans to take over some of the books she has published with Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel, he writes:

This is a big programme and some of your other publications will have to be delayed. But I take personal pride in your books and will be very

³⁷ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 24 February 1964.

³⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 21 January 1961.

³⁹ Letter to Jan Van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 21 January 1962.

⁴⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 1 February 1967.

bucked to have our names on all of them. I know of your great financial responsibilities and can therefore understand that clause in your letter where you would never like to have a book out of print for longer than two years. I hope this will never happen, although it may at times mean considerable pressure on the printers from our part.⁴¹

Also, when Blakemore's financial matters were really pressing, such as was the case in 1950, J.L. van Schaik did try to meet Blakemore halfway, for example by proposing an advance on all royalties that became due later that year.⁴² Blakemore and J.L. van Schaik did eventually, in the former's opinion, become reconciled. In a letter to Jan van Schaik she describes the last meeting between her and his father:

I am always very glad I had that one last meeting with your father. He did not live so long afterwards. We were able to clear up several things that had been hurting him for a long time, principally the fact that I had given some *Keurboslaan* books to Afrikaanse Pers. I pointed out that never once, in all the years of our association, had I entered his office without being told that my books were frightfully bad and that he could with difficulty present them to the public, and that in a sense he published them as a charity to me. He admitted that this was true, but said that it was common practice with publishers not to let their writers think they were any good. I said I had not known this, but had taken him on his word, and when Sarel Marais told me his firm really wanted the books, I thought your dad would only be too pleased to get rid of them. I told him with perfect honesty that the last thing I had wanted was to hurt him. So we gave each other a hug, and that was all right! Your dear mother looked on with great delight. Then there was the fact that for years I had written only to you and never to him. I had been prepared for that, so I hauled out of my bag his own letter, written to me in Kumasie (sic), in which he said 'You and Jan seem to get on so well, I am handing all your business over to him!' He got quite a shock at this, but couldn't refuse to recognise it... He and I could chew chunks out of each other without harm, neither, thank the Lord, being sensitive.⁴³

Blakemore's Afrikaans writing skills and the 'experts'

Yet another issue sometimes produced sparks between Stella and her publishers. As remarked upon previously, money and securing a constant income stream had

⁴¹ Letter to Stella Blakemore from JL van Schaik dated 20 March 1948.

⁴² Letter to Stella Blakemore-Owen from Mr van Schaik dated 11 July 1950.

⁴³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 28 July 1968.

always been very important to Blakemore. In the early years of her relationship with J.L. van Schaik publishers, she mostly opted to receive an upfront cash payment for manuscripts, thereby forgoing royalty payments. One of the strategies undertaken by J.L. van Schaik was to ask her to be willing to 'pay' for proofreading and editing her manuscripts.⁴⁴ For example, J.L. van Schaik writes in 1955 that it costs the firm about £15 to have Blakemore's manuscripts proofread by a qualified person.⁴⁵ The question of Blakemore's ability to write in Afrikaans became a constant theme in many of the letters she received from the publishers, and at times, the tone of the exchanges was fairly nasty.⁴⁶

However, about your ms. *Kobie gaan verder* which we received some months ago, we sent it for corrections to Prof. Kritzinger and he returned it to us the day before Christmas. He kept it a very long time, but he said that it is a difficult and tedious job and took him many hours in between his other work.⁴⁷

In her replies to statements like these, Blakemore usually countered the accusation by arguing that the problem stemmed from the fact that the Afrikaans language had not yet been standardised and that the people from the 'Akademie' were changing the rules ever so often. This did not mean that Blakemore was unaware of her shortcomings as an Afrikaans writer:

By this mail I am sending you the manuscript of *Die jongste meisie in Maasdorp-skool*, another story for girls. I hope you will like it, and you will let me know about it as soon as you can. I think it is better than the other. Anyway, the Afrikaans is.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ "In regard to the play *Eerste April* [capitalised in original], we are prepared to publish this, but it will be absolutely necessary that an expert should correct the language, as it has in many places to be revised. As it is written now, one can feel that the author thinks in English and therefore we would ask you whether you are prepared to pay the expenses to have the play made ready for the press." Letter by J.L. van Schaik to Stella Blakemore dated 6 April 1934.

⁴⁵ Letter from J.L. van Schaik to Stella Owen dated 23 June 1955. In her reply to this letter, dated 2 July 1955, Stella addresses her letter to Jan van Schaik as if he had been the author of the letter of 23 June and not his father. It may be that the markings on the envelope indicated that the letter was sent by Jan van Schaik.

⁴⁶ In a letter to Emma Blakemore, dated 26 November 1931, with reference to the manuscript of *Die Meisies of Maasdorp*, J.L. van Schaik writes 'We have only now received the MSS. back from our reader, as there were a good many points about the spelling of Afrikaans, etc. which had to be corrected'.

⁴⁷ Letter to Stella Owen from J.L. van Schaik dated 18th January 1951.

⁴⁸ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 1 November 1932.

The issue of her poor Afrikaans writing skills and the costly revisions the publisher had to make became loaded, though, when revisers started tampering with what Blakemore regarded as her style and characters. This state of affairs made Blakemore utterly furious:

Dear Jan

You are my favourite sort of person, as I think you know, and the last thing I want is to add to your troubles. But I really feel very bad about the method used in revising my books.

I know Afrikaans is still a young language, and needs continual doctoring, even in the case of better writers than I am. Although I have made it a rule for many years not to read critiques, either favourable or the reverse, I have always known and admitted that I can be corrected on many questions of language. I have indeed learned a good deal from the changes made by revisers through the years, and have often asked your father to pass my thanks on to them. Perhaps if I had been less humble in this respect, revisers would not be taking such liberties with my work now.⁴⁹

To this Jan van Schaik replies:

It is a difficult task [to revise your books] because they must not change your style, but at same time [they have to] correct the edium (sic) where 'anglismes' are used. You do not realise it but the many years that you have been away from the Union have influenced your writing and to this we must add the fact that the Afrikaans reader today is more conscious of incorrect spelling and style than ever before.⁵⁰

Blakemore became especially upset when revisers changed the way in which her characters express themselves:

It... showed me how far, during the past few years, I have allowed my style to be distorted by adopting the implied suggestions of experts who persist in making many schoolboys talk like university professors, and in using expressions I should never use myself. For instance, 'korswel' is a word I dislike and have never used. It is totally unmusical, and I cannot

⁴⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 17 August 1958.

⁵⁰ Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 27 September 1958.

see why it is superior to 'die gek skeer' or 'spot'. But it is continually substituted.⁵¹

and

It is often repeated to me that experts say they practically have to re-write my books. I have no objection to their continuing to say this, if only they will stop doing it! If I were going to die of malicious remarks, I should have been dead years ago. If I may be allowed a gentle criticism of my own, it is perfectly obvious to me that the experts engaged on revision at the moment, have no talent for creative writing. If they are dying to express themselves, but lack ideas, I am quite willing to supply them with plots, free of charge, if only they will earn what you pay them without feeling themselves obliged to mutilate my work. I can think of dozens of plots a day, and often do! As a matter of fact, I supply them at five guineas a time to a School of Authorship in England.⁵²

The issue of creative integrity and the fact that control of the manuscripts and final proofs ought to reside with the author was something Blakemore felt very strongly about. Nonetheless, she generally displayed a sense of humour about these affairs and she perhaps understood better than her publishers may have thought that she found herself in a position where neither her Afrikaans nor her English was regarded as 'good enough' or on standard.⁵³

Blakemore's personal circumstances and characteristics

Blakemore was a complex personality. In her letters and interviews with the media she certainly comes across as an enormously warm person with a lovely sense of humour and as a close observer of humankind. There was a part of her personality, though, that tended to be on the darker side.

In her letters, she at times appears to be severely depressed. Linked to this, she displays a general distrustfulness in her relations with others, which surfaces in the correspondence. She often describes herself as being pursued by others who have harmful intentions and on many occasions explains specific events by

⁵¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 30 September 1958.

⁵² Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 30 September 1958.

⁵³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 17 October 1958. After a discussion about her poor Afrikaans, she writes in a footnote to Jan van Schaik: 'One of my English contacts has just written to say that, gifted though I certainly am, there is no doubt that my English is influenced towards a certain thickness by the fact that I think in Afrikaans! Where do I go from there?'

stating that someone was out to 'get' her or that a particular action or situation had been caused by someone who wanted to harm her personally. She may have had that part of her personality in common with her mother, because this is something that also crops up in Emma Blakemore's letters. See for example the following extracts:

Stella was unfortunate in that the Rand Daily Mail sent to criticize her play, *Blind Birds* the man who had come second in the competition, and he took advantage of his position to give voice to his... But a very great manager in London is at present considering the same play.⁵⁴

and

It is very difficult for Stella to live so far from all her interests. Everybody is doing her down, even her home has been sold through mismanagement of the agent she has employed.⁵⁵

Blakemore's distrustfulness of others and their motives also applied to her writing, and it further complicated her relationship with her publisher:

Some time ago your office sent me a radio critique of one of my books, no doubt to be helpful to me. Actually, the critique was too malicious to be of use. It was obviously personal. Anyway, I am never interested in critique, good or bad.⁵⁶

and

You will have heard that for financial reasons I have lost my house in Pretoria. At one time this would have seemed a tragedy, but unhappily for the section of the community who thought it would be a very good thing for me to have a setback, it is no longer of any importance.⁵⁷

Blakemore's sense of being persecuted deepened during the difficult period of the 1960s when J.L. Van Schaik had indicated to her that she should not write any more *Keurboslaan* books. The extract from the letter below is about a new *Maasdorp* book, which she felt she had to finish in the light of the quality of

⁵⁴ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 24 January 1933.

⁵⁵ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 11 January 1951 – it relates to a parcel that went missing.

⁵⁶ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 20 January 1949

⁵⁷ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 18 December 1950

children's literature in South Africa. She wrote this letter in reply to a letter from Jan van Schaik, dated 1 February 1962, in which he enclosed a reply he had received to a letter he had written to Julie te Groen, an influential person at the Cape Town Provincial Library. The reply he received most likely contained negative references to Blakemore's *Die Rissies* series, and he forwarded that to Blakemore:

Far from being put off, I was rather surprised at the concentrated bitterness of the attack, which would surely have been excessive if I had tried to blow up the Union Buildings, or shaken hands with an African. In point of fact, I am quite prepared for any and all public buildings to be blown up, especially ones wherein men make laws, and I have occasionally shaken hands with Africans, so I probably deserve it all! Actually, I had already heard from my Cape Town bookseller friend that I have a bitter enemy on the Cape Town Library Board, and that the person responsible for the big order last year almost had their ears cut off. I have never met this person, so I have no clue as to the reason.⁵⁸

Blakemore had a way of going back to things that had happened in the past, good or bad. It seemed that she never forgot events and instants that gave her great joy or caused her great sorrow. So, for example, she recounts the story of how it came that J.L. van Schaik wrote to her that he was handing over her business to his son many times in their correspondence over the year. So too did she tend to rehash the disagreements that she and J.L. van Schaik had had. Where it came to criticism of her work, she never forgot it and always brought it up again. The letter about the library purchaser from the Cape Town Library is a case in point:

[O]ne and all report that the level of Afrikaans children's books is poor beyond all, despite Julie te Groen's statement that there are now such wonderful books being written in the Union. She said, in her letter to you, 'soos u weet', but if you do know, you are the only one that does! Those I have seen are dreary in the extreme. God forgive my wickedness.⁵⁹

and

I do not want to say anything about Capetown (sic) Library Board and the people whose children were beaten at Competition in the old days

⁵⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 6 February 1961.

⁵⁹ Unsigned letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 17 January 1963.

by my pupils. But I can say that I write for the young people who love my books, and that while I still receive such letters as I do receive, I still feel I am right.⁶⁰

and

Like all people who figure in any part of public life, I have enemies, often for no better reason than that I have had some success. This is one of the things one has to expect from life. Naturally, such people use whatever means may be to their hands, on Library Boards, etc., to do one the maximum possible injury. When that happens, there is nothing for it but to lie low for a while, as you and I have done.⁶¹

In reply to a letter by Jan van Schaik on 21 November 1961⁶² to inform her of changes in the provisions relating to Blakemore's income tax requirements, she writes:

By the way, talking of tax, I am quite sure it is all wrong that thirty percent should be taken from what I earn in the Union, because I am not living there. Someone I know over here, whose name I shall not mention because I certainly do not want to do him harm, earns a respectable number of hundreds a year recording talks for S.A.B.C. and no deduction is made from the cheques at all. However, it gave someone great pleasure to write in to the Tax Authorities and put a spoke in my wheel, and who am I to interfere with my fellow-creatures' innocent amusements? As long as I don't turn mean and malicious myself, that is all that concerns me!⁶³

Blakemore's distrustfulness of others perhaps stemmed partly from her very pragmatic nature. She found juggling her various responsibilities difficult and demanding and often had to devise and implement schemes to get and keep her out of trouble. These included schemes to avoid income tax, to get manuscripts in print so as to get an advance, and even, at times, schemes to keep her mother and husband – both of whom she was very loyal towards – in the dark about her financial affairs. For example:

Please, should you see my mother, would you be so kind as not to mention to her that I have sent the book? I hope you will not

⁶⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 24 February 1964.

⁶¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 5 December 1965.

⁶² Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 21 November 1961.

⁶³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 8 December 1962.

misunderstand this. It is just that I think she would want to discuss terms with you, or something of that sort, and I think it better that you and I should arrange these matters between ourselves. I have always been very satisfied with what you have offered.⁶⁴

About her husband she writes:

Please don't think I have taken leave of my senses, but in future, when you are communicating with me on business, would you mind using an envelope which does not give the name of yourself or of the firm? I have a perfectly sane reason for asking this.⁶⁵

Many of her schemes were launched with full support from her mother:

Stella bought this cottage, a rather large-sized garden and orchard. But so much work had to be done, because of the water pipe, etc. that she got into debt and had to get an overdraft from the Ulster bank in... [handwriting not legible] the Bank wants her to pay up, and she is depending on you for royalties to help her. Her husband could but she does not dare to let him know... [handwriting not legible] what more should be coming in because he takes it and put it in his own bank – accordingly. So be careful to send all you can afford here and it will be better to put in a closed envelope addressed to me.⁶⁶

and

We have had a wonderful home here, run by Stella's husband, but he does not allow her any assistance whatever when she is not in his home, and he feels now we have cost him more than he bargained for. So she is quite on her own, with the children she has adopted.⁶⁷

Blakemore was not unaware of this peculiar part of her personality; rather, she embraced her distrustfulness as a life philosophy:

I have always tried to influence both children to get on well with everyone, but not to rely on anyone, but I am afraid the lesson has not sunk in. Personally, I have no illusions about myself or anyone else, but then I have lived quite a while. To put it shortly, I like everyone, love a

⁶⁴ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 28 June 1934.

⁶⁵ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 5 January 1955.

⁶⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 14 July 1955.

⁶⁷ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 13 November 1947.

few people, and trust no one completely, including myself! There is my philosophy, and you can use it for my obituary one day!⁶⁸

Conclusion

The pressures of juggling her financial responsibilities, coping with criticism of her Afrikaans writing – for which she had a passion – managing a difficult relationship with J.L. van Schaik, and maintaining predisposition towards wariness of others and their motifs meant that Blakemore sometimes came across as despondent in her letters to her publisher. However, already by the early 1960s it seemed from her correspondence that things were looking brighter and towards the end of the 1960s Blakemore seemed to have been more at ease with herself and had regained much of her good humour. It was by this time clear that J.L. van Schaik was to remain her one and only publisher. Her letters from the late 1960s speaks more about religion and acceptance and she seemed to have found a place for herself:

For the rest I am doing a fair bit of – I suppose it could be called preaching, for a religious denomination I have been interested in for some years. They don't like me very much at present, because I have been doing some straight talking. I thought a lot about your brother Theo, and couldn't see why any God should let such a thing happen, and other things like it. Then suddenly I got a sort of idea that unity with the Power doesn't necessarily mean that it will hand us out benefits, and that the Unity should be all we ask for. I need hardly say that this pleases no one, since what most people want from religion is boxes of chocolates! Still, this speaking is something I feel I must do, so I do it, in spite of the weather!⁶⁹

and

The religion I have been actively preaching for years has convinced me, at last, and I don't worry about anything. It is a great thing to talk yourself into a way of thought. So I trust to whatever Power mistakenly put me here, and I try to love, or at least like, everyone.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 28 June 1966.

⁶⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 12 December 1963.

⁷⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 24 February 1964.

Chapter Five

Community and Identity: Blakemore's relationship with South Africa

Introduction

This chapter examines Blakemore's relationship with Afrikaans, her country of birth and the South African community in the context of her life history, which included a prolonged absence from South Africa. In particular, questions are posed about her attitude towards issues relating to race, class and gender against the background of Afrikaner nationalism and the emergence of apartheid policies.

Writing in Afrikaans

A question that needs to be posed is why Blakemore opted from the start to write in Afrikaans. From the correspondence between herself and her publisher it is clear that her decision to write books was definitely influenced by the possibilities this craft offered for her to supplement her income. The decision to write in Afrikaans is therefore odd, since the Afrikaans reading class was very small at the beginning of the thirties. On the other hand, South Africa did not have a market for locally produced books in English, since English texts were imported from the United Kingdom. Blakemore could not have been unaware of this state of affairs. Already in 1933, her mother wrote to J.L. van Schaik about possible ways in which to expand the market for Afrikaans books:

If Stella's works do not sell now, they will as soon as she makes her name as a singer. Could you not sell them in a cheaper edition? I know from experience that Africandres (sic) do not like spending much money on books.¹

In August the same year, J.L. van Schaik wrote a letter to Blakemore about the poor prospects for Afrikaans books and the difficulty of getting Afrikaners to appreciate books:

¹ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Emma Blakemore dated 24 January 1933.

I know the two books are very well written, but it is so discouraging here in South Africa that even interesting books like yours have such a very small sale. Out of 2000 copies of *Die Meisies van Maasdorp* there are still 1680 left and of *Die jongste meisie*, of 1500 there are about 1100 left. Our people must still learn to appreciate the value of books.²

The extent to which the choices she made about what she wrote and for which audience were influenced by the necessity of earning a livelihood through her writing is very evident in the following exchange between Blakemore and J.L. van Schaik. Van Schaik wrote to her about her royalty statement, signalling that there had been a drop in the sale of Afrikaans books.³ For a number of reasons, the Afrikaans book market boomed during the Second World War. It slumped again right after the war, and only regained its momentum in the mid-1950s. In August 1948, J.L. van Schaik thus writes:

We have now published 9 [*Keurboslaan* books] altogether, and hope the sale of the various volumes will keep selling, although there is a drop in the sale of Afrikaans books.⁴

In her reply, Blakemore does not hesitate to raise the possibility of writing for other markets, such as the Dutch. Notably, though, she indicates that she plans to continue to write in Afrikaans and have her work translated:

I did receive the statement, but did not reply, because there seemed to be nothing to say about the present disastrous state of affairs. I undertook grave responsibilities because I considered myself entitled to do so a few years ago. If, indeed, people have ceased overnight to read Afrikaans books, I must seek other markets. It has been proposed to me to write in Afrikaans for translation in Hollands. Anyway, except for a book which is half-finished now, it is unlikely that I shall be writing for the African market for some time. As my financial affairs are in an unsatisfactory state and I do not want to let anyone down, I may have to hand all my business affairs to someone who will understand how to straighten them out I tell you this so that you will understand if an accountant visits you. It will be at the instigation of my creditors, not myself⁵

² Letter to Stella Owen from J.L. van Schaik dated 1 August 1934.

³ Letter to Stella Blakemore from J.L. van Schaik

⁴ Letter to Stella Owen-Blakemore from J.L. van Schaik dated 19 August 1948.

⁵ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 24 August 1948.

J.L. van Schaik responds to her letter and encourages her to continue to write in Afrikaans. However, he indicates to her that major changes in the market for Afrikaans books have occurred, as the market was expanding and that this has had an effect on her status as an Afrikaans writer:

You must have been in a very bad mood! It is not so bad as you think in regard to the sale of Afrikaans books. There is nothing of the kind that people have 'ceased overnight to read Afrikaans books'. Not at all! But I have repeatedly tried to explain to you that, as you write so many books you cannot expect a continuous demand in large quantities of all the old titles... Besides, there are many books now published in Afrikaans. This is quite a different matter to 10 or 15 years ago when there were only a few Afrikaans books and a new book was an event... Anyhow, do not be too downhearted in regard to the sale of Afrikaans books, as the position is not at all so bad as you have pictured it.⁶

In 1950, she writes far more openly about her plans to start writing in English. Whereas previously she was only willing to indicate that she was no longer prepared to write for the 'African' market, she now explains that even though she is reluctant to do so, she will have to start writing in English (and implicitly for a market abroad, not South African) in order to meet her financial commitments:

You will remember I told you a year or so ago that I should have to begin writing in English one of these days. I have never been anxious to do so, and I do feel that once it is begun, my days of writing Afrikaans are pretty well over. I have a very strong attachment to the Afrikaans people, and a good deal of sentiment about the years spent in writing for Afrikaans young people, and it is not easy for me to make a decision that means cutting off that part of my life. On the other hand, when my affairs were in a much more flourishing state than they are now, I adopted two young Afrikaners to give them a chance in life. They are now four and five, and, unfortunately for my bank balance, both have turned out to be brilliantly clever! This was pure chance, but so it is, and they must be given the necessary opportunities. My husband does all he can, but he can do no more, and their education is definitely my concern. So I cannot afford sentiment anymore.⁷

It is interesting to note the way in which she juxtaposes her interests: precisely because she had taken on the responsibility of raising two 'Afrikaners', she feels

⁶ Unsigned letter to Stella Owen from J.L. van Schaik dated 1 September 1948.

⁷ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 18 December 1950.

that she cannot afford to continue writing for an Afrikaner market for sentimental reasons. There is evidence though, that if it were no longer financially viable for her to write in Afrikaans, she would have much preferred to write in English for a South African market rather than a British one. She at times expressed resentment about the fact that her publisher had apparently placed some restriction on her that prohibited her from translating her works in English, as they felt that this would upset the Afrikaans book buying public. In her own spirited style, she explained that she had other markets to turn to and that she had always undermined the system and the restrictions placed on her, in this case by writing about Roman Catholics, which would be even more unacceptable to her Afrikaans readers:

I have to agree with you that I seem to have come to the end of a chapter. I am sorry to part with my characters, but not heartbroken. I shall now be forced to turn to other departments of my modest writer's craft, which will be a good thing. At least it will be a relief not to have to watch every word I write in English because 'it would not do' for S. Blakemore or T. Krogh to be discovered to have written this or that! I do all sorts of odd writing about frightfully unacceptable people like, for instance, Roman Catholics, and I not always represent them as devils in human flesh! You are much younger than I, so take a bit of wisdom from me – 'when a blow falls, it can set you free'. You might need that comfort some day.⁸

Her protestations about her readers despite, Blakemore often shows a deep affinity for her Afrikaans readers and she spurns the English youth. In a letter about a new *Maasdorp* manuscript that she had prepared, she writes the following:

On the other hand, our Afrikaans children are very mature. I have written for them all these years as one could never write for English children, who seem to me never to grow up at all, even after they have been to Eton and Oxford. I have always been able to write for our own children as if they were adults, as long as there was nothing in a book that could not be read aloud in class. We have handled birth, death, marriage, crime, and even murder, without any trouble⁹

⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 2 January 1961.

⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 14 November 1963.

For in her heart, Blakemore remained an Afrikaans-speaker, even though she had been away from the country for so many years. In an interview in 1978, she said that she had 'no trouble at all projecting myself mentally into the South African scene' as she mostly thinks in Afrikaans (Hazelhurst 1978:6).

As always, the pragmatic Blakemore prevailed, and she continued pushing her publisher to allow her to translate her work in English. In 1964, J.L. van Schaik Publishers gave permission to the SABC to translate one of the novels in the *Keurboslaan* into English as *The Headmaster of Keurboslaan* and to broadcast it on the radio in twenty episodes of fourteen minutes each.¹⁰ Based on this, Blakemore decided to reopen the issue of translation with her publishers. The extract from her letter below makes it clear that it had always been her publisher that had been concerned about the Afrikaans reading public and that she would not have minded to write for an English South African audience as well:

Years ago, and through the years, many people asked me to translate the books into English for the benefit of English-speaking S' Africans. I discussed the matter with your father, more than once, and he always said that he did not like the idea because the Afrikaans readers would lose the feeling that the Kbl. books were for them.¹¹

Hoofmeisie Kobie was translated into Dutch in 1948.¹² Another novel of hers, *Katrientjie* was translated into Zulu in 1963, even though she did not give permission for this to be done.¹³ She later tried to sell a translation of the manuscript about the Gold Coast, *Uiltjie*, which was rejected by J.L. van Schaik, to an English publisher. In many ways, though she at times felt that it was necessary to explore other markets after she had left South Africa in 1947, her Afrikaans writing was for her a link to what she thought of as home, even though she had been away from the country for so long:

The children's expenses are so high, and so constantly recurring that I have been forced to do a lot of English writing for magazines, papers, radio scripts, etc. to get quick money. However, I have just had a little luck with the sale of some plots in South Africa, so money-needs are not

¹⁰ Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 2 June 1964.

¹¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 15 June 1964.

¹² Letter to Stella Blakemore-Owen from J.L. van Schaik dated 21 September 1948.

¹³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 17 January 1963.

so immediately pressing, and as I have been very homesick for my Afrikaans writing, I am devoting this whole year to it – 1953, I mean.¹⁴

Blakemore and South Africa

Blakemore felt a very strong emotional bond with her country of birth and the years spent away from South Africa deepened her longing to return. Her letters to the Van Schaik's over many years bear testimony to the constant hopes, plans and schemes Blakemore had for returning home. Already in 1947, when she and her husband were still in Kumasi in the Gold Coast, her mother writes that Blakemore planned to return to South Africa by the end of 1948.¹⁵ Her plans were frequently derailed by other events:

I wish I could look forward to seeing him [Jan van Schaik's baby] soon, but the prospects are poor. I had to leave my mother in Wales last year, and as it is impossible for her, even after months, to get a passage to South Africa, I have no choice but to go back to her when my husband's leave falls due. As a matter of fact, I am going a long way ahead of him – in October. We hate being separated, but at my mother's age I dare not leave her alone longer. My husband is resentful, but resigned!¹⁶

and

At present, our plan is to visit the Union the year after next, and I greatly hope that nothing will happen to prevent this.¹⁷

Her homesickness is clear when she writes from Kumasi:

We often go to the Airport on a Sunday evening and watch the plane come in from South Africa in the hope that there may be friends on it, but except for Jacob's arrival, we have been unlucky so far.¹⁸

She did not get discouraged when her plans for returning did not work out immediately, and continued to envisage a future for herself in South Africa. Just after she had bought the cottage in Northern Ireland in 1954, she writes:

¹⁴ Letter to J.L. van Schaik from Stella Owen (Blakemore) dated 2 November 1952.

¹⁵ Letter from Emma Blakemore to J.L. van Schaik dated 13 November 1947.

¹⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 16 June 1949.

¹⁷ Letter to Mr van Schaik by Stella Owen dated 16 February 1953.

¹⁸ Letter by Stella Owen addressed to Mr van Schaik dated 18 December 1950.

Yes, I had to let the Muckleneuk house go. I may decide to build on my own plots just outside Johannesburg quite soon.¹⁹

and

There is a prospect of our settling in the Union in the next year or two. In the meantime, there is just a chance that I might visit during this year.²⁰

Given Blakemore's British and Afrikaner heritage, and the political sentiments attached to that position, it is not clear whether she thought of herself as a South African, an Afrikaner or as both. Whilst Blakemore was the granddaughter of a very prominent Boer statesman, her mother's relationship with Percy Blakemore, the fact that she spent her school years in boarding schools in Natal where she mixed almost exclusively with English and Rhodesian girls, and the fact that she grew up in a single parent household made her different from other children of the Afrikaner elite and must have contributed to some degree of marginalisation from Afrikaner life. The issue of her identity is also difficult to gauge from her letters. The long time she spent away from South Africa, may have influenced the way in which she thought about South Africa and her relationship with the country and may have led to a propensity to talk about being South African when she meant being an Afrikaner. Certainly, she made it clear that when she talked about South Africa, she had the Transvaal (and perhaps the Free State) in mind, and not Cape Town or Natal, which she found too English.²¹ Her decision to adopt two children from Afrikaans-speaking homes is in this context not insignificant. And she always referred to her children as either South Africans or Afrikaners, even though they did not grow up in the country at all. The fact that she easily substituted South African for Afrikaner and the other way round is perhaps an indication of how close these two concepts had become to her in opposition to her notion of the 'English' from England and the English-dominated colonies of the Cape and Natal. When her children had left after a vacation with her in the Gold Coast to go back to school in Northern Ireland, she writes:

¹⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 23 November 1954.

²⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 5 May 1956.

²¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 9 February 1968.

Now that they have been in school for a week or two, I miss them terribly, but this is no climate for children, and apart from that, the Gold Coast is no place for South African children to grow up!²²

On closer analysis, it would seem that a consideration of the significant others in Blakemore's life, shows that apart from her husband, these all tended to be 'Afrikaners'. Blakemore spent much of her life trying to provide financial security for her mother, her two Afrikaner children, and two impoverished Afrikaans elderly relatives in South Africa.

At times, Blakemore seemed to be anxious about the fact that she was writing about a country that she had been away from for so long, and, in particular, as always, she felt worried about the effect that this state of affairs might have on the sale of her books:

Do you think it will be worthwhile to show my face in the Union, just to prove to the public that I still exist? I feel it would be a mistake to arrive back with a great flourish of trumpets as one who has been away for years from the scenes she writes about, but perhaps if I just unobtrusively appeared in Pretoria as if I had been around for some time, it would be a good thing. What do you think of this? Then if anyone said to you: "Maar wat bly sy dan gedurig in die buiteland?" you could reply 'My maskas! Sy was dan net verlede week hier by my in die kantoor!' ("Can someone please tell me what is she constantly doing overseas?" you could reply. "Good gracious! It was only last week that she was here with me in the office!")²³

In 1956 she has new hopes of returning to South Africa. She writes that they are planning to settle in the Union when her husband leaves the Gold Coast on retirement as 'you will have read in the papers that things out here are in a confused state, and most Europeans are deciding to leave'.²⁴ She does visit South Africa in December 1956,²⁵ but her planned return to South Africa does not materialise because they could not get her husband's pension from the state of Ghana:

²² Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 15 February 1955.

²³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 5 May 1956.

²⁴ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 17 May 1956.

²⁵ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 20 December 1956.

My husband is still battling with the State of Ghana, who also proceed about their business in a series of mild shocks.²⁶

As a result, her husband had to accept a position in Port Harcourt in Eastern Nigeria.²⁷ She writes again in 1959 about the possibility of her husband going back to Kumasi, which would mean that she would be able to come down to South Africa for a visit, as she was 'homesick beyond all'.²⁸ In particular, she states that she would love to be away from Kumasi when the Queen of England was due to visit:

I should definitely want to be out of Kumasi while the queen is there in November. The Council specially want David there for all the municipal kerfuffle (sic) connected with the visit and I should love to sit comfortably in Pretoria and think of him striding round showing the Duke of Edinburgh round housing estates and being asked the intelligent questions for which his Royal Highness is famous, and which drive people mad.²⁹

In the early 1960s she and her husband settled in London, which for her was a difficult period. During this time the realisation that she was not going to return to South Africa after all was sinking in. In 1961 she writes to Jan van Schaik:

London is all right. I'd rather be in Pretoria.³⁰

and later

Jan, I detest England and the English. Isn't that an awful and unadult admission? Don't tell anyone.³¹

It is while she is in London, that she starts referring to herself in letters as an exile:

No one will ever know how much I suffer from homesickness, as I suppose all exiles do. I know now that one should not marry outside

²⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 29 May 1957.

²⁷ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 5 June 1958.

²⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 May 1959.

²⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 May 1959.

³⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 6 September 1961.

³¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 30 October 1963.

your own nation, just because it almost always means either one or the other being exiled from his or her own country sooner or later.³²

Her health proved to be the final obstacle that prevented her return to her country of birth:

You know that I have dangerously high blood pressure. This is why I am not allowed to fly at all... Also, if I got out to the republic by boat, I am warned that I should not attempt to go up to the Transvaal, or anywhere higher than sea-level. I tell you all this, so that you understand why I am not trying to get home, even for a visit. So this is why I am an exile! If I can't live in Pretoria, it is no use. I should be just as much of an exile in Natal or the Cape. I was at boarding school in Natal, and I loathed the place. Salene, too, finds it 'terribly, terribly English!'³³

From London, Blakemore and David Owen left to settle permanently in the cottage in Northern Ireland that she and David had bought earlier and used as a holiday home all those years.

When Chris Louw referred to Blakemore in a newspaper article in 1974 as an Irish woman, she took deep offence. In reply, she said that she was a South African of birth with strong links to this country (South Africa), despite the fact that she had lived in many African states and at the time in Ireland (*Hoofstad*, 14 June 1974). Interviewed in 1978, she said that her husband and she had planned to return to South Africa in 1975 to settle there permanently (Hazelhurst 1978:6). However, the political turmoil in Northern Ireland had made it impossible for them to sell their cottage and they had had to stay there. She did state that she visited South Africa every year to see her son and two granddaughters living in Johannesburg (Hazelhurst 1978:6). From this it would seem then that her health did improve and that by the late 1970s she had to a large extent re-established contact with the country. However, by this time all her novels had been revised and re-written and no new ones were published. She never permanently settled in South Africa and died in Northern Ireland in 1991.

³² Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 12 December 1963.

³³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 9 February 1968. Salene is Blakemore's daughter, who spent a few years teaching in Natal.

Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid: Race, class and gender in Blakemore's work

Blakemore's *Keurboslaan* and *Maasdorp* books were published during very important years in the history of South Africa. Whereas the first volumes of the *Maasdorp* series were published in the turbulent 1930s, against the background of programmes to eradicate the so called 'poor white problem', the 1940s – the period in which the first eleven *Keurboslaan* books were published – marked the consolidation of Afrikaner nationalism that led to the National Party victory in 1948, paving the way for the formalisation of the discriminatory policy of Apartheid that would shape South African politics for the next forty years and beyond. As indicated earlier, Blakemore's books are currently assessed by many to be a celebration of patriarchy and are frequently described as deeply sexist. Her books have also been criticised for the racist undertones that are evident in many and for their promotion of particular middle class values.

The first six titles in the *Keurboslaan* series were published before 1947 while Blakemore was still living in Pretoria. During this period she did not correspond with her publishers as she was able to meet with them in person regularly. In order to answer questions about Blakemore's political awareness and beliefs at the time, it is therefore necessary to read her correspondence from a later period and attempt to infer from that what her position had been earlier. One of the questions that is of interest to this study is the extent to which Blakemore's publishing firm had played a role in directing the content of Blakemore's books or doing 'political editing' of her manuscripts. From scrutinising original manuscripts held by the National Afrikaans Literary Museum and Research Unit (NALN) it is clear that the firm virtually never intervened in the narrative line of any of Blakemore's manuscripts. Editors and revisers focused on the language and style components of the books.

Race

As in many aspects of Blakemore's work, the key to understanding the way in which, for example, race relations are depicted in her books lies in Blakemore's pragmatic approach to selling books. Exchanges that bear directly upon the situation in South Africa, including Apartheid race relations, only appear in correspondence between Blakemore and Jan van Schaik from the late 1950s and

early 1960s. In the first titles of the *Maasdorp* and *Keurboslaan* series, the word 'kaffir' was generally used to refer to any African. In later books, Blakemore started using the word 'native'. But by 1958, she had already been away from South Africa for more than a decade and it is clear that she felt that she was no longer in touch with the way in which South African politics shaped the way in which the everyday life is enacted. Writing about the revision of *Die Kroon van Keurboslaan* in 1958, Blakemore demonstrates her increased isolation from South Africa by asking Jan van Schaik to affirm a particular political change she had made in the revised manuscript of an earlier book: 'By the way, I have cut out the word 'kaffer' wherever it occurred. Right?'³⁴ In a later letter, she again asks about a specific form of address, showing that she was more than willing to adapt her manuscripts to present political concerns, should Jan van Schaik advise her to do so. From her letter, it is clear that she relied in some of these matters solely on guidance from Jan van Schaik:

Please will you tell me, by return, as I want the information for *Kultuur op Kbl.* what is the position these days when African teachers or other professional men address a similarly-placed white man? I mean, in *Misverstand* (which I hope to see turning up one of these day) I have Daniel Motaung calling doktor Serfontein 'Baas' and it occurs to me that this may be wrong these days, as the good Daniel is a teacher in the local Native school. He crops up again in *Kultuur*... Would such a native call Die Hoof 'Doktor Serfontein' or would he get shot if he did? Of course, Daniel is the son of Danster who works for Die Hoof, and so presumably called him 'Baas' when he was small, and may have continued to do so, more or less as a title of affection. I don't know how these things work nowadays and I'll be grateful for a hint.³⁵

In reply, Jan van Schaik wrote:

The educated native today addresses the European as 'meneer' and [not] as 'baas' anymore.³⁶ In the Cape and also amongst natives who speak English they rather use 'master' than 'baas' and it is today only the uneducated native who is still an ordinary labourer that uses 'baas'.³⁷

³⁴ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 18 October 1958.

³⁵ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 5 November 1958.

³⁶ The last part of the sentence should probably read and 'no longer as 'baas' anymore'.

³⁷ Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 12 November 1958.

At times Blakemore does show her frustration about writing for a South African, and in particular Afrikaans, market and the limitations that imposes on her. With reference to the fact that her publishing firm did not want her books to be translated into English, she wrote in a letter to Jan van Schaik that she had written books in English that would not be approved of by her readers in South Africa:

I also write English books, which, for private reasons, are published under a name no one in South Africa will ever know is mine. They are perfectly respectable, but are written for a firm catering for a religious denomination highly unpopular in the Union. They net me a modest income – too modest.³⁸

This then provides some evidence for a claim that Blakemore at times felt irritated, if not uncomfortable, about the extent to which the parameters within which she was allowed to operate was set by a South African market and that the thought that she was defying these, even if only she knew about it, by writing about events and people – in this case Roman Catholics – that would shock her South African audience provided her some secret joy. Nonetheless, in the main Blakemore was always willing to heed to advice and built it into her manuscripts. In a letter to Jan van Schaik about her planned series, *Die Rissies*, she indicated that she had listened to his advice about events in Africa and incorporated that into the way in which she developed her black characters:

In view of the changing pattern of life everywhere on the African Continent, mentioned in your letter, I have made the couple of Natives in the book excellent characters who get bopped in the course of their duty!³⁹

Having said that J.L. van Schaik Publishers and the language experts they appointed to revise Blakemore's manuscripts never tampered with the story line or did 'political' edits of texts, it is true that they sometimes made changes to the dialogue and that this may have had a political colour to it. Blakemore seemed to have been upset that in the process of revising one of the *Die Rissies* manuscripts the editors had changed the way in which the African characters speak. In this regard, she wrote: 'I also think it will be a mistake to let the Bantus

³⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 30 September 1958.

³⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 March 1959.

talk like university professors, but I don't insist on that point'.⁴⁰ In this case, though, the point that she raised seems to be connected to her insistence on being true to her characters and the fact that she felt strongly that in everyday life these characters would not have spoken standard Afrikaans rather than to an objection to a political edit as such.

There is only once an incident where the firm made a substantial political edit to a manuscript, but again this happened at Blakemore's instigation. The exchange that took place between Jan van Schaik and Stella Blakemore on a matter pertaining to an incident in a new *Keurboslaan* manuscript is printed here in full. In a letter to Jan van Schaik in 1960, Blakemore writes the following:

I have Dr. Serfontein at one point lifting a six-year old African child on his horse in front of him and riding home with him, and I think at another dramatic point he lets the child, who has been through the mill rather, hold his hand. It has suddenly occurred to me that these small incidents may be *steens des aanstoots*... I do not entertain Africans in my home, but I have been teaching them music for so many years, from the ages of six to sixty, that the thought of that amount of contact between a European of somewhere in the late fifties and a child of six does not *stuit my teen die bors* as perhaps it should. If it worries you, who are on the spot and understand these things, let Die Hoof get off his horse and walk alongside the child, and later don't let him reach his hand out to the babe. After all, people are always altering things in my books, so they may as well do a bit of work on it for once! But I have written the parts of the story that affect the family of Die Hoof's old servant very carefully, and I don't seriously think they can give offence.⁴¹

Of interest is the way in which Blakemore uses the word 'should' – writing that contact between a young African boy and a white man in his fifties does not offend her to the extent that it perhaps ought to. It is difficult to get a clear idea of the layered meanings in Blakemore's letter. From the fact that she uses a number of Afrikaans phrases, it can be surmised that she either uses it as a mechanism of distancing herself, thereby using the word 'should' to indicate that she is not taking this issue seriously enough given the conservative views of her Afrikaans readership. At the same time though, it could also signal that she felt that she had been away from South Africa for too long and that her experience in colonial

⁴⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 12 June 1959.

⁴¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 3 February 1959.

Africa had made her forget about South Africa and its particular problems. Blakemore does not neglect to make the point to Van Schaik that she does concur with Apartheid segregation by saying that she does not entertain Africans in her home. The ambiguity in this letter, which is difficult to resolve, forms part of a broader ambiguity that Blakemore displayed in her views on South Africa. From other letters it is evident that though she was clearly far more liberal than her readership, and in general approved of 'equality for all'⁴² as she sometimes phrased it, and disapproved of outright racism, she still felt that South Africa's situation was unique and that no outsiders could understand it.⁴³

Jan van Schaik wrote a very long and considered reply to Blakemore's letter. In his response one senses the carefulness with which he composed this letter, as if he were at pains not to upset Blakemore about his suggestion and as if he thought she might be upset about what he had to say, even though she did ask him to look into the matter. Also, he seemed to want to make sure that he does not to come across as racist himself. For these two reasons, the carefully phrased letter at times has a distinctly patronising tone:

Another and more important alteration: after very serious consideration I decided rather to leave out that part where Dr. Serfontein rides the native child home on horseback after he has found Jonas under a bush, too frightened to go home.

The reason for this was firstly that it seemed rather unnecessary for him to do. Your MS [manuscript] reads at this point that they were 'naby die draai voor die groot skoolhek'.

Of course, this means that Robert cannot now accuse the Doctor of showing more consideration towards his 'volk' than to poor whites. What is left, however, does not in any way diminish the impression that this boy is a rather miserable character and thoroughly disagreeable in contrast to the 'Keurboslaners'.

Furthermore I had to keep in mind that an act like Dr. Serfontein's would certainly annoy a considerable section of your readers. (Judging from your letter of February 3, 1959, it would seem that you are not quite unaware of this fact!) Yet, this fact, important as it is, would not have

⁴² Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 18 August 1960.

⁴³ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 March 1959.

decided the case for us because you certainly handled the situation with great care.

I think I know what you had in mind in describing that little incident – to show the total lack of snobbery in Dr. Serfontein as well as his acceptance of every individual, regardless of the colour of his skin, as a person in his own right. In this context, however, this incident does not quite serve the purpose for which it was intended. Indeed, as I have mentioned already, it might only trigger off the resentment of a certain type of reader.

This part of the Ms. has been carefully revised so as to make sure that it reads smoothly. Something else: Dr. Serfontein manages to convey the meaning of human tolerance in a much more moving way by his attitude towards the natives during the terrible ordeal of the dangerous operation on Mias.⁴⁴

It is the pragmatic Blakemore that replies to his letter, as usual punching a sting about Jan van Schaik's own political views. In the letter, she argues that the incident involving the headmaster and Jonas was included in the manuscripts because it had a narrative purpose and not because she was trying to make a political point:

As for the incident of Jonas being 'lifted' by Dr. Serfontein, I was not REALLY trying to make the 'human equality' point, because to me it is so natural that I always forget that others don't. The point of the incident was to call out Robert's animosity against Jonas' family, so that he might later have been suspected of deliberately injuring the other child. However, you are the person who takes the risks in publishing and you know the conditions better than anyone.⁴⁵

Yet, Blakemore was a complex personality, full of contradictions. Her extensive experience of living in colonial and postcolonial Africa and her thoughts on that seeped into many of her letters and stereotypes often prevailed:

Parcels always take longer in these parts, because they require more handling than letters, and the Nigerians are even slower than the Gold Coasters, or, as they now call themselves, the Ghanaians.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 9 August 1960.

⁴⁵ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 18 August 1960.

⁴⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 14 November 1958.

and

I lost no time getting it into my possession – at least not more time that one always loses when dealing with the Nigerians.⁴⁷

At other times, she made strong statements about the possibilities of a non-racist South Africa at a time when this certainly was not an accepted view among the section of the population she was addressing. For example, in an interview with a journalist of the newspaper *Hoofstad*, published on 14 June 1974, Blakemore said:

As swart en wit moet saamwoon, kom hulle gewoonlik goed klaar. Ek het in Ghana (toe nog die Ivoorkus) onder 'n swart skoolhoof gewerk. Hy was baie goed vir my as personeellid. In Swaziland en Nigerië het ek presies dieselfde ondervinding gehad.

[When black and white have to live side by side, they usually get along well. In Ghana (then the Ivory Coast) I worked under a black school principal. He was very good to me as a staff member. In Swaziland and Nigeria I had exactly the same experience.]

In instances when she tries to link her experiences in colonial and postcolonial Africa to the situation in South Africa, the contradictions and ambiguities in her approach are most evident. In one such example, she manages to combine a disparaging tone about the possibilities of Africans governing themselves and heeding to a democratic project with a statement that is broadly in favour of lifting the colour-bar, whilst she remains cautious about whether this is desirable in South Africa:

Things do, as you say, seem to be in a state of flux on our continent. But I saw Ghana from the start of the anti-white riots until the achievement of Independence, and I observed, as I expected, that the moment they had what they said they wanted, and at the moment when the millennium was supposed to dawn, they set to hating each other far more bitterly than they had ever hated us. Now they are offering Europeans all sorts of inducements to go and work there, far beyond anything that was offered before, and I believe there are now about double the White people in Ghana that were there before Independence. I expect to see this happen everywhere. The Nigerians

⁴⁷ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 15 November 1958.

don't bother anyone. They have Independence, but it doesn't seem to have sunk in. Total lack of colour-bar is no drawback, because here, as elsewhere, you choose your friends, and no one can force you to have a man of any colour at all in your home if you don't want him. I adjudicated at a music festival the other day, and the African teachers I had to do with there, differed not at all in their manners from teachers I used to meet at the Bantu Festival in Pretoria. Of course, South Africa's problems are quite different from anyone else's, and I am very glad it does not fall to me to solve them. I can only go on as I have always done, trying to be courteous to people of every race, colour and creed, because I think it right. It comes fairly naturally to me – except now and then!⁴⁸

From the late 1950s to the early 1960s Blakemore and Jan van Schaik often write to each other about the political situation in South Africa: In 1960, Jan van Schaik writes:

We are well in Pretoria – only worried what the future will hold for us. Events have been very disturbing lately, but I think they were exaggerated in the overseas press. Things have calmed down again although everyone is upset about the attempt on the life of our Prime Minister. These things have never before happened in our country, and one usually associates this type of thing with countries in the Middle East and Southern America. Personally I hope that the latest events will perhaps bring a better understanding in South Africa and especially amongst the two main sections of our white population.⁴⁹

Blakemore's reply captured her homesickness, her belief that Africans in South Africa had not yet reached a point where they could be regarded as equal to the other populations and her disrespect for the Anti-Apartheid movement. Yet, her letter also reflects her opinion that the international press was not really concerned about what happened to Africans at all and that the whole anti-Apartheid movement was but a part of a general political game, an activity which she detested:

As I type, I am looking out on the lawn and the flower borders. It all looks lovely, I must admit. It has been a wonderful spring and I have the most gorgeous tulips this year. Even so, I'd rather see some Karoo or a bit of Namakwaland out there. My homesickness is ever-present,

⁴⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen, signed as 'Esso' – a pun on the speediness with which she writes novels and replies to letters – dated 19 March 1959.

⁴⁹ Letter to Stella Owen from Jan van Schaik dated 19 April 1960.

especially at this time when the whole world seems to be combining against South Africa, always without the slightest knowledge of the problems involved. Personally, I stand for kindness and humanitarian treatment towards everyone everywhere, but it is only the utterly uninformed who suppose that all people [are], as yet, equal. Still, I need not tell you that most of the criticism is only in the press. It is quite insincere. No one really cares what becomes of Africans. It is just a stunt. If you saw a march-past of protesters against Apartheid, as I did in Liverpool, you would be quite relieved to see how little weight such a movement can carry. The crowds are made up of all sorts of misfits, and are generally ridiculed by those on the pavements. But of course the papers give the impression that it is a mighty movement, destined to sweep all before it! Every now and then I feel impelled to write or broadcast about these things, but then I remember my grandfather, Theunis Krogh's advice to his children: "Hou julle uit Politiek uit. Dis 'n groot gesmeer!"⁵⁰ I have always held aloof from it and I always shall.⁵¹

Class

The issue of class is conspicuous in its absence in the correspondence between Blakemore and her publishers. This, however, did not mean that Blakemore was ignorant of issues of class and the way in which class cleavages impacted on her market. She motivated her argument for writing more books in the *Janse Cloete* series by stating that she knew that there was a group of readers in the rural areas that would not find the *Keurboslaan* books appealing and who needed texts that were more closely linked to their life world:

About the Janse Cloete books... I should rather like to do about three more Janse Cloete books, because they were definitely intended for boys at the 'plattelandse' (sic) who get rather bothered at the idea of the privileged life at Keurboslaan.⁵²

Yet, by 1959 the sales of her books had brought home a message to her that she wanted to share with her publisher. In May 1959 she writes to Jan van Schaik about criticism she had come in for because the setting for her books is generally a boarding school background as opposed to a domestic, family background. Her critics have argued that boarding school is not a shared experience for her target readers and that most of her readers attend day schools. She writes that she had

⁵⁰ The English translation reads "Keep yourselves out of Politics. It's a messy business!"

⁵¹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 9 May 1960.

⁵² Letter to J.L. Mr van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 11 September 1947.

always thought that her *Blourand*-series, in particular *Judith op Blourand* and *Elfie, Apie en Carolus*, were among the best books she had ever written.⁵³ These books are all set in a family environment in the Transvaal. Nevertheless, in the letter Blakemore complains that she had never received a single fan letter about any of these books. Moreover, she argues that the criticism about the fact that her books portray schools that are very different from those her readers attend also seem to be off the mark, as the sales of her books have proved that her readers prefer to read books about Blakemore's type of schools:

[A] very experienced teacher whom I knew, complained that my schools were not like the ordinary schools as our children know them. I could still have holes talked in my head at that stage, so I meekly wrote the *Janse Cloete* books about the ordinary type of school. Of the result, I need not remind you. It almost looks as yet another teacher was wrong, and children preferred my schools, while attending the other kind. As a matter of fact, there are masses of schools like mine, in Natal and the Cape.⁵⁴

Class does play an important part in her books and many of the narratives are strongly loaded with references to economic mobility, social stratification and the problem of 'poor whites'. In fact, the one case where Jan van Schaik did intervene in a *Keurboslaan* narrative by cutting the section where Dr Serfontein gives a young African boy a ride home, which was discussed previously, a direct class confrontation was posed in the story: Based on the incident, the antagonist, Robert, accused Dr Serfontein of caring more for his 'volk'⁵⁵ than for 'poor whites'.

Gender

Blakemore wrote a fair bit about her relationship with her husband, David Owen. Despite claiming that married life was indeed the best option for a woman, she did often complain about the restrictions married life placed on her and the extent to

⁵³ *Judith op Blourand* is the story of a spoiled, independent and affluent teenager, Judith Villiers, who has been orphaned and lives with her aunt in a posh suburb of Cape Town. Through a business venture gone wrong, she loses her fortune and has no other choice but to go and live with her cousins in the town of Blourand in the Transvaal. Her cousins themselves had lost their parents, and Dawid and Petronella, who are much older than their siblings, have taken it upon themselves to take care of the family, so that the children do not need to go into foster homes. The family is enormously poor, but happy. The book tells the story of how Judith has to learn to make personal sacrifices in order to be accepted as part of this poor, but warm and loving family.

⁵⁴ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen, signed 'Esso', dated 8 May 1959.

⁵⁵ in this instance, the word 'volk' denotes black workers or staff, and was common in a farming context.

which it was required of her to turn herself into a different persona to appease men:

Actually, the 'Owen' part of me is quite unlike the part of 'me' you know. I more or less have to be helpless and rather dull-witted in order to satisfy the male need to protect, cherish and control! I have observed your adorable mother tackling her problem in the same way. Our affections and the hidden maternal pity we feel for our men-folk enables us to persevere until death! Herma will be very cross with me for betraying the basic secret of womanhood!⁵⁶

Despite generally complying with the wishes of her husband, her attitude towards men, as indeed she herself remarked in one of her letters, tended to be maternal and patronising, casting them as fairly narrow-minded persons of habit that needed constant encouragement and admiration from women.

I am not starving yet. That's one thing about having a husband. He has to support you! Mine does so very willingly, as long as I hold aloof from the rest of the world and pay attention to no one except him. If I have to pay attention elsewhere, he would rather be on the other side of the world than watch me doing it!⁵⁷

Not often, but on a few occasions a tone of resentment slips in about the position of power that men occupy in society:

In point of fact, I am quite prepared for any and all public buildings to be blown up, especially ones wherein men make laws...⁵⁸

With regard to her writing and gender relations, she seems to have followed the pragmatic route once again. In her books that were aimed at girl readers, the vast majority of characters tended to be female, while in her books for boys, the opposite was the case. When she writes to her publisher about the design of a cover for the *Die Rissies* series, which targeted both boy and girl readers, she shows that she knows the reading habits of children well:

I have kept the children between the ages of eight and thirteen, two boys and two girls. I have let them share in the cleverness, but with the

⁵⁶ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 March 1960.

⁵⁷ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 19 January 1959.

⁵⁸ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Owen dated 6 February 1961.

bias slightly on the side of the boys. I suggest that the cover picture is such as will appeal to boys rather than girls. Girls always like boys' books, whereas the reverse is seldom the case.⁵⁹

Because she knew that girls were likely to read books for boys, whilst boys would never consider reading books intended for girls, her boys' books usually included elements that catered a little bit for a female readership, including a hint of romance. She was able to create strong and emancipated women characters and felt a little bit despondent when a very dedicated reader begged her to ensure that one of the favourite *Maasdorp* characters, Elsabé, a woman focused on her career and became the principal of the Maasdorpse Meisieskool, got married. Blakemore conceded and Elsabé did indeed get married in the subsequent book in the series, but about this Blakemore wrote:

Why a handsome women with a fine career should be regarded as 'poor' because no wretched man has regarded her as desirable, I never can understand, but that remains the general view, in spite of votes for women and what not!⁶⁰

Conclusion

Blakemore's relationship with South Africa was complex and layered. Whilst her letters indicate that she saw a strong association between herself and her country of birth, the fact was that she spent most of her life away from South Africa. Blakemore's position on politics provides evidence for a statement that she did not, generally, support the cause of Afrikaner nationalism or that, at the very least, she would not have liked to become involved in such a movement herself. Yet, her activities as an Afrikaans writer and music and drama teacher (when she lived in Pretoria) cast her in the role of community creator. Here, her decision to write in Afrikaans cannot be regarded as neutral. It may be that her writing skills in English were underdeveloped and that this contributed to her decision to write in Afrikaans. However, on balance it would seem that her early success in terms of publishing in Afrikaans, coupled with her deep longing for her country of birth and an idealistic expectation of the growth possibilities of the Afrikaans book market were the main reasons for continuing to write in Afrikaans. Whilst Blakemore clearly distances herself from what she regards as crude forms of

⁵⁹ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 19 March 1959.

⁶⁰ Letter to Jan van Schaik from Stella Blakemore dated 9 February 1968.

racism in South Africa, hers is generally a colonial mindset underpinned with a good dose of racist ideas. Her responsiveness towards the market or the book buying public therefore also influenced the way in which she wrote her books. Nonetheless, J.L. van Schaik publishers provided Blakemore the freedom to publish texts without interference in the content, except for the one incident discussed in this chapter. In the last instance, Blakemore therefore retained the final say on the contents of her books.