South African bibliography: a survey of bibliographies and bibliographical work

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South African bibliography is essentially a selective bibliography of South African bibliographies, providing at the same time an overview of bibliographical work in the country dating from the earliest times to the present. The third edition published by Mansell updates the earlier editions published in 1970 by Crosby Lockwood and 1980 by David Philip. As with earlier editions, the selection here focuses on bibliographies produced in South Africa. Emphasis is placed on more recent bibliographies, but there is still extensive listing of older bibliographies (published and unpublished), including bibliographies compiled by students in librarianship when such bibliographies were a course requirement at some library schools.

The third edition of South African bibliography follows the same pattern as the second edition, with the first part of the book identifying in a narrative style a selection of bibliographies and the second part being a numbered, alphabetical author listing of the bibliographies mentioned and identified by number in the first part. The volume has an excellent author, title and subject index. The eight chapters in Part 1 embody the same domains which were covered in the previous edition, namely retrospective national bibliographies, current national bibliographies, subject bibliographies, indexes and lists of periodicals and newspapers, theses and research, official publications, archives and manuscripts, and bibliography in South Africa. Part 2 contains bibliographic descriptions for 869 items listed in Part 1. Compared with the 585 entries in the second edition (and bearing in mind that the choice in both instances was selective), this shows a considerable increase in the number of bibliographies which have appeared in – and on – South Africa.

Indeed, in the 16 years since the publication of the second edition, the bibliographical scene in South Africa has changed dramatically as a result of advances in technology. Consider, as the most obvious examples, the extensive activities of the South African Bibliographic and Information Network (SABINET) which was established in 1983 (from 1997 the company is trading as SABINET Online), the phenomenal growth in the creation, availability and use of online bibliographic databases, and the use of the CD-ROM format which, barely a decade after its introduction, is already commonplace. A useful new feature in this third edition is an appendix listing ‘Southern African bibliographic databases on CD-ROM, 1996’. The brief list here includes inter alia details of NISC’s African studies and South African studies anthology CD-ROMs, and the several CD-ROMs (most being full-text) published by Butterworths Electronic Publishers and by Jutastat. A new chapter detailing how information technology has influenced bibliographic work in South Africa would also have been most appropriate. The lack of particulars on SABINET’s bibliographic activities is especially notable; the brief section which has been tacked uncomfortably into Chapter 2 does not include the expected historical survey of the extensive bibliographic services provided by this company. However, many of the local bibliographic databases which can be accessed via SABINET Online are in fact mentioned elsewhere in the book. A further problem relates to the lack of clarity in the descriptions of some of the main general bibliographies for the Southern African region, including the SACat which is SABINET Online’s most significant local database. Where the principal developments in South African bibliographic activities are discussed in Chapter 8, the period after 1970 is sketchy, and the impact of information technology is mentioned only in passing. There were many important national and regional bibliographic developments in the year of imprint (1996) and these could understandably not be included in this brief survey. Developments characteristic of the second half of the 1990s (such as the establishment of library consortia like GALEIC
and CALICO, and problems surrounding SAMARC) will no
doubt be incorporated in the next edition.

This being said, solid acknowledgement must be given to
the author for the revision of the book. Bibliographic works
such as this are unequivocally a labour of love, the discipline
of bibliography representing a time-intensive and generally
unappreciated vocation. The book provides a good overall
‘historico-bibliographical record’ (p.19) for South Africa.
The extensive coverage achieved in the earlier editions is
maintained, with most of the earlier text being retained and
new (as well as some older) bibliographies being added to
bring the review up to date.

Updating is most evident in Chapter 3 which covers subject
bibliographies, the subjects arranged in broad Dewey
Decimal Classification sequence. Whilst most of the pre-
viously-listed bibliographies still feature here thus ensuring
the necessary retrospective coverage, it is the expansion of
this chapter which is mainly responsible for the increase in
the number of bibliographies listed in Part 2. Subject fields
covered in this chapter range from the inconsequential (e.g.
Philately, with two entries) to the significant (e.g. Politics and
race relations, with over 40 entries). New categories added to
this edition certainly reflect changed times (‘Women’s issues’
with 10 entries and ‘Black literature’ with 17 entries), as do
subtle changes in subject labels (‘Race relations’ replacing
‘Ra~e problem’).

The expansion – or lack – of local bibliographic activity
which is represented in the coverage of the chapters on
periodicals and newspapers, theses, archives and manuscripts,
and official publications is a telling tale of the measure of
progress which has taken place in South Africa in the past two
decades. To take government publications as an example, a
quote from Chapter 6 (p.49):

‘The bibliographical situation regarding official
publications in South Africa has never been very
satisfactory ... if one can judge by the example set in
other countries, then the fault lies with the Govern-
ment Printer, who, in South Africa, has never issued
a comprehensive catalogue of publications’.

The same sentiment was expressed in the earlier edition, and
the need to repeat the statement indicates the extent to which
bibliographic control of South Africa’s government public-
ations is sliding even further backwards.

Experts in specific subject fields, and compilers of some of
the larger and better-known general bibliographies, will no
doubt detect omissions and minor errors in the listings and
narrative descriptions respectively. It has to be recognized
that bibliographies of bibliographies like South African
bibliography must be highly selective (and, to a
certain extent, unavoidably subjective), and the sleuth work
required to compile a work of this nature is unfailingly dif-
cult and time consuming. This third edition of South African
bibliography marks professor Musiker’s fortieth year in the
bibliographic field. He established an international reputation
as an excellent distinguished bibliographer during his profes-
sional years at the University of the Witwatersrand and is in-
waveringly continuing his love for bibliography during his
retirement, with several other new works in press. Biblio-
graphy in South Africa would be much the poorer without
such dedicated individuals who compile and publish bibliogra-
phies which have a very limited commercial market, but
whose publication fortunately continues to ensure that the
bibliographic activities of the country are recorded for
posterity.

Even with the publishers’ special price of £25.00 for the
local market, our present problematic exchange rate makes
South African bibliography rather pricey for smaller South
African libraries to consider buying and certainly inevitably
too steep for the bibliography student’s pocket. The volume
represents an important source internationally and is recom-
mended for Africana collections, research and university
libraries worldwide. Its scope is not paralleled elsewhere.

(South African bibliography is not to be confused with
Reuben Musiker and Naomi Musiker’s Southern Africa bib-
liography, a completely different bibliographic work which is
to be reviewed in a later issue of this journal.)

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