

Commemorative edition Gedenkuitgawe

Pieter Egbert Westra



During the 50 years I have been associated with the South African Library, my greatest privilege has been to become friendly with the three Directors with whom I have worked. Each of these Directors had his own style, and impressed his own stamp on the affairs of the Library, without in any way harming the magnificent traditions of this superb institution. The purpose of this tribute is not to tell the story of the Library and its triumphs and tribulations, or the history of Piet Westra's predecessors, but to pay a tribute to 'a captain who managed to keep the galleon afloat despite storms and adverse winds on its long voyage to its present situation'.

Piet Westra (PW) has always believed that paper, print and information should be put to the greatest amount of appropriate use, and I will be mentioning some of the very positive steps which he has taken to carry out this aim as Director of the South African Library. Since PW took over the Directorship in 1981 there have been very great strides in what is today known as Library and Information Science. A librarian is no longer regarded merely as 'a custodian of a library', as the *Oxford English dictionary* says, but also has to be able to shape reading habits and to add information which improves the quality of life of every citizen.

I have watched with admiration the very positive manner in which he has endeavoured, not only to improve the Library and its physical buildings, but also his endeavours to reach out to a wider research and reading population.

I first met PW when the Councils of the two National Libraries – the State Library in Pretoria and the South African Library in Cape Town – used to meet about twice a year to discuss mutual national library problems.

In the space of 17 years, PW has piloted the Library a long way, from a haven for a scholarly few to an information provider for the ordinary citizen of the 'new' South Africa. Comparing the start of his voyage in 1981 and its end in 1998 tells its own story, 11 800 users then, over 30 000 now; 68 000 items consulted then, 154 000 now; 8 000 photocopies then, 374 000 now! Traditions have been preserved: a dedicated staff committed to excellence, and a rugged sense of autonomy and an institution which has preserved its unique character. He can look back with considerable satisfaction on the 17 years during which he guided and managed the South African Library.

Pieter Egbert Westra was born in Groningen, Holland in 1937. At the age of 16 his family immigrated to South Africa where he completed his schooling and obtained his university education at the University of Pretoria extramurally.

His library career began in the Transvaal Provincial Library Service, transferring to the State Library in Pretoria in 1961 where he rose from Library Assistant to Assistant Director under Dr Hans Aschenborn. When the Trustees of the South African Library selected him to succeed Dr Anthony Robinson in 1981, he was the obvious person for the post. At the very time PW took over as Director, the Human Sciences Research Council proposed an amalgamation of the two national libraries in an unpublished report, and it was he who resisted this and defended the autonomy of the South African Library, as he has done ever since. Indeed, it was his foremost aim on taking office to push the South African Library back into the limelight. But it would prove a Herculean task. He embarked on expanding four main aspects of the Library's work, namely, publishing, obtaining adequate funds, giving the Library and its collections more publicity, improving the facilities, and preserving the Library's unique book stock.

Perhaps closest to his heart was publishing: already during his first year as Director a number of important publications saw the light and two major bibliographic projects had commenced. It is remarkable that during his 17 years the Library has published 44 books and many more guides and minor items, all related to the Library or its collections and mostly printed on the Library premises in an attractive design and format. He took over the editorship of the *Quarterly Bulletin* from Dr Robinson and continues to edit it to this day. Where in early years it struggled to obtain contributions, it has over the last decade always had a long waiting list of articles to be published.

To publicise the Library and its collections, over the years dozens of major exhibitions, simposia and conferences were organised, which drew a lot of attention from the media and public and almost always resulted in new publications.

In 1984 a very successful manuscript Symposium was held; this was followed by i.a. three Conferences of Bibliophiles (1984, 1989 and 1996); a Symposium on the Preservation of Library and Archival materials (1986); a Symposium on Computerisation in South African Libraries (1987); a Symposium on Maps (1988); a Symposium on Book Publishing in South Africa for the 1990's (1990); a Symposium on Library Evaluation and Development (1991); and a Seminar on the future of Publications Control and the free flow of Information in South Africa (1993). These important initiatives attracted expert speakers and participants from all over South Africa and abroad and the published proceedings of these meetings are valuable contributions to their specific subject fields.

In 1982 the beautiful Octagonal Room, which for many years had been used for the storage of books, was completely renovated and changed into an attractive setting for exhibitions and functions. Since 1982 numerous exhibitions around the topics books and knowledge were organised in this room, with the main aim of making the collections of the South African Library better known. For many of them printed catalogues were issued. Some of the more major exhibitions were: *Cape Town in the 1980's*, *Fine bird books* and *John and Charles Bell* (1982); *The Schumacher Aquarelles* and *Flora Africana* (1983); *Modern printing, Medieval and Renaissance manuscripts in the Grey Collection* and the *Abolition of slavery* (1984); *Heraldry in South Africa*, *Proteas in print and picture* and *Treasures from the South African Library* (1985); *The book of books* and *Books in peril* (1986); *The voyage of the first fleet* and *Shipwrecks off the South African coast* (1987); *Maps of Africa*, *The Huguenots of South Africa* and *South African botanical heritage* (1988); *The art of the book* and *Material from the Grey Collection* (1989); *Portugesa Monumenta Cartographica* and *South Africa: a publishing history* (1990); *Cape Town in the 30's* and *Shipwrecks of South Africa* (1991).

PW also played a prominent leadership role in the library profession by regularly taking part in and contributing to library and information conferences. To secure recognition

abroad he always attended IFLA Conferences and became a member of a number of their specialised Standing Committees. He also participated in the formation of the new professional association, SAILIS, of which he has been a Council member ever since. In 1982 he established the 'Committee of Heads of Major Libraries in the Western Cape' which still meets regularly to co-ordinate library and information services. PW also played a crucial role in the formulation of the Legal Deposit of Publications Bill in 1985 and later of the new Bill of 1997. The drafting of the National Libraries Act, 1985, and the new Bill recently, received his constant attention.

Not only did he ensure the Library's place as one which served all the racial groups of South Africa, he also started an active campaign against the reckless censoring and banning of books on political grounds by the government, and as early as 1984 began taking advantage of the Library's position to submit banned books for reconsideration. Over the years through his initiative hundreds of important works were unbanned and on the day the political opposition was freed in 1990, he declared that all the 'banned' material in the South African Library should be transferred to ordinary stock. His stand resulted in television coverage across the globe.

Mainly through his efforts the two national libraries were among the few institutions which obtained permission to collect all banned political material and make it available for research.

The most visible landmark of his career is the way in which he managed, through long negotiation and determined hard bargaining, to get additional accommodation for the Library and his success in having all the buildings upgraded to acceptable standards. The Library now occupies two magnificent buildings owned by the State with full environmental control in all storage areas, access for the disabled, effective public areas, and every facility for optimum work by the Library's staff, as well as two large, very practical storage buildings hired by the State on long leases.

During this period too, preservation was put on a proper footing. His initial efforts to get the State to establish a large Conservation Laboratory, fully-fitted, seemed on the point of achievement when by an unanticipated last-moment amendment to the Estimates in Parliament, the South African Library's budget item was assigned to the Library of Parliament, who thus received the Laboratory for which PW had worked so hard. After this setback he created a conservator's post and year by year set aside small sums of money to provide the necessary equipment. Although this was never funded by the State through the subsidy formula, the Laboratory is today as well-equipped as any.

As one programme after the other matured, he continued his battle to acquire more funds. The State grant was and is hopelessly inadequate. Numerous letters and memoranda were sent to the authorities explaining, pleading, begging, and threatening. Although the hopes that the new National Libraries Act of 1985 would correct the situation, regrettably, to

this very day, many of the functions prescribed by the Act have never been funded, and others most inadequately.

His attempts to acquire financial support from the private sector had mixed success and were handicapped by the fact that donors do not receive benefit from the tax concessions they would receive if they contributed to sporting events, universities and technikons.

Although continued fund-raising campaigns, approaching major and minor companies, met with little success, there have nevertheless been staunch supporters of the Library. The Abe Bailey Trust has donated many thousands of Rands for conservation purposes, the Rowland and Leta Hill Trust has generously funded the purchase of rare publications. In addition unexpected bequests would arrive from people who in their lifetimes had held in high esteem the work of the Library. However, this kind of income could do no more than get the Library out of a tight corner for specific projects. The State grant still formed 90% of its income. It shames South Africa that American citizens giving money to the South African Library get tax relief at home but South Africans giving money to their own national library cannot. National libraries world-wide are basically dependent on the state for their income and the South African Library has never succeeded in contributing more than 10% of its income through its own activities and donations.

A publishing company donated a big sum for the establishment of the Centre for the Book and many of the Library's own publications have been sponsored by the private sector.

While the struggle to carry out the Library's normal tasks continued, it was driven into a changing environment of computers, information management, democratic staff relations and new labour regulations. Through the years PW has coped with all the resulting difficulties.

Since his appointment the Library was able to make use of new technology and keep abreast of modern development. Making the transition to computerised methods, however caused a big drain on the Library's resources, and renewal and upgrading is never-ending. This was at the cost of the Library's capital reserves which were almost depleted during 1997. However, by the end of PW's career, the Library possesses a modern computer system equal to the best available.

The last years have in general not been easy for heads of South African cultural and educational institutions and the South African Library has been no exception in this regard. The democratisation of our country has also led to demands for changes in the management style of these institutions and a greater participation in decision making by all staff. The processes involved in leading to these changes have often been painful for the Management of the Library and particularly its Director. PW has had the satisfaction however of seeing staff unrest gradually subsiding and management and staff again co-operating creatively and harmoniously.

During the same period a long drawn-out court case took place against a well-known artist/publisher to obtain one of

her art books under legal deposit. Although it ended successfully for the Library, it also gave rise to unjustified criticism from the media and the art world, mainly directed at the Library's Director.

One cannot describe PW's career at the South African Library without mentioning his wise and enthusiastic support of the non-profit publishing association, the Van Riebeeck Society, which has always had close ties with the Library.

The Friends of the South African Library established by Douglas Varley when he was Director, was influenced and stimulated by PW in its various activities such as the holding of conferences, organising regular functions, and an active publications programme.

The last objective is now also on the verge of being achieved, namely the establishment of the Centre for the Book. PW saw the need to reach a different public to those who traditionally came to do research at the Library. He wanted to do this through an outreach programme to develop a wider book culture, including the book as an art form, and development as a carrier of information and as means of pleasure through reading.

The State had allocated the Old Archives Building to the Library in 1987. Between 1991 and 1996 this handsome Edwardian building was thoroughly upgraded and restored and it was then decided that part of it should house the Centre for the Book. Over a long period he worked to get support and funding, and now, with private and public donations, the Centre has become a reality. A Head and additional staff were recently appointed and practical operations have begun.

Although this is in no way a complete history of the development of the Library during the 17 years of PW's Directorship, I can truly say it was a lively period which saw great expansion of the Library's activities.

I am glad to have been able to pay tribute to a person who has done so much for the South African Library and brought it into line with other famous libraries in the world. He has shaped its future in the millennium.

Pieter Egbert Webstra has retired at the end of February 1998. He can look back at achievements won despite the most adverse circumstances. He will undoubtedly retain his active involvement in the Centre for the Book, the Friends Association, the Van Riebeeck Society and other initiatives. Apart from that we know that his many other interests, hobbies and involvement in various sectors of our society will keep him very occupied. We wish him a long, happy and active retirement. May he, like a better-fated 'Flying Dutchman', long sail the waters of the Cape of Good Hope.

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