

Sabotage and Rebirth in the Karoo.

By Denis Beckett

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This is a tale of the Karoo, of a dry dry dusty dusty bit of it.

Ah, as I write I feel koppie beneath my feet; clear crisp view to forever.

This is a tale of the Karoo and of beautiful lunatics, and of South Africa here and now. But it begins in another place and another generation.

Hay on Wye is an un-dry and un-dusty picture-postcard dorp on the England/Wales border. In 1960 Hay was coming up for its 900th birthday but seemed unlikely to make it. The cattle trading industry, which had sustained the economy since frontier wars went out of fashion, was all pooped out. Town was teetering.

So they got smart, and said "let's make a Booktown".

A what? There was no such thing. Half a millennium since Gutenberg, the notion "Booktown" had never been thought of.

Hay thought of it. It made itself into a town built on books; talking books, reading books, ogling books, selling books. Now, Hay has twenty fulltime bookshops. Its annual festival fills a hundred thousand beds. And the idea caught on, as good ideas do. By 2007 Hay was the granddaddy of 28 booktowns stretching from Jinbocho, Japan, to Archer, Texas, via Bosu-dong, South Korea, and Redu, Belgium.

There were booktowns in every continent except Africa.

And then, along came a beautiful lunatic.

When I was a student a friend of mine approached a prominent person with an idea. The prominent person listened, and said: "where is the money in this?"

My friend was startled: "It's not about money, it's about... beauty."

The prominent person said: "What use is that? To spend time on things that make no money is lunatic."

Ever since, I've hoped the world will never run out of beautiful lunatics.

Darryl David was already a rare figure, as an Indian professor of Afrikaans. When he decided that what the Karoo needed was a booktown, he became rarer.

He took it seriously. No light whimsies here. Darryl examined prospective booktowns, writing up his results on the Internet and explaining why this one, that one, the next one, wouldn't do.

Then he came to Richmond, and he explained why it would do.

This was a bold thing to explain. Insofar as Richmond's potential was pegged on Hay's success, there were discrepancies.

In a 2-hour drive of Hay you have a population centre called London. In a 2-hour drive of Richmond you have a population centre called Graaff-Reinet.

In a 300K radius of Hay you find some 10 000 bookshops. In a 300K radius of Richmond you find 0 bookshops.

It was an ambitious basis upon which to create a *booktown*.

But Darryl David phoned around, undeterred, and, it turned out, all roads in Richmond led to a particular person. They led to a Canadian veterinarian in Parktown North, Johannesburg.

Baker is an Africa convert, and puts a convert's zeal into his hobbies. One of these is driving 4x4s to corners of central Africa where cooldrink cans burst in the sun as if they've been microwaved,

and crossing a bridge can take a week. Another hobby is watching the sun go down from Vegkop, his manor house on the hill over Richmond, with beers and friends and deep satisfaction at the world and its works.

Baker has a forename, Peter, which features on his degrees and his ID. In person, he is so solidly known as “Baker” that one can think he was christened Baker Baker. He is a man in a hurry, who answers his phone (when he can find it and has remembered to turn it on) by bellowing “What!” in tones designed for declaring war.

Darryl gulped before phoning Baker to propose a booktown in Richmond. “I knew that people would think ‘is this for real’, and I know that people can be rude.” Darryl didn’t know that Baker has a third hobby: thwarting the Karoo’s new industry.

Money is being made in the Karoo, at last. That *should* be exciting news, but *shoulds* are risky. This money is made by sabotage. You buy up a derelict cottage, demolish it, and sell the wood – mature yellowwood, often 100 years mature; ceilings and beams and floorboards, gold dust. Then you leave the crumpled dagha walls like a kicked-down anthill, and the Karoo has lost twice. It has sacrificed a treasure and it has acquired an eyesore.

Local government has the legal means of combat but local government is the epicentre of “incapacity”, the code word for implosion by reverse racism. Add a new Rates Act whereby the rates on a pensioner’s cottage exceed the pensioner’s pension and, but for one thing, you’d see a Karooful of kicked-down anthills.

That thing is the thin mortgaged line of people who are buying up the Karoo.

Some say “speculators”, and there is something in that. But it is so far-fetched a speculation that in my view it comes closer to beautiful lunacy.

Baker is a baron of Richmond now, the puzzled possessor of a clutch of run-down dwellings that would pay him millions if he pulled them down and are money down the drain while he keeps them up.

At least Baker has a stream of Joburg pet-owners on the supply side. Co-baron John Donaldson, a stoere Boer despite his name, returned to the Karoo from which he sprang and found kicked-down anthills spreading like hawkers’ stands. He bought one demolition candidate and set it up as home. Soon he was running a family of mini-businesses and, with Baker, buying demolishables before the demolishers got them.

When Darryl David phoned Baker and Baker bellowed “What!” Darryl nearly put the phone down. “I mean, it was a bit tricky, you know. If he’d said ‘good morning, how can I help you’, it would be easier to explain.” Darryl spat it out notwithstanding, and Baker, within some 90 seconds of hearing “booktown” for the first time in his life, bellowed “Yes!” so heartily that Darryl’s ear hurt.

John Donaldson was promptly enlisted and Booktown Richmond was born.

Fast-forward now through a year or so of local politics, allowing your mind to boggle at the galvanising, objecting, stonewalling, steering, re-steering, re-re-steering, backbiting, bitching, accusing, blaming, disputing, denouncing and disbelieving that the injection of a new dimension into a village’s life must mean.

Come to the third weekend of October 2008, and place yourself in Richmond.

Which may be hard to do, as few people ever saw Richmond, this Richmond. Mostly, the name conjures up Natal’s Richmond, green and wet and near to Alan Paton’s “road with a beauty past the telling of it”.

No, this Richmond hasn’t heard of “green” or “wet” but could say a thing or two about another kind of beauty past the telling of it.

This Richmond is off the N1, just where, going south, you meet the first bend in the road since Gariiep Dam 151 kilometres behind.

And you don’t think it’s a dorp at all. You think it’s a Caltex garage.

61 Ks north-east you go *through* Hanover, and can’t reasonably miss it. 106 Ks south-west you go *through* Three Sisters too, technically, though you’d better not blink. Richmond, you go *past*. If you swing your head at the right moment you glimpse the Caltex garage and that’s it. The dorp is hidden behind the bult.

Richmond was an early beneficiary or victim – take your choice – of the Bypass Effect. Even while the national road laid the economy low, it saved the dorp from the ugliness of chain-stores. The

chain-stores invaded prosperous dorps, flattening the old quaint main road and replacing elegant gabled high-ceilinged edifices with horrible retail hangars designed 100% for yield and 0% for beauty. The spurned Richmonds sacrificed butcher and baker and candlestick-maker, yes; not to mention doctor and dentist. But they set themselves up for a marvellous *one day*.

One day crowds will beat a path to the unspoiled dorps, if they haven't been kicked into anthills. *One day* the Richmonds of the world will Rise Again, like the Clarenses and Franschhoeks and that poetic duo Dullstroom and Wakkerstroom. *One day* Baker and Donaldson may have to be stripped of their Lunacy badges.

But that day ain't any time soon, and when I pulled in to Richmond on the third Thursday of October I wondered if it'd be any time in the next century.

Activity taking place was modest, 87% of it being on the stoep of the Old Age Home. This was welcome reassurance that tranquillity is not dead in our frenetic era, but not the ideal start for **Boekbedonderd**, the first Booktown Richmond Festival.

On closer inspection a few busy people in bright red Boekbedonderd shirts were scrabbling around corners of the town. I felt warmly sympathetic towards them. Shame, they'd tried. Damn pity that no-one came.

Well, I've been wrong before but this was the best wrong yet. By Saturday night I doubt there was an unspoken bed in a hundred kilometres. Then again, not many were in use, at least not for sleeping, because that dorpie partied till dawn.

And all from books. From the book basis sprang tours and djols and walks and talks light and heavy, and revelry. Never did such a stream of GP cars turn off at the Caltex. Cape Town registrations were close behind and the Karoo itself was magnificently represented.

Flaws were many. I'm yet to see the dorp festival that finds a mesh between mainly-whitey visitor action and mainly-darkey local presence. This festival made some attempt... and it isn't easy. A donkiekarretjie is excellent transport in principle. In practice people revolted at either the pulverising of the donkeys or the frailty of the carts. (Don't say "wusses" until you've tried it.)

But no flaws blocked the supply of liquids or foodstuffs or good vibes. This was a marvellous weekend, the kind from which you come away loving the desert and the dorp and beautiful lunatics and your country, and feel okay about yourself, too.

Now why would I be telling you this now, in a double-length column that I hope Alec and the Moneyweb mense will swallow?

Because the third weekend of October is on its way. Google Booktown Richmond and check it out. And if you get there let me know; we'll share a drink.