

Special Collections of the Natal Society Library

Only a very small percentage of the 25 000 members of the Natal Society are aware of the tremendous wealth of the library's collection. Most are aware of the Lending and Reference areas on the ground and first floor from which they borrow adult or children's books for home-reading, or where they come to obtain information for school projects, business, or merely to assist in the completion of crossword puzzles. A smaller number actually visits the second floor where the music collection is housed, but very few are aware that on the third floor of the library building the Special Collections can be found.

W.J. O'Brien Collection

Principal among the Special Collections is the O'Brien collection of books which was bequeathed to the Society from the estate of the late Dr W.J. O'Brien. Dr O'Brien was well-known in Pietermaritzburg. Having arrived in 1878, he served in the Natal Light Horse in the Anglo-Zulu War. Afterwards he became a draper in Pietermaritzburg but in 1888 set himself up as an accountant. He was a City Councillor at the time of the South African War, Mayor in 1903–1904, a tremendous benefactor, whose contributions to Pietermaritzburg are remembered in the W.J. O'Brien Hall of Residence at the University as well as at Collegiate School, and he was a member of the Natal Society Council for very many years.

Further biographical details of this important figure in the history of Pietermaritzburg, can be found in the third volume of the *Dictionary of South African Biography*.

The W.J. O'Brien collection is housed in a special room which has been furnished and fitted in the style of a Victorian/Edwardian gentleman's library. The collection itself clearly shows the wide literary interests of Dr O'Brien, and one can see that he was a bibliophile with sufficient resources to indulge his interests. Indeed, like any private library, it is a reflection of the character of the owner.

In the O'Brien collection there is a complete set of the *Anglo-Saxon Review*, published from June 1899 to September 1901, by Lady Randolph Spencer Churchill, Sir Winston's mother. This publication came out quarterly. Each edition had a different embossed-leather binding, and contained articles written by authorities of the time on literary subjects, and printed on hand-made paper. The publication is certainly a collector's item, and something which the Natal Society Library is inordinately proud to possess.

Very near by is a copy of J.C. Smuts's *Holism and Evolution*, in which the author has inscribed the following message: "My friend W.J. O'Brien, with kindest regards from J.C. Smuts. 1926." Both Smuts and O'Brien served together in Parliament, and it is known that Smuts stayed with Dr O'Brien when he visited Pietermaritzburg on occasions.

Another autographed publication in the library is the life of Sam Campbell told in verse and lettered by his daughter Ethel Campbell, sister of the well-known South African poet, Roy. The book was published privately for her father's friends and the inscription reads: "To the Honourable Dr W.J. O'Brien, with best wishes from the writer, E.C." It is dated the 28th August 1951.

O'Brien had an eye for Africana. In his collection is a de luxe edition of Volumes I and II of Burchell's *Travels in Southern Africa*, published in 1822. Also published the same year, and in the O'Brien collection, is the Rev John Campbell's *Travels in South Africa, undertaken at the request of the London Missionary Society; being a narrative of a second journey in the interior of that country*. Both books are beautifully illustrated with coloured prints, and together with Latrobe's *Journal of a visit to South Africa in 1815 and 1816*, (published in 1818), form an important contribution to our knowledge of South Africa at that time. The illustrations in these works and the quality of the paper and the binding, make them a joy to handle.

But O'Brien was not interested only in Africana. He had a tremendous collection of books on the history of the Peninsular War. There is the six-volume set on that subject, by Col. W.F.P. Napier, C.B., as well as the five-volume publication by Charles Oman, who was Deputy Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford. One can see that the Peninsular War and the Napoleonic Wars were of great interest to W.J. O'Brien. He had several books about Napoleon Bonaparte including the memoirs of Constant, the Emperor Napoleon's head valet. Other works on the period include two books by Thomas Carlyle on the French Revolution, the memoirs of Madame du Barri, and the memoirs of Marie Antoinette.

Being a political man, W.J. O'Brien had many books on political figures of his, and earlier, times such as Joseph Chamberlain, Disraeli, Bismarck, as well as classical historical works such as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Grote's *History of Greece*. The Americans too, are not neglected and the collection includes Woodrow Wilson's five-volume *History of the American People*, and Nicolay Hay's *Abraham Lincoln*, a history in ten volumes.

The collection is tremendously rich in other ways too, and it would be negligent to omit such interesting items as a twelve-volume pig-skin bound numbered edition of the *Memoirs of Jacques Casanova*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and the collected works of Balzac, Molière, Dumas, Dickens, Hardy, Henry Kingsley (brother of Charles), who wrote about Australian life, Rudyard Kipling, Andrew Lang, R.L. Stevenson, and Samuel Richardson. Strangely, O'Brien had a full collection of the novels of Winston Churchill. It will be remembered that the Winston Churchill concerned was not Winston Spencer Churchill, but an American novelist, contemporary of Winston Spencer Churchill.

The A.F. Hattersley Special Collections Room

Next door to the O'Brien collection is the collection of the Natal Society itself, made up of valuable works which have been collected since the Society was established in 1851. These are housed in the same room as the portion of Professor Alan Hattersley's collection, which was bequeathed to us. The room itself is known as the A.F. Hattersley Special Collections Room.

The more valuable and interesting items of the Natal Society's Special Collection starts with the books which were donated by the founding fathers of the Natal Society, to establish the library. This was the first material way in which they could show their enthusiasm for the embryonic organisation established on that cold May night in 1851. People like Henry Cloete, Donald Moodie and Robert Moffat, Jnr, all donated books to the Natal Society. Several of these are still in our Collection, and date back as far as the early decades of the 17th Century. They are mainly travel books, and some are in dire need of the attentions of a good antiquarian binder and book restorer.

The Natal Society Library's Special Collection obviously reflects the town, province and country, in which it exists. It also reflects the times through which it has passed. Considerable emphasis is therefore given to the works of Bishop John William Colenso and the controversy surrounding his See in Natal.

A multi-volume *Pictorial History of England* is in this Collection. It was donated to the Natal Society by Prince Alfred, son of Queen Victoria, when he visited Natal in 1860. Subsequent to that visit, his mother sent autographed copies of her two books about Balmoral to the Natal Society. Other aspects of this Special Collection include a wealth of Africana books on travel and exploration, as that was one of the specific interests of the Natal Society when it was established. Other interesting odds and ends are also to be found here. They include an autograph album containing the autographs of such varied people as Queen Victoria, the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon Bonaparte, peers of the Realm, academics, authors, and musicians.

Almost alongside the autograph album and assorted photograph albums from the turn of the century, is the collection of burial records for the Commercial Road cemeteries, containing a great number of early and well-known inhabitants of Pietermaritzburg. One or two of these volumes contain the reasons for death of those individuals interred. It is a shattering reflection on the medical knowledge of those times, as well as the social life. Alcohol, venereal disease, and suicide, seemed to have claimed more victims than is commonly known.

Professor Hattersley's collection, like W.J. O'Brien's collection, reflects the man himself. Many of the books in this part of his collection are on Scouting, the history of Britain, and many of his own works on Natal and Pietermaritzburg history. His bequest has given us some valuable additional copies of his works which are now out of print. Of particular interest are those works containing his own jottings and notes.

The Map Collection

Adjoining the Alan F. Hattersley Special Collections Room, is the Map Collection. Most of the maps in this room are those published by the Government printer in the 1:50 000 series as well as the 1:250 000 series on South Africa. We have a complete collection, as far as we are able to determine.

All maps published in the Republic of South Africa are subject to the legal deposit legislation of the Copyright Act. Accordingly, a considerable collection of maps has been built up over the years by the Natal Society Library. These are often consulted by people going on walking trips in the Drakensberg, or trying to locate farms and ruins of buildings and kraals. Road maps, topographical maps, topocadastral as well as maps showing the

vegetation, geology, water resources and population distribution of South Africa, are all housed in this Collection.

An effort has been made to purchase maps of surrounding territories as well as of cities in other parts of the world. With the passage of time, other maps have come into the collection of the Natal Society. British Field Intelligence maps of areas of South Africa put out by the British Army during the South African war, are to be found in this Collection. In very many cases these are the first maps ever drawn of areas of South Africa. Certainly, they give an interesting picture of the towns and country-side at that time. There is even to be found a military map of the German trenches near Abbeville during the First World War.

The Collection is arranged according to the latest principles of cartographic librarianship. The Natal Society Library was fortunate to have the services of Mr Christopher E. Merrett a few years ago, who had specialised in map librarianship at the University of Sheffield. He arranged our Collection and added greatly to the maps contained therein by careful and judicious buying. Furthermore, his period spent at the Natal Society Library contributed greatly to a knowledge of South African maps as he developed an extensive index to the 1:50 000 topographical series, and this index has been published by the Natal Society. While here, he was also busy on the preparation of a selected bibliography of Natal maps which has recently been published by an American publishing house.

Around the walls of the Map Collection are a number of framed maps, one of which shows Durban in 1839. It was hand-drawn and painted by an unknown author and shows the position of Capt Alan Gardiner's house as well as the residence of Mr Biggar and the laager occupied by the Voortrekkers near Umlazi. Another framed map shows the fortifications and military dispositions around Fort Napier during what was referred to as the "Boer rebellion of 1899".

Maps are very basic research documents and the contribution which this Collection can make to academic research, is little realised and even less used.

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Finally, how much of all this is known, and to what extent is this material used? First of all, because of the value of the books in these Collections, they are kept locked.

Members wishing to make use of the rooms for study purposes are welcome to enquire at the Reference counter. They will then be either issued with individual books in the Collection, or allowed to sit and work in the Special Collections rooms themselves. While access by the general public is restricted, serious researchers and *bona fide* writers and students are welcome to make use of these Collections. The library is very proud of them and wants them to be used while, at the same time, has a greater responsibility for their protection and preservation from unscrupulous individuals than would be the case with materials on the ordinary Reference shelves and in the Lending Divisions.

It is hoped that the recently instituted tours of the Library, and this article, will help to publicize the Collections and stimulate an interest in these lesser-known and lesser-used parts of the Natal Society Library's very valuable book and map collections.

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