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Title	*Peter McDonald on Censorship in South Africa*
Description	Peter McDonald talks about censorship, its philosophical basis and general history within Apartheid South Africa
Presenter(s)	Peter McDonald and Oliver Lewis
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Interviewer Your current major research has been on censorship in South Africa.

Respondent Yes.

Interviewer Could you explain what censorship is and `[[then we'll move on to South Africa 0:00:07]]`?

Respondent So, one of the things is that you've got to be quite careful about using the word censorship, I think. People use it loosely to refer to any attempt to control or silence or regulate what people say in the public domain. If I say to you, "Look, I think you should be quiet at this point. You've said enough," people will say, "You're censoring him. That's not fair, not right."

I think out of respect for the people who suffered under real censorship regimes; we need to be a bit more precise about how we use the word censorship. And I would say yes, although there are many ways in which media, journalists, all sorts of people control what other people say, censorship really must involve a state authority – so some other government or state authority – kerbing public speech or writing with the threat of punishment. So, I would say something like that about the conditions that are necessary for something to be really censorship proper.

So, when I simply try to shut you up, I'm not censoring you; I'm just shutting you up. Because a) I'm not a state authority and b) I haven't got any kind of major punitive measure backing what I'm doing. So, yes; when we talk about censorship, I want to keep it to that fairly narrower sense rather than just a looser general sense of controlling what people say.

Interviewer And what interested you in censorship?

Respondent I've always been interested in the intersection between the state and what we can call the Republic of Letters, the literary culture of a particular period. And to that extent, I suppose I've been interested in the relationship between literature and politics, if you want to put it as broadly as that.

But the things that interest me in this is also, it's broader. It's broader than simply censorship. When you think about the world we live in now forms like the novel, survive really because commercial publishers can make money out of it. It's a market driven, cultural product, the novel.

Poetry, it's a little bit trickier for poetry and poets to survive commercially. There are publishers who make a go at it, Faber and Faber for instance in the UK is probably one of the – is the leading

poetry publisher and has been for a long time. But a lot of poetry and smaller publishing outfits get a lot of support from the Arts Council. So there's a lot of state support. For certain forms of artistic and literary endeavour that need state support, and that's been going on really since the mid-twentieth century where there was a new relationship that struck up between the state and the sphere of culture, if you like. And the idea that states should sponsor and support certain cultural activities and ensure that they can survive. Because the market mechanism won't ensure that they survive.

So, there's all sorts of ways in which the state gets involved. If you take a smaller society like Norway for instance, where the national language - or the two national languages, because there's a big dispute in a way – but the national language is seen on the global scale as a minority language. Again, the state actually supports a lot of literary activity by ensuring works that again a particular committee decides are significant literary works for Norwegian culture that a copy – and this is about a thousand copies, I think this involves – a copy of each work is bought by the public libraries in Norway.

So a publisher can be guaranteed, if you like, the sale of a thousand copies, which makes it commercially viable. So there's all sorts of forms of state patronage that continue today in the state.

But of course, the state's relationship to the sphere of literature has not always been positive and enabling. It's also been positively disabling, the obvious form of that is state censorship, which has a long history. And I'm interested in that long history but I've worked mainly on the twentieth century.

But the project that I'm currently interested in and the book that I've just finished called The Literature Police, focuses on South Africa. And it focuses largely on South Africa because there's an extremely odd and surprising linkage between questions of literature and censorship. Whereas we would normally think that censorship, as it were, out to curb literature in South Africa. The situation was strangely complicated, and it's that strangeness that got me interested.

Interviewer And how did censorship emerge in South Africa?

Respondent So, the modern South African state is a twentieth century invention, dating back to 1910. And like most colonial states at that point, there had always been forms of censorship; the control of public speech and writings, representations, drama and so on. In the 1930s the Union of South Africa, as it was then called - which was the racially segregated dominion of the British Empire - in the early 1930s, the first Official Statutory Board of Censors was set up and it was initially – as the date might give away – initially set up mainly to deal with film, which was a new thing.

And various states around the world were worried about the consequences of film in all sorts of ways of what it might do to the society. And so they set up this board. It actually dealt with film and what was called public entertainments; basically drama, theatre. But very quickly, its powers were expanded to cover imported books as well. So, internally or domestically published books of which South Africa has very developed and complicated because it's a multi-lingual society publishing industry internally at that time.

All those books were just covered by the common law. So, there was no system of internal censorship; that was only for imported books and for film that there was a system of censorship. Now that was from the mid-1930s. And then in the course of the 1940s and 1950s, various church groups – primarily Afrikaan – church groups were eager for the government to set up a system that controlled internally produced books as well. And in the 1950s, the government set up a commission to look into the feasibility study of this as it were and they published a report. And the report was published more or less at the same time that H.F. Verwoerd, who became the prime minister of apartheid South Africa, and he's the figure often associated with being often the architect of Grand Apartheid – H.F. Verwoerd.

The report on censorship coincided with the beginning of his period as Prime Minister. Government didn't do much about it and then you had the Sharpeville Atrocities in 1960 and all the controversies surrounding that, which was followed by a government clamp down. Which included introducing a system of internal censorship. So that in 1963 for the fist time, a board of censors was set up to vet internally produced books as well as imported books and film and theatre. So, that was what began in 1963.

My book's called The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences. The apartheid censorship system effectively began in 1963 but there had been a system in place before that.

Interviewer And who were the first censors and who appointed them?

Respondent This is really gets to the number of the project and why I've written a book that is both about literature and about censorship, which although people think that there's natural connection between the two, it's actually not so obvious as to what the connection is between... You know, Censorship is largely a topic for political study and investigations; what's a literary person got to do with censorship? Apart from the fact that some literary books are banned and it there anything interesting that you can say about censorship from a literary point of view?

My expectation was not and when I first went into the archives, which was really not at all for any academic reasons; it was for curiosity. It was just to find out a little bit more about them, to have a look at some censorship reports, which was in the late 1990s, when I'd just learnt - I was going back to South Africa quite regularly – and I'd just learnt that the archives had been officially opened. So, South Africa had its first democratic elections in 1994, in 1996, the old censorship archives were officially opened. I mean, there's a twenty year rule; you have automatic access to things that are twenty years old.

And the whole project really began because I went in to this archive, started to find some of the reports – it was a very complicated collection of things to look at, because things are rather disparate and disorganised – but to my surprise, I suddenly started to make the connection between certain reports and who the censors were. And I had expected the censors to be school teachers, ex-policeman, those kinds of people. And it's also interesting, I think, that broadly speaking we all think that censors will be stupid people. People that somehow or other are the equivalent of intellectual thugs. And I was rather shocked to discover that this was not the case.

Sure, there were plenty of people who might fit that standard idea of a censor in the South African system, but a lot of the censors were leading literary academics; mainly – but not exclusively –Afrikaans, plenty of English speakers as well. Of course largely white, but also again somewhat surprising, not exclusively white, which also surprised me. And more perversely – not only was it leading literary academics – but there were some major writers, poets and so on. So this created a huge problem and a question for me is, "Why did these people get there? Why were these people running the system?"

And that then led me to do much more research to start to investigate the system right the way back to its beginnings in the 1930s, as I've just gone through that history to the 1960s. And that research took me back to a particular figure within Afrikaans literary culture of the twentieth century; the leading and major Afrikaans poet of the twentieth century called N.P. van Wyk Louw, who's a figure in Afrikaans literary culture with the stature of W.B. Yeats. He has that kind of prestige and importance. And he was also an extremely inventive, interesting, experimental poet.

And the reason I was taken back to him is that when these church groups were lobbying to have internal censorship introduced in South Africa in the 1940s and 50s he wrote vociferously against this and fought actively along with many other people who supported his cause against the introduction of any form of internal censorship. Primarily, it has to be said, because he was worried about what this would do for the kind of Afrikaans literature that he wanted to

see emerging. A more modern, radical and indeed critical Afrikaans literature. He lost that – as I said, after Sharpeville, the government was determined to introduce a censorship regime – and as a consequence of that, and because he was associated with a group of Afrikaans literary intellectuals who were noisy, critical, outspoken the government, effectively said okay, "We are introducing the system. You – this particular faction – of Afrikaans writers, led by N.P van Wyk Louw, who are called The Fourth Avant Garde, you can run it."

Van Wyk Louw saw this as a kind of victory for all of South African literatures, as he understood them, but in fact, quite clearly, it was from the government's point of view; a strategy of co-optation. They were trying to buy off this outspoken group. And so it was partly as a consequence of that the first chief censor was a man called [[Gerrit Dekker 0:13:07]], who was a very close ally and supporter of van Wyk Louw, and who shared his views on a modern Afrikaans literature and was a leading Afrikaana literary academic, then very elderly. And he had written the most – first and most – important – initially most important – history of Afrikaans literature.

He became the first chief censor. And he then surrounded himself with a group of younger – in fact, former students of his - who came to dominate the system. And because of the links to van Wyk Louw, and because of the position that they took, they set themselves up with a mission again, somewhat perversely, to protect literature. They saw themselves as the guardians, as it were, or the guardians of specifically also, the Republic of Letters, the idea that writers must be given a kind of autonomy from any kind of church, states, political authority to say and do what they like. They saw themselves as wanting to protect this; that space of the literary in that sense.

So, once I'd mapped out that history and got that in my mind, I realised that there was first of all a much more complex story to be told about the history of apartheid censorship and its cultural consequences. But secondly, I also realised that there was a connection between a series of questions that I've had definitely since my late teens, things that have got me interested in literary studies; why I'm doing the work I do now. As well as a series of questions that dominated the field of literary theory in the twentieth century to do with the fundamental questions, what is literature?

So, if these people saw themselves as protecting literature, what did they think literature was? And also manifestly, their commitment to defending literature was hopelessly compromised, hopelessly erratic. So, that for instance, you'll fins that one of Nadine Gordimer's novels, The Conservationist, which the censors recognise as politically controversial, was let through. But another one, equally well written - if you want to put it in those terms – equally interesting, The Late Bourgeois World was banned. You find that one selection of poetry by an important black South African poet, Ingoapele Madingoane, Africa My Beginning is banned. But another one, by and equally important black South African Poet, Mongane Wally Serote, Yakhal'inkomo is passed.

These decisions are just simply on the record of what was passed and what was banned; erratic, eccentric, unpredictable. And then I started to recognise that because of this perversity, suddenly the kinds of theoretical problems that I'd been kind of interested in and working on, and the fact – the kinds of questions that had really driven me to be interested in things like the publishing industry; who publishes things? Who decides this is literature and they want to promote it in that way? And so on and so forth. Those kind of things. Suddenly, this was at the heart of the censorship system as well. And that the eccentricity of their decisions wasn't, as it were, simply politically motivated or the kind of obvious - or stupid for that matter – just to kind of censors as censorious bureaucrats who just make stupid decisions. Neither of these things were fully explained what was going on, but rather what helped to explain what was going on was the particular idea of literature that they had.

And so, they would decide – because of the idea of literature that they had – that this was pornography, whereas this was literature. So that the literature would get let through. This was seditious propaganda and this was literature. So the seditious propaganda would get banned.

They are constantly making these kinds of judgements and the difficulties of those sorts of judgements, the theoretical problems associated with - where do you draw the boundary line between literature and non-literature? - were at the heart of the system. So suddenly this theoretical problem and my interest in institutions in the modern state came together in a way that I didn't expect and was somewhat surprised. Because the conclusion that a lot of the theoretical work done in the late twentieth century - from the 1970s on - the conclusion was – and this also fitted with a lot of my intuitive sense of why literature was attractive and interesting to study – that literature is something we can never settle and define once and for all. That actually, maybe one of the things that's most interesting about it is a kind of anarchic lawlessness. One of its basic rules seems to be to break all the rules.

Not only have all other forms of public discourse – so that you can start to talk about things that, in a novel, you can suddenly talk about things that were deemed to be literature, but only within pornography, and that was in fact not legitimate. It was illegitimate speech, but you would make that – or writing – you would make that legitimate by putting it into a novel and making it part of literature. So, those kinds of rules; you'll be breaking those sorts of taboos with what you can say.

But also, equally, you're constantly breaking the rules and norms and conventions of literature. That's built into it. So that we can sometimes find ourselves encountering a work that we just can't make head or tail of first time. So, somebody reads Beckett's The Unnamable; it just doesn't look like anything that you've read before. Whether literature or not literature, it doesn't look like a novel but it also doesn't look like a political treatise or – just strange, and you don't know what to make of it.

But that's also not just something that's an interesting part of cultural history and isn't literature, always new and always changing. It's actually a radical part of what literature does as a form of public discourse. So that it's constantly testing the limits of what you think literature is.

So, those kinds of problems - and this is amply demonstrated by the copious reports that the censors wrote – were at the heart of the censorship system. And of course, when you put that in the context of a society that is a, of course, radically divided but also one that is multi-cultural, then the questions of who decides what constitutes literature and what doesn't gain a particular force and interest.

Interviewer Did that conception of what constituted literature change over time?

Respondent Their conception of literature was often internally contested; that's one thing. Again, these problems of what is literature, they struggled with it themselves. They didn't have a consensus; that was the false assumption on which the entire project in trying to protect literature perversely from within the system was based. That actually, they could know what it was, that there would be a consensus. They did not have a consensus about literature.

Sure, they had moments of consensus, and there were easier cases than others, but under pressure, the consensus was always very fragile. That's the one thing.

And then also, I think partly because a generation of literary academics and writers – a single generation in many ways of literary academics and writers largely got hold of the system – their ideas as head of literature didn't change that radically. And they worked with assumptions about the nature of the literature that a lot of people still share today, and certainly shared in the late twentieth century. For instance, they would have the idea that literary language must be somehow very clearly identifiable as a special form of language. That what goes on within literary language or within poetic language doesn't go on in ordinary language. That there's a sharp divide, which we can all know and be clear about.

So, for instance, in genuine poems, go and get statements about the world. They don't make those kinds of claims. That's a highly disputed conception of poetic language, which a number of theorist and certainly a number of poets have disputed by putting bald statements into their poems.

On the other hand, they also worked with assumptions that, far from being a narrow, parochial kind of national concern, you know, that a great literature is both national and universal. You know, this is again a standard, going right the way back to Aristotle. A standard way of thinking about what distinguishes between the kinds of truths that you can find in literature and say in history; that the truths in literature are somehow universal, whereas the ones in history are somehow particular. That again is another highly – for a long time – has been a highly controversial and disputed idea about what literature can do. And they held to that view.

Those views led to all sorts of eccentric readings and assumptions where they would pass one collection of short stories because they thought it was, in some sense, universal and they would ban others because they thought this was too targeted to South Africa, too specifically; satirical about this or that government minister or whatever. They would make those sorts of judgements.

Interviewer Was there a level of self-awareness that they were part of the state apparatus?

Respondent Oh, yes. I mean, they knew. I also managed to interview some of them. They've all started to die off now, just in recent years. I mean, they were all pretty elderly when I interviewed them, but I interviewed a few. They were very clearly aware of the fact that they were in the system. I mean they did have the view that they were doing – what they were doing was compromised but, the standard view was, what else could you do? You needed to do something that would protect literature and so on and so forth. So they had these kind of self-understandings of what they were doing.

And there's also one perhaps good bit of – not just from interviews but actually from the archival evidence – there was one great moment I found in the 1960s, where one of the censors who was a leading professor of political philosophy at the university of Cape Town, a man called A.H. Murray, who was a long-serving member of the censorship system from the 1960s right the way through to the 1980s, so there was remarkable consistency to the people who were acceptable to the regime. I just came across one point; Murray commenting in a censor's report, actually to do with the decision to ban the really important, now constitutional lawyer, ANC activist, Albie Sachs who's a constitutional court judge in South Africa now They banned his first autobiographical work, The Diary of Albie Sachs, about his time in prison in the 1960s.

And in the process of the deliberations about that book, A.H. Murray comments, "If we ban this, we really run the risk of somebody in the future, coming along and looking over these archives and saying that we only ban things for political reasons." And of course, surprise, surprise; somebody did come along and somebody did have that thought precisely. So they did anticipate and they knew what they were doing.

Having said that all the documents that they were producing, of which most of them have survived in the archives and extraordinarily, rich archival deposit left behind, all their documents were secret. Actual reports and so on were not publicly known.

Interviewer Did these reports take the form of scholarly criticism then?

Respondent That was the other thing that surprised me. I mean, what got me involved in the project was, I expected a censor to be a censorious bureaucrat; that's what you think. Or somebody who's just mechanically following the law. And yet, I found myself reading some of these reports that were really just extended exercises in literary criticism. Sometimes pretty good literary criticism, not all, always. But certainly a lot of it, by more interesting figures – for instance, here are Dekker's reports from the 1960s – extremely careful, carefully argued critical reports. Really the essence of the whole report has got nothing to do with the law; hardly any references to the details of the law, hardly any references to the act. But everything to do with, is this a great novel or not?

And this leads to some very, very strange outcomes. They only managed reach a consensus finally to ban Nadine Gordimer's Late Bourgeois World, for instance. But somewhat perversely -

because of their role as aesthetes, high-minded notions about the literary being a special kind of writing where the rules of ordinary language didn't apply - they somewhat perversely banned Late Bourgeois World because it was a great novel, according to their own criteria of what greatness constituted.

Which meant that say for instance the issues about making – the novel's partly about a group of white revolutionaries, who start off a sabotage campaign – because of the naturalness of the literary style, the power, as it were, and the effectiveness of the literary style, it's going to naturalise people's views on – readers will take it totally as natural that making bombs and so on – and indeed, inter-racial sex – will be completely naturalised. People will be seduced by the power of the writing.

So, in a perverse way, Late Bourgeois World gets banned because it's a great novel and in that way, it'll seduce people into accepting say inter-racial sex or bomb making as a natural activity. So, extremely strange and eccentric.

Interviewer So, going back to the title of your book, what damage did this have? What cultural damage did this have to South Africa?

Respondent So, the political damage that the censorship system made is indisputable and huge. And obvious. I mean, they simply banned everything that wasn't communist, everything that emanated from the ANC. Everything that was against the regime politically. So, politically, categorical, obvious damage.

Culturally, equally massive damage, but not so obvious. So, yes there was the obvious damage of certain books by certain authors were banned and suppressed. But less obviously, because of the perversity of the decisions, in some ways as one black writer once commented in the 1980s, banning for instance gave some writers an easy sense of having achieved something. Which was maybe problematic, because maybe they were achieving some things on the terms of the state and maybe getting banned wasn't the badge of honour that everybody thought it was, although that was certainly the standard view.

At the same time they let through and passed works that were politically engaged, undoubtedly by interventionist writers. And that affected their reputation; the fact that they weren't banned. So, that would be applied to say someone like J.M. Coetzee, who – all three of the novels they scrutinised; The Life And Times of Michael K, In The Heart of The Country, Waiting For The Barbarians were let through. And that affected peoples' perceptions of Coetzee, that maybe he wasn't the important interventionist writer that some people – including me – claimed he was because he wasn't banned.

So, both by letting certain writers through and by banning others, there were all sorts of unexpected kinds of cultural damage wreaked. And the main thing that the thing reveals is that when you've got a bunch of government appointed literary professors and writers deciding what constitutes literature and what doesn't, you end up with these sorts of absurd outcomes.

The consequences of which are only damaging, as opposed to letting literature remain part of the public debate and let those disputes all take place in the open.

Interviewer Dr McDonald, thank you.

Respondent Pleasure.
