

Book Reviews/Boekresensies

Book collecting in South Africa

Christison, Grant

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Three decades have passed since the publication of journalist Denis Godfrey's works on Africana books (Godfrey 1963) and Africana objects (Godfrey 1967). At a more scholarly level, former Johannesburg city librarian and Africana Museum director, R.F. Kennedy, excelled himself with a superb book of essays on Africana (Kennedy 1965). Maintaining this momentum, his successor, the renowned and equally knowledgeable Anna H. Smith edited two books of scholarly essays on Africana themes in the mid-1970s (Smith 1973; 1976).

Seven volumes of the admirable *Bibliophilia Africana*, published by the South African Library have also included many useful contributions in the Africana field (*Bibliophilia Africana* 1966–1997).

There has been something of a hiatus in this field since the 1970s, and South African bibliophiles and booksellers have been waiting for a publication which would update Africana activities.

The need has now been partially filled with the recent publication of *Book collecting in South Africa* by a Pietermaritzburg-based antiquarian bookseller. The review will justify the use of the term 'partial' in respect of Christison's book, but on the positive side, the new book has many merits. The particularly strong aspects of Christison's new book are the sound and excellent recommendations conveyed in Chapter 6 on how to go about finding the books one has decided to collect. Chapter 7 on values continues in this helpful vein and provides examples from a variety of subject fields on the importance of crucial factors such the condition of the book and in determining the price a collector will be willing to pay. Chapter 8 is largely devoted to the pioneer Natal collector, Killie Campbell, although in the reviewer's opinion, this section would have been more appropriately and logically placed in Chapter 4, which gives the profiles of leading South African book collectors. In this connection, no mention is made of several of the other important Africana collectors, such as J.L. van Schaik and M.D.W. Jeffreys (their collections are held respectively at the Unisa library and the University of the Witwatersrand library).

The author deserves considerable credit for his very sound comments on book anatomy and construction (dust wrappers,

bindings, etc.), and perhaps one of the best chapters of all is Chapter 15, on the care of books and collections.

Chapter 9 gives an outline of South African antiquarian book dealers through the years, far removed from the valuable, related Chapter 18, which is a directory of antiquarian and new book dealers. This directory is a highlight of the book and certainly one of its most useful features.

Many useful hints and suggestions for the aspiring collector of Africana are included in Chapters 10 and 11, and the latter chapter is arranged thematically, field by field. Schutte's important thesis (1969) on the products of the mission press is a surprising omission. This is all the more serious in view of the fact that the author discourses at length on the mission presses. In addition, index entries referring to these presses are also of an unsatisfactory nature.

The reviewer is at a loss to understand why Chapter 12, on selecting and surveying one's field of interest, is separated from earlier chapters which deal with very similar matter. In other words, the arrangement of the book leaves something to be desired. In fact, the reviewer even questions the necessity for having 18 chapters in all, some only a couple of pages in length. This produces a rather disjointed overall impression on the reader.

Inherent weaknesses in the book are the totally incomplete and inadequate mention of important Africana collections in university and other types of South African libraries. It is clear that in compiling this section, the author consulted inadequate sources and was unaware of the lists and descriptions of specialist Africana libraries given in the reviewer's *Companion to South African libraries*. For example, even the relatively recently established Rand Afrikaans University Library has no fewer than eight specialist Africana collections.

The bibliographical component of the book is, in the reviewer's opinion, by far the most inadequate section. The author seems to be totally unaware of the fact that the South African Library's *Bibliography of African bibliographies South of the Sahara* (4th ed. 1960), has been superseded and replaced by Musiker's *South African bibliography*, first published in 1970 and supplemented throughout the 1970s, second edition by David Philip in 1980 and in a greatly enlarged third edition in 1996. The latter lists almost 1 000 South African subject bibliographies. Although he briefly mentions Musiker's *Guide to South African reference books*, he alludes only to an early 1971 edition, and appears to be unaware of the succeeding updates and a restructured sixth edition.

In a personal communication to the reviewer after publication of his book, the author took cognisance of these vital omissions. The lesson to be learned is that where an author's personal knowledge falls short, he should call upon a professional in the field to supplement his advice and guide him in the pertinent direction. In this way, pitfalls would be avoided.

The lack of expert professional advice is evident also in the strange index with which the book is equipped. As too many

non-fiction books are still appearing without indexes, it is gratifying to note that Christison's book does indeed have an index, but it should have been compiled and presented in a more conventional format. There is a Directory of free lance professional South African book indexers available to assist an author in this regard. For example, a professional indexer would never enter Palmer and Pitman in the vague form in which these two authors appear in the index. In the main body of the text itself, the citations referring to important reference books are often unacceptably vague.

Other errors are apparent in the text. The *Dictionary of South African biography* did not cease publication in 1987. It was succeeded by a new format entitled *New dictionary of South African biography*. The publisher is wrongly cited as HSSR instead of HSRC. The imbalance between black-and-white subjects mentioned by the author, had indeed been redressed in the new book.

The *Standard encyclopaedia* was published between 1970 and 1976 (as correctly stated on page 134), but not 1970, as cited on page 162.

The bibliography of books consulted by the author, appended to the text, is really very unsatisfactory. Errors noted include the omission of some forenames (e.g. Bradlow); the absence of publishers' names; the omission of crucial themes (e.g. *Africana curiosities*, edited by Anna Smith, although the companion volume, *Africana byways* is mentioned, the *Bibliophilia Africana*, Vols. 1-5); there is no mention of the national library from which the *Quarterly bulletin* emanates; no pagination is provided for periodical articles. Similar inadequacies are evident in the 'Notes', for example Coates: See how it runs, p. 12. Where on earth does one find this article?

Despite the shortcomings and limitations of the book, noted in this review, the book is nevertheless welcome because of the gap it fills in the area of Africana book collecting. The reviewer expresses the hope that an eventual second edition will effect improvements in both arrangement (more precise text and more logically grouped illustrations), in correction of errors, rectification of inadequacies and a more professional approach to the bibliography and index.

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