

# BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA

## South Africa becomes a Friend

SUE FOX

### AES South African Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina

**T**he new library in Alexandria, Egypt, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), is intended to replace the great library of antiquity - a vast seat of culture and learning in the Ptolemaic era. The ancient library is believed to have burned down when Cleopatra's ships caught fire in the harbour during a battle with the Romans.

The new library is the culmination of a vision and dream formulated some 30 years ago by Professor El Abbadi within the walls of the University of Alexandria. But it was not until the late 1980s that the dream came to fruition and became a vast project backed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (Unesco) and the international community. A competition for the design of the library building attracting over 700 entries worldwide was won by Snohetta, a very young, very inexperienced firm of Norwegian architects.

A conference was held in Aswan in

February 1990 attended by many international dignitaries who pledged their support for the new library project. This led to the signing of the Aswan Declaration and the establishment of an International Commission for the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria, chaired by the Egyptian president's wife, Suzanne Mubarak.

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina stands adjacent to the Alexandria University on the shores of the Mediterranean, almost on the site where the ancient library was believed to have stood. The entire complex, including museums, research institutes, several exhibition galleries, conference centre and a planetarium, comprises the largest concrete circuit in existence. The library building tilts at an angle placing four of its ten floors below ground level. The building is partially surrounded by a curved wall of Aswan granite decorated with letters from the alphabets of many nations. Its sloping circular glass roof is representative of the sun disk and symbolic of sun god Ra - another link back to ancient times. The planetarium, itself an architec-

tural masterpiece, forms a globe floating in a upturned pyramid beneath which sits the entrance to the science museum.

Stepping inside the library building one can look up at the vast pillars capped with the lotus flower symbol as used by the ancient Egyptians, which support the ceiling of the terraced reading room. The reading area itself stretches across all seven levels of the library, provides 200 computer terminals and seats 2 000 readers. It is believed to be the largest reading area of any library in the world. The library has space for eight million books. Other collections include maps, manuscripts, rare books and documents and multi-media.

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is intended to be an international arena for seminars, lectures, exhibitions, educational activities and much more. The new library enjoys high level support with Mrs Mubarak as its official patron and chair of the Board of Trustees and Dr Ismail Serageldin, a former director of the World Bank, as the library director.

### Formation of AES South African Friends' Group

In April 2002 the Egyptian Society in Cape Town arranged the event *Alexandria in Cape Town* to mark the intended opening of the new great Library of Alexandria. The Cape Town Society had invited as its main guest speaker, Dr Mostafa El Abbadi, a professor at the University of Alexandria who had been responsible for the concept of a new library some 30 years previously. My own attendance at this event sparked the idea of starting an international Friends group of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA) in South Africa. The committee of the Ancient Egyptian Society (AES) in Johannesburg shared my enthusiasm and, not being able to resist the challenge, I offered to get the group off the ground. Our approach to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was well received and we were accepted as an informal Friends group under the auspices of the Ancient Egyptian Society in Johannesburg. The AES South African Friends' of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was



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formed in July 2002 and operates as a sub-group of The Ancient Egyptian Society, with its own committee. The group is currently the only group of this nature in South Africa and the only group in the region apart from Morocco. Our South African Friends' Group is listed on the web site of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina along with some 30 other Friends' groups from around the world. The AES South African Friends aim to support and assist the Bibliotheca Alexandrina by creating public awareness: through donations and by promoting cooperation between private and public sector organisations and the Alexandria Library. The AES South African Friends of the BA have a number of projects in hand, both short term and long term.

### The inauguration

As a result of our participation as an international Friend of the new library, I was very privileged to represent the South African AES Friends' Group at the 5th International Friends Meeting at the library in Alexandria in October 2002, which was part of a four-day event surrounding the inauguration (14 to 17 October 2002) of the new library. Thanks to generous donations by friends and colleagues in the corporate library world as well as organisations and individuals, we were able to present to the new library at the time of its inauguration a small collection of materials of historical, cultural and artistic value, unique to South Africa.

The city of Alexandria came alive during the celebrations, welcoming not only kings, queens, heads of state and other dignitaries from around the world but also representatives from many of the international Friends' groups. The library was officially opened to the public on Saturday 19 October 2002 and immediately following the opening

between 6 000 - 10 000 visitors a day passed through its doors. I'm relieved to say that as an official visitor at the time of the inauguration I was amongst those fortunate enough to be treated to a pre-opening tour, which enabled us to see the library without the pressure of crowds.

It was a wonderful, once in a lifetime experience and one came away with the feeling that friendships made there would last a lifetime. Needless to say, it was all over far too soon but not without the promise of meeting again at the next Friends' meeting - same time, same place!

### Sixth International Friends' meeting

Who could resist the opportunity for another visit to Egypt, to Alexandria, and to renew the acquaintance of the other International Friends and our charming, hospitable Egyptian Friends whom we met the previous year. The meeting (11-13 October 2003) was attended by about 60 delegates including, of course, representatives from the several new groups which had been formed during the year. Our theme for that year, the collection of material directed towards the history and cultures of the peoples of South Africa had been enthusiastically received by the Egyptian Friends of the BA. With material again donated by various sources in the form of print, videos and posters, our stand at the exhibition in the foyer of the conference building was truly representative of South Africa. My attendance at the meeting also presented an opportunity to offer a tour from South Africa to coincide with the meeting, aimed at librarians and anyone interested in visiting the new library to join in the celebrations. I left with a small group of interested travellers to Egypt and returned

with a bunch of committed Egyptophiles!

### Seventh International Friends' meeting

What a wonderful experience it was for fellow librarian and committee member, Anita, and I to attend the seventh meeting (9-12 October 2004) of the International Friends of the BA held at the Alexandria Library last October. Thanks to Egypt Air's schedule, we arrived before the meeting but already Alexandria was abuzz with preparations and I was delighted to come upon several groups of by now familiar friends from around the world who had also jetted in prior to the start of the proceedings.

Arriving two days early allowed us to spend an entire day at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Special tours of the library, the museums and the planetarium show had been arranged for us. Much of which I had not seen on previous visits due to time constraints. One of the highlights for me was to see the much publicised mosaic dog dating to Greco Roman times discovered during excavations for the new library. Attention has frequently been drawn to the uncanny resemblance of the dog sitting next to an upturned vessel in this mosaic and, for those who are familiar with it, the advertisement for the old 78 gramophone records under the label, His Masters Voice.



The planetarium show was an open one attended by adults and children from the local population. But the staff had been well briefed on our visit and we were ushered into our seats and handed headphones so that we could listen to the dialogue in English. One of Anita's special interests was the children's library which the librarians reluctantly gave us permission to visit. No adults, even mothers, are allowed into the children's library, leaving the children free to select and read as their fancy takes them. Much of the material was in English and in answer to my question to a little girl of about seven as to whether her English was good, she replied rather shyly that it was.

The seventh International Friends meeting commenced with an informal evening get-together and drinks at the Cecil Hotel, complete with birthday cake to celebrate the second birthday of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

My name was down to attend Mrs Mubarak's programme on the Sunday, which included official presentations to Mrs Mubarak by some of the International Friends' groups. Our contribution was a small collection of books and DVDs on topics of South African social history from the 19th century to current, some children's books and three issues of the Western Cape Provincial Library's magazine, **Cape Librarian**. Although concerned at the suitability of our very small collection as a gift for Mrs Mubarak, I was instructed to take it along. In the end, Mrs Mubarak, who was opening the book fair in Germany, had her schedule changed and was not able to attend her programme. The library had risen to the occasion and put together small exhibition tables for each country represented on which their material was displayed against the backdrop of that country's flag. I certainly feel justified in blowing South Africa's trumpet when I say that our table was one of the best and attracted quite a bit of attention. Indeed, it was very encouraging to note the words of Professor Sohair Westawy, the new chief librarian, who said 'where else in the world would we get material on these topics' (unique to the history of South Africa).

The opening of two anniversary exhibitions was conducted by Dr Serageldin, the library director, in Mrs Mubarak's absence, which was followed by the Arts Centre musical programme. I think all our hearts were touched by the opening number which consisted of a short rendition of *Three blind mice* played on tiny violins by a group of very small children. Items that followed, instrumental and vocal, featured musicians and singers ranging from slightly bigger children

right up to adults. What a disappointment it must have been that Mrs Mubarak could not be there to appreciate the performances which had been so carefully practiced in her honour.

The day's official luncheon for the International Friends in the Hilton Coffee Bar, one of the library's several restaurants, was again hosted by Dr Serageldin. The speech which Mrs Mubarak had prepared was read in its entirety by Dr Serageldin, this highlighted Egypt's role as peacemaker and was particularly relevant in the wake of the devastating Taba bombings which had taken place three days previously. An extract of this speech published in the Egyptian English language newspaper, **The Egyptian gazette** on Monday 11 October, stressed the BA's role as an international player in spreading peace and resolving conflict.

After the official luncheon I was granted a short meeting with Dr Hussein El Shaboury, director of the arts programme at the library, to discuss the SA Friends' proposed projects. The meeting was beneficial in that we now have a clearer idea as to the BA's preferences. Our challenge is to obtain the necessary funding to carry out our project.

Anita attended the alternative day programme - a visit to the Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (Culnat) located at Smart Village, Egypt's new hi-tech hub at Cairo's green office park. Smart Village accommodates local and international partners such as Microsoft Hewlett Packard and Vodacom. An affiliate of the BA, Culnat's objective is to 'document the many different aspects of Egyptian cultural and natural heritage and to preserve and make available through digitisation'. Important amongst these objectives is the documentation of scientific Islamic manuscripts in collections throughout Egypt and the web site *Eternal Egypt*, which showcases Egypt's treasures and cultural heritage, including artifacts from the Egyptian Museum. This in conjunction with its international partners, IBM and Unesco. Another project is *Cultural Panorama (Culturama)* an interactive multimedia programme covering, initially, three aspects: the Pharoanic timeline, the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus and Modern Egypt.

One of the evening events included poetry readings from the various countries, the poetry books then being donated to the library's poetry collection. Anita's choice for South Africa was *My beautiful land* by Anjie Krog from **A new century of South African poetry** which she read most beautifully and for which she received a number of compliments.

True to form, our Egyptian Friends hosted

the International Friends to a social day out. This time to the four active monasteries at Wadi al-Natrun. Unfortunately, the Pope, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Orthodox Coptic Church was away and we were not able to present the letter written for us by Bishop Marcos of the Coptic Church in Johannesburg. However, the monks were there to show us around and enlighten us on the history of each of the monasteries. Baramus Monastery is believed to be the oldest and is said to occupy the place where Macarius the Great settled in around 340. The Monastery of St Macarius houses the relics of the hermit monk, St Magar and in the church of St Marius is a coffin containing the relics of sixteen patriarchs of the Coptic Church. The Monastery of Anba Bishoy, founded by St Bishoy, a disciple of St Marcarius, contains beautiful murals of the disciples and a beautifully-carved door dating to the 12th century.

All too soon it was time to bid au revoir to Alexandria as, unfortunately, our flight schedule did not allow us to stay for the remainder of the business meetings. But according to the feedback I've received, some of the resolutions included:

- the importance of working with the International Friends on joint programmes
- encouraging partnerships and exchange through internships and promoting scholars' work with Egyptian counterparts on specified research for the library.

## So what do they want from us?

- Works on the Ancient Library of Alexandria written by South African scholars and researchers
- Books on the ethics of science and technology - a South African perspective
- Poetry by South African poets
- Journal subscriptions within the scope of their collections policy - possibly on an exchange basis.

Now there's a challenge for us all!

## Web sites

Bibliotheca Alexandrina

<http://www.bibalex.org>

Culnat

<http://www.culnat.org>

Smart Village

<http://www.smart-villages.com>

Eternal Egypt

<http://www.eternalegypt.org>