

THE ARCHIVES

a fountainhead for fact or fiction

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When school groups visit the Cape Town Archives Repository (CAR), one of the usual questions is: 'What is the difference between an archive and a library?' The archivist then explains that one has to remember that the term 'archive' actually refers to a distinctive, even unique group of manuscripts, not to a building as is generally believed. When, for instance, a municipality transfers agendas and minutes of meetings to the CAR, these documents will be added as accrual to the existing body of documents stored in the strongrooms of the repository. In archival terms this body of documents is known as 'an archive'. There is therefore, for example, the archive of the Municipality of Goodwood, the archive of the artist Gregoire Boonzaier (1909-2005), the archive of the Centre for Progressive Primary Health Care, et cetera.

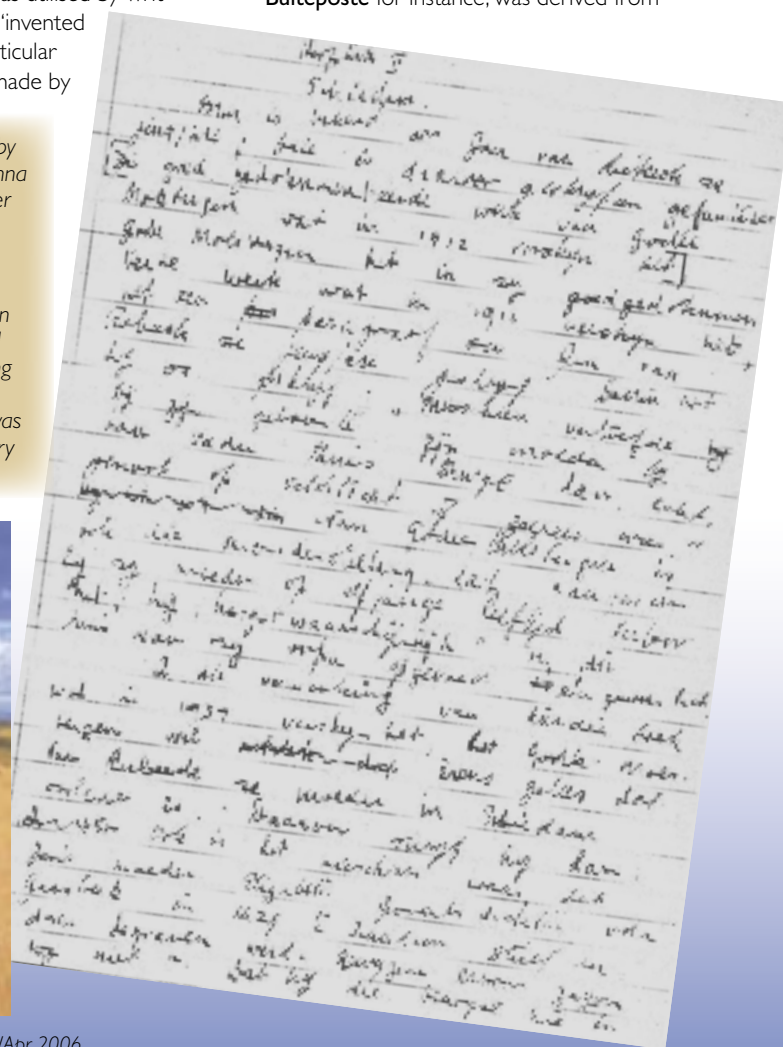
Thus groups of documents, albeit maps, photographs or written text, are housed in archives repositories. Texts are either hand-written or printed, but usually comprise original and not mass-produced material. Each archives repository has publications stored in a specific room, which in fact is a library like any other. 'This library is a by-product of the content of the repository as a whole; the books reflect the subject-content of the archival collections in the strongrooms, as these collections are indeed the primary sources from which the books, the secondary sources, are created. The original sources, such as minutes of committees, are in turn reflected in the books, in the form of foot-notes and bibliographies.

An example is the book *Op die spore van Simon van der Stel* (launched on 14 October 2005), which relates the commemorative

'expedition' by a group of history buffs in 1985 - the trek of Simon van der Stel to the Copper Mountains in 1685 was re-enacted by following the original route in a replica of a calèche, the type of coach utilised in 1685. To provide background material for this book on the 1985 tour, research needed to be done on the events leading up to the decision to undertake the expedition in 1685. CAR was the obvious place to find primary sources on this subject. Secondary sources were also important, because any researcher worth his salt, has to make sure that he does not blindly repeat what others have written before. Also, secondary sources sometimes provide useful clues to which original sources exist, as utilised by writers who have already 'invented the wheel' on the particular subject. Statements made by

Right: Section of a manuscript by well-known historian/archivist Anna Boëseken highly regarded for her historical research

Below: To provide background material for the book, *Op die spore van Simon van der Stel* on the 1985 tour, research needed to be done on the events leading up to the decision to undertake the expedition in 1685. CAR was the obvious place to find primary sources on this subject



such authors should be critically analysed by using the original text they refer to in their publications. In this rather merciless manner mistakes or deliberate distortions by authors are exposed and corrected.

Historians are frequently accused of subjectivity or even dishonesty to the extent that a large percentage of the public, who has never set foot in an establishment such as an archives repository, distrust (or are oblivious of) the scientific methods of qualified researchers, especially historians. Some writers of historical works - like *Buiteposte* (1993) by Dr Dan Sleight, or historical novels (for example, *Eilande*, 2002, also by Sleight) are bona fide historians, while novelists such as Karel Schoeman and the late Dalene Matthee made use of the services of researchers like the mentioned Dr Sleight, who put in long hours of meticulous research in the reading rooms of archives repositories. In the case of historical novels - such as Schoeman's *Armoesyn van die Kaap* (2001) and Matthee's *Circles in a forest* (1984) - the authors need to build their stories on facts to create the illusion of reality and therefore the true events have to be researched. Historical works, including unpublished academic works - Sleight's *Buiteposte* for instance, was derived from

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his unpublished doctoral dissertation (*Die buiteposte in die ekonomie van die Kaapse verversingsposte*, 1987) - include references as proof of being factually correct. Although the conclusions made from such facts may be controversial, the dates, places and names mentioned can be located (or not, if concocted) in archival repositories.

Original records, like the hand-written documents created during the 17th century up to the early 19th century when the Dutch and then the British ruled South Africa, provide information on more than just government policies - even the weather patterns of three hundred years ago can be observed from daily entries in the Council of Policy records (1652-1795). The Court of Justice archive contains certain criminal cases, including that of Susanna Kuun who was raped by a slave in 1732.

According to the historian Eric Walker *A history of South Africa*, 1928, one Hendrik van Nias was executed for stealing a violin. This mistake was repeated by another historian, Isobel Edwards in *Towards emancipation* (1942), because she did not consult the primary sources. In the Court of Justice archive, no 336, the truth is revealed:

on page 322 Hendrik confesses 'Ja, ik heb haar verkragt'.

While the preservation of primary sources is a given, these sources have to be readily accessible to be of any use at all. Here then, the skill of the archivist as an authority on arrangement and description is important - there can be no substitute for experience as every archival group is different in composition, origin, et cetera. Archivists basically learn their trade on the job. Finding aids includes the **Guide to Archivalia**, which lists all archival groups and provides information regarding the extent of each group, source codes, et cetera, while inventories provide more detailed information regarding specific groups.

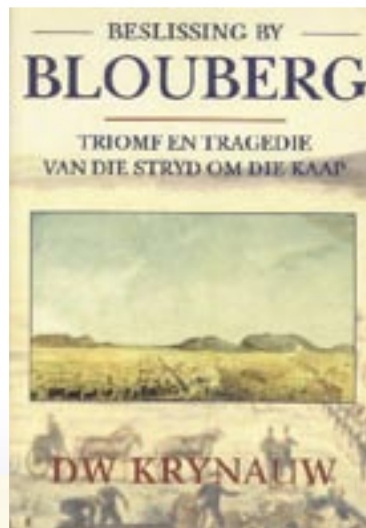
Lists of inventories are displayed in the Finding Aid Room, adjacent to the Reading Room of the CAR, each with a source code, also to be found on index cards and the National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System (NAAIRS). Books, pamphlets, dissertations and periodicals housed in the library of the CAR, as well as maps and photographs can be located in the same way. For those conversant in the 'ways of the web', the web site of the National Archives and Records Services of South Africa can be visited at www.national.archives.gov.za. The e-mail address of the CAR is <capearchives@mweb.co.za>.

Archives repositories do not make use of the Dewey System, because of the nature of archival records, which are grouped together according to the Principle of Providence - in other words, virtually any type of record (maps,

letters, audiocassettes, et cetera) can be found in an archival group; the concept of being grouped together is the source or place of origin. The archivist, especially the reading room attendant, has to be aware of which archival groups contain what information, as such information may be dispersed over several groups. Information about the Battle of Blaauwberg (1806) is to be found in maps, books, verbatim copies, microfilm, pamphlets, papers by British, Dutch and other authors, the photograph collection, personal papers donated to different repositories (both locally and abroad), et cetera. The prospective author of an article or book on this event soon finds out that primary research can be a harrowing, yet gratifying experience - and that a good relationship with the archivists in the reading room can be like having a St Bernard in a blizzard!

To conclude: is the CAR a 'glorified library?' I believe not - libraries are libraries and archives are archives. And both are very necessary - as all information facilitators know. *Note: For more information regarding the history of the Cape Town Archives Repository, readers may refer to former head of CAR, Marian George's article Treasure house of documentary heritage, Cape Librarian September/October 2002, p.36.*

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Above: Research from primary resources from several groups was needed by the author of this book

Left: Illustration contributed to Claudius related to the Van der Stel trek in 1685

Top right: Primary resource in Court of Justice archive reveals the truth in a criminal court case

Right: Map of Battle of Blaauwberg, a primary resource

