

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH AFRICAN LIBRARIES IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES: CULTURAL AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of books and articles on the historical development of libraries in South Africa (Immelman, 1953; Friis, 1962; Kesting, 1980; Manaka, 1981; Walker, 1994; Lor, 1996; Kalley, 2000). They typically highlight the involvement of prominent individuals like Joachim von Dessin, Charles Somerset, John Molteno and others, and associations such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the South African Library Association (SALA) – later renamed the South African Institute for Library and Information Science (SAILIS) – and, more recently, the African Library Association of South Africa (ALASA).

Historical writing on South African libraries shows a pattern of progression from private reading societies to private and public subscription libraries subsidised by the government, to Carnegie-funded libraries, to free public libraries with legislation to secure their financial viability (Ehlers, 1986). This narrative hides from view some of the cultural and political struggles that led to advances and retreats in a more complex history.

It also overlooks the stories of religious, voluntary, cultural and political organisations that shaped the growth of reading and readers, and promoted the establishment of libraries. The library initiatives of these organisations were often provisional and short-lived or eventually incorporated into official library provision structures. They did, however, contribute to greater public awareness of the importance of libraries and reading. This chapter describes the library and reading work of some of these organisations in order to tell a wider story of libraries in South Africa, incorporating other reading locales, library advocates and aims for libraries and reading.

2. EARLY INFLUENCES

It is well known, for example, that Lord Charles Somerset's tax on wine financed the

founding of the South African Public Library in Cape Town in 1818, with a key focus on education and the youth. What is not well known is that this idea had already taken root in rural areas of the Cape Colony. As early as 1803, Johannes van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society mooted the idea of setting up a library for his school at Bethelsdorp mission station near Port Elizabeth. The day schools and Sunday schools at Bethelsdorp, Theopolis, Hankey and other mission stations were used by Khoisan children and adults who wanted to learn to read and write. Attendance numbers at these schools remained consistently high despite objections from nearby farmers, and other difficulties.

In order to supplement religious education at these schools, Van der Kemp requested that his friends should send books on geography, arts, manufacture, Latin and Greek grammars and dictionaries, history, chemistry, anatomy, surgery, midwifery and philosophy, among other subjects, for this library (Sales, 1975:43). Although we have no evidence that such a library was indeed set up at the time, the notion of wider reading and libraries was established in these mission communities in the early 19th century.

Missionaries' efforts to teach reading and writing raised literacy levels at these mission stations. A census taken in 1846 showed that, at Pacaltsdorp mission station, 92 out of 209 persons were literate. At Bethelsdorp mission station, 40 of the 82 men and 80 of the 250 children were literate. At Genadendal mission station, 110 of 546 men, 163 of 547 women and 326 of 482 children were literate (Cape of Good Hope Legislative Council, 1846). These newly literate readers began to frequent the non-subscribers' rooms of subscription libraries when these emerged in the Cape Colony from the 1840s onwards.



Genadendal Public Library in the Theewaterskloof Municipality in the Western Cape opened its doors to the public in 2002.

(Courtesy of the Directorate of Library Services, Western Cape)

For example, after the committee of the Queenstown subscription library, established in 1859, decided to open its non-subscribers' room containing newspapers and magazines freely to the public, crowds of "coloured readers turn[ed] up merely to look at the pictures" (Van der Walt, 1972:61). It was a clear indication of a growing thirst for more reading materials and better library services. This was, however, unsurprising because when these readers had moved from the mission stations to the Kat River settlement near Grahamstown in the 1830s, they enjoyed access to school libraries. This settlement also had a printing press, a circulating library, a reading society and a wide range of newspapers (Read, 1852:123).

Missionaries requested the Religious Tract Society, based in London, to supply their schools with both religious and secular materials. These arrived in the form of "libraries" of books and tracts from about 1815 onwards. The tracts were translated into Dutch and the vernacular languages and were distributed widely to individuals and families, who read them voraciously. At Theopolis, for example, a missionary reported that a 14-year-old girl who had just died "had read all the books in the library two or three times over, with many of the books furnished by the Religious Tract Society. Just before she died, she was reading Mr Hill's *Village Dialogues*. Her Bible was her constant companion" (Jones, 1850:552).



Wellington Public Library in the Cape Winelands was established in 1879. Its building in Cape Dutch style dates back to 1923.

(Courtesy of the Directorate of Library Services, Western Cape)

3. THE SEGREGATION ERA

The Religious Tract Society contributed to the wider education of these readers by adding a programme of popular science publishing in the mid-19th century (Fyfe, 2004:5). It continued the supply of books and religious and “scientific” tracts well into the 20th century and successfully launched a reading room and a library at the Wolhuter hostel for black mineworkers in Johannesburg on 27 April 1939 (United Society for Christian Literature, n.d.:30). This library later became a depot of the Carnegie Non-European Library in the Transvaal, where the mission-educated poet and dramatist H.I.E. Dhlomo was the organiser-librarian from 1937 to 1940 (Everts, 1993).

Dhlomo encouraged reading at these library depots by inviting prominent African speakers and producing *The Reader's Companion*, in which he discussed library topics and introduced new African writers to the reading public. It included lists of books in Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho, and newspapers in Zulu and English. The library depots of the Carnegie Non-European Library were usually located in schools and were spread across remote parts of the Transvaal (Gauteng today). There were also school library depots in the Orange Free State (Free State today). Phyllis Ntantala (1992:86), who taught at the Reginald Cingo High School in Kroonstad in the 1930s, recalls that the school library was heavily used, even over weekends, and that learners bought their own books from money earned from casual jobs.

Mutual improvement and self-help organisations that emerged in the second half of the 19th century also discussed the benefits of reading and promoted the growth of a black readership across the country. Sol Plaatje, author and lobbyist, was a member of such a society in Kimberley (*The Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 1895:3). He combined this work with an interest in libraries and attended the Carnegie Corporation's landmark library conference in Bloemfontein in 1928. A number of independent library initiatives in the black townships of Johannesburg and Kimberley can be traced to individuals and groups associated with such self-help organisations (Cobley, 1997:63–64). They often envisaged alternative purposes for reading and libraries.

For example, the library of the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg, which also became a depot of the Carnegie Non-European Library, sought to link reading and libraries with writing. An editorial in 1938 in *The Bantu World* – which could have been written by the editor R.V. Selope Thema, who had been the superintendent of this centre, or by Dhlomo – connected the “library movement” with the production of “Bantu literature”. In this way, libraries were claimed as part of a cultural movement by African people to produce their own authors who would “express the feelings, aspirations, thoughts and visions of the race” (*The Bantu World*, 1938).

In the editorial, the library was compared to an “extensive orchard, where one may pick delicious gems and appease their hunger, [and] gather fruit to sell to the world”. This meant that if readers did not find books by African writers on the library shelves, they should be inspired to produce such works of literature themselves. In doing so, they would enter African writers into the English canon of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Dickens. In fact, this is what happened when Peter Abrahams, who worked at the library in 1937, was motivated as a writer upon reading W.E.B du Bois's *The souls of black folk*.

A small number of African women also borrowed books from this library. As from the late 1920s, self-help organisations among African women such as the *Zenzele* (“help yourself”) clubs of the Eastern Cape encouraged reading. These clubs were started by mission-educated African women and sought to improve the lives of rural women by focusing strongly on subsistence farming, cooking skills, cleanliness, child care and health care (Higgs, 2004).

Similar examples of independent initiatives to promote reading and libraries were found in Cape Town’s townships. In the 1930s and 1940s, politicians like Zainunissa “Cissy” Gool and writers such as James La Guma and Christian Ziervogel introduced young men and women from the townships to books and music at social events (Soudien, 2000:36). Political organisations such as the Lenin Club, the Spartacus Club, the New Era Fellowship and several other Trotskyist groups ran socialist Sunday schools for children and held study groups in District Six.

The Spartacus Club had its own study class, as did the non-Trotskyist October Club. Many of these political factions taught reading and writing and distributed the books of the Left Book Club (Drew, 2002:142–143, 186). Ziervogel belonged to a radical discussion group called the “Fifteen Group” and collected about 15 000 volumes (Bickford-Smith et al., 1999:84). He became the first librarian at the Hyman Liberman Institute in District Six in Cape Town in 1933. By the time he was told to stop supplementing the library collection he had already added 3000 of his own books.

Ziervogel used the library space for political debates and discussions, and combined orality and literacy to emphasise a wider role for libraries in the communication of ideas and opinions. Religious influences also contributed to the spread of libraries among the working classes of Cape Town. Prominent local Islamic scholars allowed young students access to their personal libraries and family collections. For instance, the Islamic Library in Cape Town, which grew to several thousand items, began as a lending library of 300 items in the home of Ahmed Khan in the residential area of Primrose Park (Haron, 2001).

A greater impact on the growth of readers and libraries in the early 20th century, however, came from a number of women’s organisations. In the wake of the devastating Anglo-Boer South African War from 1899 to 1902, these organisations cooperated with Departments of Education and teachers’ associations, and were concerned especially with the kind of history books being read by school learners. The women were members of the Guild of Loyal Women, the Victoria League, the Afrikaans Women’s Christian Society, the South African Women’s Federation and the Women’s Agricultural Union.

In their early work, the women robustly recommended certain kinds of history textbooks and historical fiction to promote ideas of imperial or national identity (Dick, 2004). They set up many libraries in urban and rural schools around the country, established classroom reading circles and sponsored book prizes for history essay competitions. They even commissioned the writing of history textbooks by prominent historians, and sometimes wrote history textbooks and historical fiction themselves (Bleby, 1916; Fairbridge, 1918).(1)

1 Dorothea Fairbridge also produced a number of works of historical fiction such as *That Which Hath Been* (Cape Town, 1910); *Piet of Italy* (Cape Town, 1913); *The Torch Bearer* (Cape Town, 1915) and *The Uninvited* (London, 1926).

Their promotion of libraries and reading produced interesting results. A former principal of the University of Pretoria, C.H. Rautenbach, who went to school from 1909 to 1918, recalls his use of a school library in Zeerust in the Western Transvaal (North-West province today). The mostly English books donated by the Victoria League stimulated his love of reading (Immelman, 1970:79). Some women's organisations continued their library work until these small libraries were incorporated into official structures and became legislatively and financially secure by the 1950s, and even after that.

The number of libraries and readers grew in this curious mix of cultural and political contexts. Women's and cultural organisations had also collaborated with SALA and the Union Defence Force during the Second World War of 1939 to 1945 in a "Books for Troops Scheme" that provided thousands of books and millions of magazines to South African soldiers (Dick, 2005). Branches of the Victoria League in the Cape Peninsula, for example, distributed books to lonely outposts in the country and to troops abroad. They also furnished and maintained reading rooms and the libraries of soldiers' clubs in Cape Town, and supplied a library of 2500 books to the military hospital in Westlake (*Cape Times*, 1941). In turn, the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisations (FAK) assisted the scheme through regular public appeals for books in Afrikaans.

When the scheme wound down its activities at the end of the war, the books were used to start new libraries and expand others – such as one in Atteridgeville near Pretoria and another at Pollsmoor near Cape Town. During the war, the Union Defence Force had also become involved in literacy classes for black soldiers, many of whom went on to further their education and became regular library users after the war. This resonated with a contemporary government focus on adult education and the establishment of adult night schools by radical and liberal political groups.

4. THE APARTHEID ERA

Afrikaner women's organisations and other Afrikaner cultural organisations were especially influential in the agitation for free public library services in South Africa. The emphasis was on social upliftment of "poor whites" and included an awakened appetite for reading. Some members of the Afrikaans Women's Christian Society would, for example, read aloud from carefully chosen books during visits to impoverished rural families. Even as a kind of racialised philanthropy they spurred the growth of libraries in small country towns like De Aar, Molteno, Petrusville, Sterkstroom, Wellington and many others.

Soon after an ordinance in 1955 made the use of public libraries in the Cape province free of charge but segregated, a group of coloured teachers who were members of the Teachers' Educational and Professional Association organised themselves into the Cape Library Association. It used a similar upliftment motive to promote the growth of libraries in the segregated coloured sections of small rural towns and villages. This is how library depots were established in Kakamas, Riemvasmaak, Heuningvlei and other remote places (Williams, 1960:10). Some of these depots developed into fully-fledged public libraries with a growing working class readership.

In Cape Town, a group of liberal individuals, most of whom were associated with the National Union of South African Students, established night schools in 1945. They

formed the Cape Non-European Night Schools Association (CNENSA) and worked with the Cape education authorities. A notable feature of adult learners at these schools was their motivation to achieve a secondary education. A possible reason was that, for some time in the Cape, African men were exempted from pass laws and given rights under the liquor laws if they had a Standard 6 (Grade 8) certificate (Eiselen, 1951:43).⁽²⁾

The value of reading and libraries was inculcated in adult learners at these night schools. By 1955 there were 9503 learners in centres in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pietermaritzburg (Bird, 1986:206). Calls from learners themselves led to the establishment of libraries, such as the one at Walter Teka Primary School in Nyanga, Cape Town (Wilson, 1991:94, 108). The apartheid state eventually withdrew its subsidy in 1957, by which time there were 14 such schools in African and coloured townships spread across the Cape Peninsula (Wilson, 1991:47). CNENSA struggled on until 1967, when it was forced to close as a result of political and financial pressures.

Teachers also encouraged learners to use other libraries. Mxolisi Mgxashe, for example, a member of the Kensington night school and a Pan-Africanist Congress activist, regularly used the reference section of the South African Library in Cape Town to read and photocopy passages from books on communism, Garveyism (after Marcus Garvey) and Pan-Africanism. When arrested by security police in 1963, he was relieved that he had just handed in an essay the previous day on the French Revolution in which he had predicted a revolt by the oppressed people in South Africa (Mgxashe, 2006:72, 164).



Graffiti against the Johannesburg Public Library in the 1970s.

(Courtesy of Ely Weinberg)

Libraries and readers grew both inside and outside of formal library and educational structures even when an increasingly authoritarian apartheid state tried to direct and control thought, especially from the 1950s onwards. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 entrenched an inferior education for black South Africans under the apartheid Native Affairs Department. The introduction of Bantu education led to the purge or closure of

² Pass laws required black South Africans to carry documents to “prove” that they could enter white urban areas.

many existing black school libraries. For example, the library of an established black college, which had been developed over a century, was put up for public auction (Tabata, 1960:59).

This “protection” of the minds of young innocents from “dangerous ideas” included Afrikaner youth, in the form of information resistance and youth preparedness schemes and the encouragement of teacher librarians to promote good books and “healthy reading” (Roux, 1954). Librarians and readers also had to contend with stronger censorship laws, states of emergency and, in many cases, the destruction of libraries.

The Langa Public Library was burned down during riots in Cape Town in 1960 (Varley, 1961) and the Guguletu library in Cape Town was burned down in 1976 (Hermer, 2001:12). The Winifred Holtby Memorial Library in Soweto was destroyed in the unrest of 1976 (Berry & Bishop, 1985:23). Libraries were included in 15 incidents of damage also to civic halls and community centres in Cape Town from August to September 1976 (Western, 1996:267). Mini-limpet mines damaged the Rocklands Public Library in Mitchell’s Plain on 20 October 1988 and the Randfontein Public Library on 15 December 1988 (Morris, 1989/90).

In response to these developments, organisations and activists aligned with the anti-apartheid movement still sought to develop and sustain library and reading facilities in rural areas, townships, prisons and in exile. Resource agencies and resource centres emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in response to school boycotts and poor library provision in black areas. They gradually aligned with the Mass Democratic Movement and became associated with the idea of “people’s education” as people’s libraries and alternative libraries. By 1992, there were over 100 resource centres that focused on education, career development, trade unions and general information (Stillwell, 2001:202).

These resource centres provided information and learning spaces for the political and academic education of activists. They were often managed and monitored by progressive librarians associated with the Library and Information Workers’ Organisation. However, during the turbulent 1980s, some activist groups also used municipal libraries in townships to plan protests, debate political strategy and exchange banned material (Dick, 2007).

Outside of South Africa, hundreds of political activists who fled into exile had access to the library at the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFSCO) at Mazimbu and the library at Dakawa in Tanzania. These libraries were seen as important tools in the liberation struggle. In addition to political titles banned in South Africa, the collections included works of William Shakespeare, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and South African writers like Sol Plaatje, Es’kia Mphahlele and Alex la Guma (Morrow et al., 2004:75–76).

A few SOMAFSCO students gained qualifications in librarianship and archival work with funding from international donors. Some of them worked at the SOMAFSCO library and were later appointed to positions in libraries and archives in South Africa. Over 1500 Tanzanian students continue to use the SOMAFSCO teaching, library, laboratory and accommodation facilities today (Manghezi & Tikly, 2005).

The value of reading and libraries prevailed also in the political prisoner community during the apartheid period. Some political prisoners qualified themselves as librarians through the correspondence tuition of the University of South Africa and improved li-

brary services to their fellow prisoners. Political prisoners Denis Goldberg, Sedick Isaacs and Ahmed Kathrada, for instance, gained librarianship degrees, and many others included librarianship as optional subjects in other degrees.



Start and growth of the SOMAFCO Library in Tanzania in the 1970s.
(Courtesy of Marjatta Lahti)

Other political prisoners drew on previous experience and a love of books in their prison library work. In 1965, Stanley Mogoba, Canzibe Rosebury Ngxiki and Dikgang Moseneke organised the library in the general section of the Robben Island prison. They arranged boxes of books brought from other prisons into divisions like Novels, Poetry, Drama, History, Geography, Politics and Science.

In the segregation section that housed Robben Island's senior political prisoners, Ahmed Kathrada ran the tiny library and was later assisted by Sbu Ndebele and Khela Shubane. Kathrada used his position as librarian to communicate information and have discussions with colleagues and general-section political prisoners when he delivered, collected and took stock of library books. Sbu Ndebele, the current Premier of the KwaZulu-Natal province, refers to the long debates in the prison library as "important bricks in my personal development" (Venter, 2006).

At Pretoria Central Prison, the Prisons Department's own collection was strengthened when the Pretoria Municipal Public Library established a depot there in 1970. By June 1978, 110 prisons around the country were using provincial and municipal library services and 401 294 books and magazines were issued from July 1977 to June 1978 (South Africa, 1978:14). Through long struggles to improve access to libraries and reading materials, acquire literacy skills and combat censorship, the political prisoner community developed an appreciation for libraries and reading. The private collections of many political prisoners were added to some of these prison libraries.

5. CONCLUSION

A mixed library legacy was therefore bequeathed to South Africans when the dramatic political changes unfolded in the early 1990s. The cultural and political influences listed here attest to a rich library heritage and the involvement of a wide diversity of South Africans in library and reading development. As we acknowledge such contributions, it

becomes clear that libraries played a larger role in South African national life and the liberation struggle than one may think.



The current Pretoria campus of the National Library of South Africa. The Library moved to the renovated Masonic Hall in Andries Street in 1921.

(Courtesy of the NLSA)

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