

# Eugène N. Marais

by  
Johann Lodewyk Marais

## of the Waterberg

Eugène N. Marais called the Waterberg the mystery region of his boyhood and a "wonderland" (*The Road to Waterberg and Other Essays*).

This mystery was created by stories he heard as a young boy in Pretoria: "There were three boys of Waterberg in the village school and the influence of their stories abides in my mind to this day." They told him about dramatic and atrocious events involving Chief Mapela.

People also came with wagons "to unload their ivory and skins at the trading stores: giraffe hide whips; sjamboks of rhinoceros and hippopotamus hides ... rhinoceros horns and dried hides of all the big animals of the wild bushveld". Often live animals such as small zebra, eland, monkeys and "birds of wonderful plumage" could be seen. He even saw "trek-oxen that had escaped the jaws of a lion" and heard about lion attacks.

Marais went to see the Waterberg for himself, apparently in 1905 or 1906, after he had sold the newspaper *Land en Volk* and after practising as an advocate. Leon Rousseau, in *The Dark Stream: The Story of Eugène N. Marais*, mentions "escape" from a girl and from morphine as motivation for the move. Marais also wanted to prospect, and Dolf Erasmus, who received him at Nylstroom station, was a prospector himself.

In 1907 Marais settled on the farm Doornhoek in the Naboomspruit district to prospect. Shortly afterwards Marais and Alec Austin built huts for themselves in the so-called Bobbejaankloof on the farm. Here Marais observed a troop of baboons for three years and wrote about them in, among others, *My Friends the Baboons* (1939) and *The Soul of the Ape* (1969).

At the beginning of 1908, after a Johannesburg company had obtained the mineral rights to the farm, Marais settled on the farm Rietfontein, which

belonged to Gys van Rooyen and his wife, Maria. While farming with cattle and breeding horses there, he observed the social structure of the termites in the hills, observations that were the source of *The Soul of the White Ant* (1937). He also provided for the medical needs of a large area and established his reputation as a "wonder doctor" when he put the paralysed Hessian van Deventer under hypnosis and through post-hypnotic suggestion managed to have her walk again.

In the Waterberg Marais visited many places and got to know the veld expert Jan Wessel Wessels, the animal catcher Emil Tamsen, the Nylstroom herbalist Ebrahim Ravat and an old Bushman, Hendrik, from whom he heard the tales that were to be included in *The Rain Bull and Other Stories from the San* (2007). While staying on the farm Purekrans en route through Bokpoort to the Palala Flats, he saw the Waterberg cycad (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii*), which was named after him in 1944.

During his stay in the Waterberg, Marais was very active. As well as prospecting, he worked as "mine doctor" at the tin mine at Doornhoek and as chief engineer in the construction of the road leading to the mine. He was also the resident justice of the peace and ran a court and prison on Rietfontein. From October 1912 to May 1915 he voluntarily handled the rain station at Rietfontein for the Weather Bureau.

Between 1910 and 1915 Marais interrupted his stay three times – for up to a year – to visit his brother at Boshof to try to rid himself of his morphine (or opium substitute) addiction. During most of his stay at Rietfontein Mrs Van Rooyen controlled his morphine supply, which eventually led to animosity between them.

Marais made famous observations of animal behaviour and other natural phenomena in the Waterberg. His pub-



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lications from the 1920s onwards drew attention to this unique region. It features as a striking space and introduces the reader to several people whom Marais knew there or chose to foreground.

The Waterberg indeed played a prominent role in the life and work of Marais. ■

Dr. Johann Lodewyk Marais is a literary critic and writer. His interest in Eugène Marais, who also wrote in English, started as young schoolchild after reading the poem "Winternag", written in 1905; Johann's D.Litt. degree *cum laude* was on Eugène Marais's scientific prose. In 1983 he made his own debut as a creative writer with the volume of poetry *Die somer is 'n dag oud*, for which he received the Ingrid Jonker prize.