

NEWSLETTER OF THE
GRAAFF-REINET MUSEUM

EDITION 1 | 2024

THE HOURGLASS

DIE UURGLAS

Botanical Gardens: Graaff-Reinet



In this Edition:

- The Botanical Gardens
- China Belle: The Musical

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Liewe Vriende,

Museums is nie net plekke waar ons op 'n tasbare wyse met ons eie geskiedenis en erfenis kan omgaan nie, museums het ook ontwikkel in ruimtes waar gemeenskappe bymekaar kan kom om deel te neem aan betekenisvolle gesprekke en aktiwiteite. In museums leer ons mekaar beter ken en die ideaal is dat ons op hierdie manier respek en aanvaarding vir mekaar se verskille kan kweek.

In die eerste gedeelte van die een-en-twintigste eeu het museums, veral in Suid-Afrika, dramaties verander, juis omdat die winde van demokrasie toe al begin waai het. My pad met, en liefde vir, museums strek amper oor drie dekades. Ek was gelukkig (en bevoorreg) om hierdie groei en transformasie, eerstehands te ervaar.

Vroeër was museums dikwels beskou as heilige koeie, onaan-tasbaar en staties, hul blik gefokus op sogenaamde hoë kultuur. Besoekers is subtiel aangeraai om hul asems in museums op te hou en hul hande agter die rug, en 'n mens kon beswaarlik gou genoeg

Redaksioneel

Deur Anziske Kayster

daar uitkom. Vandag is museums egter lewende en interaktiewe ruimtes wat die lewe in al sy fasette weerspieël. Die moderne museum daag jou denke uit deur 'n wye spektrum van menings en sienings aan te spreek terwyl hulle steeds analitiese en onafhanklike denke aanmoedig, sonder om hul objektiwiteit in gedrang te bring.

Onlangs het ons egter kritiek ontvang oor die opvoedkundige programme wat ons in samewerking met die Onafhanklike Verkiesingsraad (OVK) geloods het. Sommige mense is vas oortuig dat museums nie by politiek betrokke moet raak nie, maar eerder op geskiedenis en erfenis moet fokus. Hierdie perspektief is egter baie beperk en mis die punt van wat museums werklik is, want is geskiedenis nie maar net politiek in 'n ou gedaante nie?

Museums en Politiek: 'n Onlosmaaklike Band of nie?

Om te sê dat museums politiek moet vermy, is om die rol van geskiedenis en erfenis in die samelewing te misken. Geskiedenis en erfenis is uiters nou verweef met politiek en kultuur en het hoofsaaklik te make met hoe ons ons rol in die samelewing ervaar.

Museums verskaf eintlik die etiese raamwerk waarbinne mense en organisasies moet saamwerk tot voordeel van die samelewing. In Engels word dit “social responsibility” genoem en dit is voorwaar 'n taak wat ons ernstig moet opneem.

Net vir interessantheid:

Museums speel ook 'n rol in die groei en ontwikkeling van vandag se ekonomie en kan dit as 'n toerisme-aantreklikheid inkomste genereer. Erfenis is dus iets wat verkoop en dit sluit nie net besoeke aan museums en monumente in nie, maar erfenis beskik ook oor die vermoë om dorpe te bemark veral omdat die publiek daarmee (erfenis) saamstem en daarmee identifiseer. Daarvan kan Graaff-Reinette verseker getuig. Ons kan dus nie iets so alledaags soos “geldmaak” van museums skei nie.



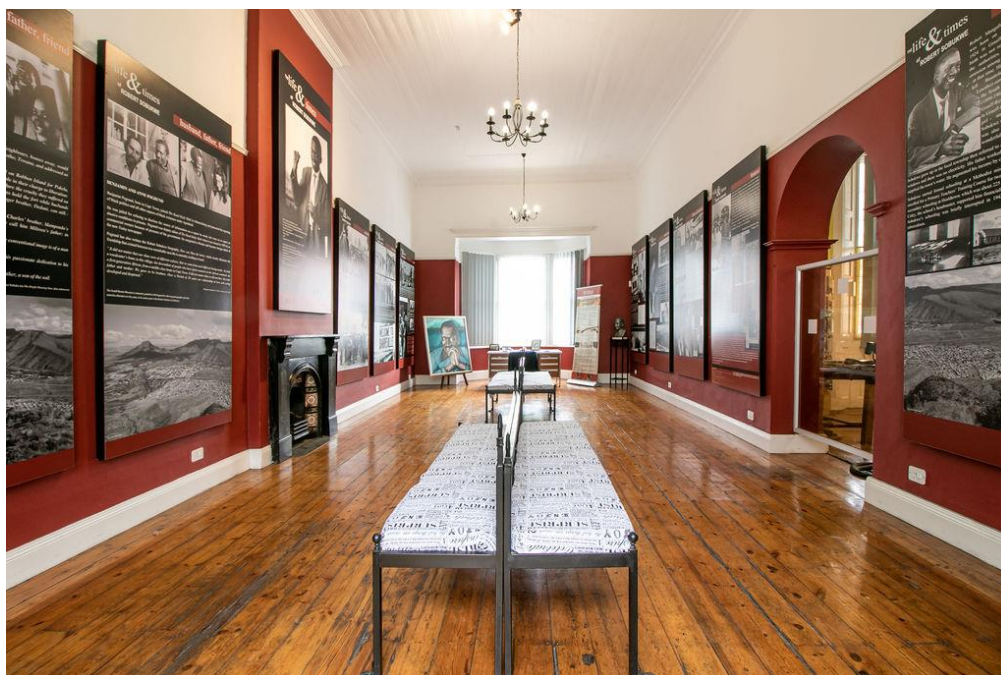
Leerders van Nqweba Hoërskool gedurende die Jong Kiesers Opvoedkundige program

Deesdae word museums toenemend as besighede beskou en die erfenisprodukt as 'n belangrike bron van volhoubaarheid. In die verlede sou dit as vêrgesog beskou word om geld te maak deur erfenis en die verlede te verkoop. Vandag is ons terdeë daarvan bewus dat “the past is up for sale” en dat dit ons volhoubaarheid onderstreep.

Maar om terug te keer na die politiek: omdat museums beide erfenis- en openbare instelling is, is dit onmoontlik om politiek daarvan te skei. Om dit te doen, is soos om te vra dat ons soos die drie blinde muise moet rondloop, met die risiko dat ons sterte binnekort met 'n mes afgekap kan

word. Ons werk is nie om klem te plaas op partypolitiek nie, maar om 'n ingeligte en goed nagevorsde perspektief te bied op politieke stelsels en openbare menings, terwyl ons 'n objektiewe benadering handhaaf. Objektiviteit en onpartydigheid bly ons leuse.

museums uitgestal word. Selfs die ontdekking van diamante was 'n hoogs gepolitiseerde kwessie, wat die ekonomiese en sosiale landskap van ons land ingrypend verander het. Erfenissimbole, wat dikwels in museums gebruik word, is ook deurdrenk met politieke betekenis.



Die Robert Sobukwe-uitstalling by die Ou Biblioteek

Voorbeelde van Politieke Temas in Museums

Museums in Suid-Afrika illustreer hierdie onlosmaaklike band tussen geskiedenis en politiek duidelik. Die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog, die *Struggle for Freedom*, en die koms van demokrasie is maar net 'n paar voorbeelde van politieke temas wat dikwels in

Dink aan monumente en gedenktekens as 'n wesenlike manier waarop ons politieke leiers en individue herdenk. Dit is nie 'n nuwe verskynsel nie, maar eerder 'n integrale deel van ons herdenkingskultuur. Ons landskap is besaai met monumente van politieke leiers, en ons museums is gevul met die nuanses van politiek in ons versamelings, beide uit die

verlede en die hede, asook dit wat ons in ons argiewe bewaar.

Museums as Lewendige Gemeenskapsentrums

Deesdae is museums veel meer as net plekke van nostalgie. Hulle funksioneer as lewendige gemeenskapsentrums waar mense bymekaar kom om saam te leer, te debatteer en te groei. Ons moet nie huiwer om kwessies aan te spreek wat die kern van ons samelewing raak nie, insluitend politiek. Museums moet 'n platform bied vir diverse stemme en perspektiewe en 'n ruimte skep waar mense veilig kan voel om hul sienings uit te druk en te verken. So pak ons die bul by sy spreekwoordelike horings!

Die opvoedkundige program wat daarop gefokus het om die prosesse van verkiesings en die geskiedenis daarvan aan jong kiesers te verduidelik, en veral te demonstreer, is juis 'n bewys van hoe belangrik hierdie tipe aanslag is. Ons spreek relevante kwessies aan en neem ons rol as opvoeders en fasiliteerders van openbare kwessies wat elke mens in die samelewing raak, ernstig op. Ons doel is dus om voort te gaan om uitdagende en betekenisvolle

inhoud te bied wat mense aanmoedig om krities en onafhanklik te dink.

Ten slotte..

Die rol van museums in ons samelewing is baie meer as die bewaring van artefakte. Hulle is dinamiese ruimtes wat voortdurend aanpas om aan die veranderende behoeftes van die gemeenskap te voldoen. By die Graaff-Reinet Museum verskuif ons grense. So verseker ons dat museums relevant bly en 'n werklike impak maak op die gemeenskappe wat hulle dien. Museums lewe nie net in die verlede nie; hulle is aktiewe deelnemers aan die vorming van ons toekoms.

THE BOTANICAL GARDENS OF GRAAFF-REINET

(Johannes Haarhoff)

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GARDENS

The idea of a botanical garden for Graaff-Reinet was first mooted in 1861, but it remained nothing more than an idea for ten years. There was, however, a group of citizens who met regularly in the town library for public lectures on astronomy, chemistry and especially botany, keeping the idea of a botanical garden on their agenda. Their dream came alive in 1872 when a large portion of land within the Graaff-Reinet horseshoe was put up for sale. This area, now occupied by the “Botanics” sports grounds, included all the land in the quadrant between Park and Stockenstrroom Streets and the Sundays River. When first surveyed in 1853 as shown in Figure 1, it comprised of six large erven with a total area of about 28 000 m², and the northern extension of Plasket Street between the erven and the Sundays River. Some, or possibly all, of these erven became the property of a Mr Peche. When Peche put these erven up for sale, 40 residents sent a petition in October 1872 to Sir Henry Barkly, Governor of the Cape Colony, asking for permission to establish a botanical garden. Almost immediately, in November 1872, Barkly sanctioned that the erven be used for a botanical garden, adding £200 to cover some of the initial establishment costs. The size of

the garden, shown in Figure 2, was mentioned as about 28 000 m² (7 acres) which suggests that Peche owned all of the erven.

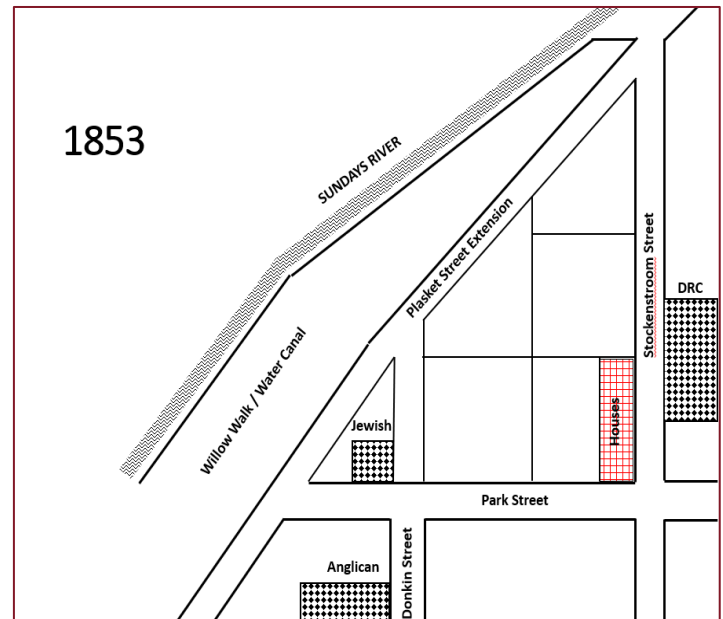


Figure 1. The original erven in the quadrant between Park (then Bird) Street and Stockenstrroom Street, as surveyed in 1853.

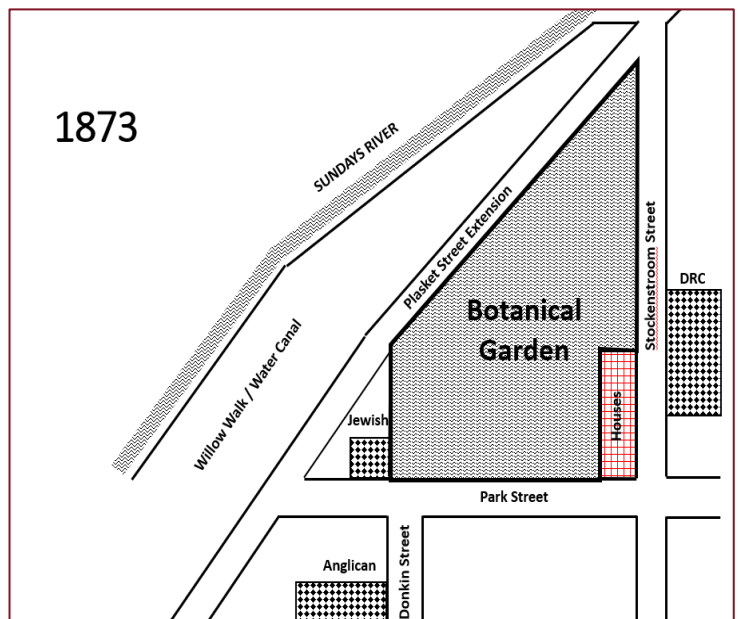


Figure 2. The original 1873 boundaries of the Graaff-Reinet Botanical Gardens in relation to the cemeteries of the Dutch Reformed Church (established 1844), the Anglican Church (circa 1845) and the Jewish Community (circa 1852).

A Botanical Gardens Committee was quickly established and met for the first time on 20 November 1872, including the Reverend Charles Murray (who also had a keen botanical interest), Francis Guthrie, Harry Bolus and John McLea. A layout of the garden was prepared, presumably by McLea and hundreds of trees were planted, including fruit trees. From the sketchy information available, we know that McLea served as curator in 1872, and again from 1875-1878, Bolus in 1874, and Charles J Howlett from 1898 until sometime before 1915. William Tuck worked in the Gardens in 1881. At one time, there was also a gardener named Kirchoff. (Kirchoff is a well-known South African seed company, but no link could be established with the Graaff-Reinet Kirchoff up to now.)

During the first decades of its existence, the Gardens flourished. It was fortunate to have extensive access to convict labour, but it remained necessary to exploit additional sources of income as far as possible. The Cape Government made annual grants of £150, later increased to £250. A citizen support group of about 90 persons paid an annual subscription of £1 each. Furthermore, the Gardens were made available for balls, charity concerts and bazaars, presumably for a fee. From 1879 to 1883, the Graaff-Reinet Amateur Band performed weekly at promenade concerts in the Gardens. The sale of plants was, however, the main revenue stream, starting small in 1874 by only selling £3 worth of plants. By 1877, 13 000 plants were available for sale. In 1880 the revenue from this source reached £439. The focus of the Garden was not only on decorative plants and trees, but also on the propagation of different varieties of fruit trees. Public support

also came in other ways, such as the handsome fountain donated by Graaff-Reinetter Herman Wertheim, shown in Figure 3. The Gardens were opened to the public from 08h00 to 18h00 in winter; and from 06h00 to 20h00 in summer.



Figure 3. The focal point in the centre of the Botanical Gardens was a water fountain donated by Graaff-Reinetter Herman Wertheim.

The initial establishment of the Graaff-Reinet Botanical Gardens was driven by a number of gifted Graaff-Reinettters, who are deserving of closer examination, and appreciation, for their significant contributions.

FRANCIS GUTHRIE (1831-1899)

Francis Guthrie was born in Paddington, England on 22 January 1831. He was a gifted child and was sent by his parents to attend University College in London where he obtained BA and LL.B. degrees. He started out as barrister in London for a while, but his main interest lay in mathematics. In 1861, at the aged of 30, he left England for the Cape Colony to take up the chair of Mathematics at the newly established Graaff-Reinet College. Here he met Charlotte Isabella Grisbrook,

daughter of a local medical doctor and pharmacist, marrying her in February 1871.



Figure 4. Francis Guthrie (1831-1899)

The Graaff-Reinet College, first proposed in 1858, was an institution which taught at both the preparatory (high school) and university levels. Two professors were appointed to teach the university subjects – James Gill, graduate of Cambridge, was Professor of Classics and Guthrie was Professor of Mathematics. The two professors and the Reverends Andrew Murray and William Steabler formed the first Senate of the College. The College opened with 20 enrolled students and classes were taught at first, in temporary classrooms in Somerset Street. In 1864 the College moved to a new building in Bourke Street, today the site of the Petrus de Klerk provincial building. The College initially

flourished and built an excellent reputation, but student numbers started to decline from 1869, with Guthrie leaving Graaff-Reinet for Cape Town in 1875. In Cape Town he worked for two years as a barrister and editor of a newspaper, before joining the South African College in November 1878 to lecture in mathematics. He retired in January 1899 owing to ill health.

Guthrie was much more than a lawyer and mathematician. During his time in Graaff-Reinet, he played a prominent role in numerous activities:

- As fundraiser for a hospital built in 1877, today the site of *Huis van de Graaff*
- Collected the first rainfall statistics in Graaff-Reinet, part of his interest in irrigation
- Proposed a new water scheme for the town, eventually built in 1884
- From 1861 to 1875 director of the Library, which served the town from 1847.
- Developed the Library into a cultural centre with regular public lectures, including his own series of ten lectures on botany.
- Helped to manage the finances of St James Anglican Church
- Proposed a route for a railway line between Graaff-Reinet and Middelburg

Guthrie was a close friend of Harry Bolus (appearing in the next section) while in Graaff-Reinet. Their friendship continued after both had left for Cape Town, where they collaborated on botanical projects, working mostly on the genus *Erica*. Guthrie built an extensive collection of the Cape Peninsula

flora which eventually found its way to the herbarium of the University of Cape Town. There are 14 plant species named after him. He died on 19 October 1899, only nine months after his retirement and was buried in St Thomas's Anglican Church in Rondebosch. A close colleague remembered that "his unfailing good humor and patience generally succeeded in unravelling hard knots. He had wide interest beyond his immediate work, was a great reader, and made a special hobby of botany in which he did a large amount of valuable work".

HARRY BOLUS (1834-1911)

Harry Bolus was born in Nottingham, England, on 28 April 1834. One of Harry's teachers in Nottingham was George Herbert who, in turn, was a close friend of a Grahamstown merchant named William Kensit. When Kensit needed an assistant in Grahamstown, the teacher mentioned it to Bolus. In this way, a 16-year old Bolus arrived in Algoa Bay on 18 March 1850 and proceeded to Grahamstown. By March 1855 Bolus had relocated to Graaff-Reinet and took an active interest in the affairs of the community. He participated in the activities of the local immigration board, the theatrical club, the agricultural society and the town library. He even tried his hand at sheep farming and as a reporter and lithographer for the Graaff-Reinet Herald. He married Sophia Kensit, sister of his earlier employer, in 1857 and in 1858 he started a general dealership in town in partnership with his brother Walter, who had since joined him in Graaff-Reinet, but the dealership was closed in 1860. After a stint with the Graaff-Reinet Board of Executors, he helped to establish the Midland Fire Assurance and Trust Company and was employed as its secretary until he left Graaff-Reinet for Cape Town in December

1874. There he quickly established himself as a financial broker and participated in the social and intellectual life of the city, as he had done in Graaff-Reinet, with far too many accomplishments to list here. He retired in 1894 with a considerable fortune. Harry Bolus stayed in Cape Town until his death, but visited England no less than 14 times. During one of these trips he died in Oxford, Surrey on 25 May 1911 at the age of 77 years.

Following his marriage in 1857, his first son Alfred was born in 1858. Sadly, Alfred died on 19 August 1864 at the age of six of diphtheria. This left Bolus in such a state of despondency that his close friend Francis Guthrie (see above) suggested that he should take up botany to take his mind off his bereavement. He pursued this hobby wholeheartedly, making excursions up the mountains to search for and collect plants, which he described carefully with pencil and pen. In this way botany, for which he is best-known today, became a lifelong passion to Bolus. He was a founding force in the establishment of the Graaff-Reinet Botanical Gardens in 1872 and was named Honorary Curator in 1874. After his departure to Cape Town he greatly expanded his botanical interests. He visited Kew Gardens in England often, regularly sent succulents and bulbs there. He also kept up correspondence with leading international botanists, formed a valuable library of botanical Africana, conducted collecting trips to different parts of South Africa and wrote articles and books with the main focus of the erica and orchid species of the Cape. He established an extensive herbarium which, after his death, was donated along with this house and a large sum of scholarship money to the South African College. This is today the Bolus Herbarium at the University of Cape Town. He received an honorary doctorate from

the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1902.



Figure 5. Harry Bolus (1834-1911)

JOHN HUNTER MCLEA (1836-1878)

John Hunter McLea was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 24 May 1836. After working as a nurseryman for a few years, he emigrated to the Cape of Good Hope in the late 1850s, settling in Graaff-Reinet where he started a forestry nursery. He married Margaret Haddow Hunter, born in 1836 in Stevenston, Scotland, probably after his arrival in Graaff-Reinet as the first of their nine children was only born in 1862 and the last in 1876. Not much is known about his initial years at Graaff-Reinet, but it is certain that he

remained active in the field of botany. He developed a special interest in the mosses, which he collected, dissected and made drawings of. His interest in the mosses followed after being encouraged by none other than Harry Bolus, whom he befriended after arriving in Graaff-Reinet. McLea, along with Francis Guthrie, Harry Bolus and the Reverend Charles Murray, formed the core of citizens lobbying for a botanic garden in Graaff-Reinet which would eventually lead to its establishment in 1872, as described earlier. McLea gave much of his spare time to lay out and develop the garden, was part of its management committee and was appointed as its first curator. He planted 850 (some sources say 1000) trees in the garden and started to write a handbook on gardening, which seems not to have been completed.

McLea also befriended Thomas Francois Burgers in Graaff-Reinet. Burgers had returned in January 1859 from his theological studies at Utrecht in the Netherlands and then stayed with his mother on her farm Langfontein in the Camdeboo, waiting to be called to a Dutch Reformed congregation. He left Graaff-Reinet at the end of June 1859 to assume duties as a young *dominee* at Hanover. It is very likely that McLea and Burgers met during this six-month period, which corresponds with McLea's own arrival in town. Burgers moved on to become the President of the Transvaal Republic in May 1872, which may have been a contributing reason why McLea and his family decided to also move to the Transvaal, leaving in February 1873. He spent most of 1873 collecting plants in the Lydenburg and Pilgrim's Rest area, moving to Pretoria towards the end of 1873. In 1874 he was

appointed to lay out a botanic garden on the site of the present Burgers Park. His proposals were approved in May 1875 and he proved to be a “thoroughly competent, practical and hard-working curator”, but progress was slow as no allowance was made for a supply of labour. Moreover, the *Volksraad* failed to renew his contract in May 1875 while President Burgers was absent, which was a turbulent time in Transvaal history. Without an official contract and salary, McLea’s position was untenable.

He resigned in September 1875, returned to Graaff-Reinet and resumed his earlier job as curator of the Botanic Garden at a salary of 200 pounds per year, indicating the high esteem in which he was held. He held this post from 1876 to 1878, when he died from a stroke while at work in the garden on 16 December at the age of 42. He lies buried in the Cradock Street cemetery in Graaff-Reinet, along with his wife and four of his children (see Figure 6). Plants collected by McLea are found in numerous herbaria in South Africa and England.

THEIR BOTANICAL LEGACY

Closer examination of the lives of these three men shows that they all came to Graaff-Reinet at roughly the same time, and all at a youthful age. Harry Bolus arrived first in 1855 at the age of 21, John Hunter McLea in 1859 at the age of 23 and Francis Guthrie in 1861 at the age of 30. Their time in Graaff-Reinet overlapped for a decade, during which they actively participated in a broad range of public activities, becoming close friends. Their collective interest in botany was, no doubt, a driving force in getting the Graaff-Reinet Botanical Gardens off the ground in 1872. Shortly thereafter, Bolus left in 1874 and Guthrie in 1875, while McLea died in 1878. Sadly, the Botanical Gardens do not exist today but the name lives on locally in the sports fields as their monument. Their more lasting legacies live on far more widely in another way: each of these three men, none of whom were professional botanists, were recognised by their peers and honoured by collectively having 31 plant species named after them:

- Guthrie had 14 plant species named after him in the genus **Guthriea** and the species *Satyrion guthriei*;



Figure 6. The McLea family grave in Cradock Street Cemetery, Block 2 Row 12 Grave 2. “Our dear parents John Hunter McLea born Edinburgh Scotland, passed away December 16 1878 aged 42. Margaret Haddow Hunter McLea born Stevenston Ayr, passed away January 4, 1898”.

- Bolus had 15 species named in the genera **Bolusia**, **Bolusafra**, **Neobolusia**, **Bolusanthus** and **Bolusiella**; and
- McLea had two species named after him – Sutura **macleana** and **Pterogoneurum macle anum**.

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UPCOMING EVENTS



Join us at
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By Dalene Seymore and Jenny Lea Penning
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15 AUGUST 2024 |

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China Belle – From World War II to the stage in Graaff-Reinet

By Anziske Kayster

In July 2021, renowned journalist Ivor Markman, known for his particular interest in Graaff-Reinet, posted a brief, but captivating, description on the "South Africans in WW1, WW2 and Korean War" Facebook page. He mentioned Douglas de la Harpe, a Graaff-Reinetter, captured at Tobruk during World War II who wrote the musical "China Belle." Markman was seeking information or even a photograph of de la Harpe, noting that he had written a "musical romance" while in hiding during WW II. The post garnered significant attention and was shared on the "Graaff-Reinet History" Facebook group, but unfortunately, no additional information surfaced.

In 2019, I embarked on extensive research into the history and heritage of Graaff-Reinet. Mrs. Dianne Loock, whose husband Willem was a veritable walking encyclopedia and a wealth of information on all things Graaff-Reinet, generously lent me her files. The files held newspaper clippings, magazine articles, posters,

pamphlets, brochures, memorabilia, and more, offering a treasure trove of research material. Amongst these items, a striking red and black program repeatedly caught my eye: adorned with Chinese-style lettering and the face of an oriental lady, along with a string of bells. It was the program for the 1986 local production of "China Belle." This fascinating pièce piqued both my interest and imagination.

THE STORY BEHIND "CHINA BELLE"

In January 1945, amid the snow-covered landscape of Germany, Douglas de la Harpe and Francis Lowry conceived "China Belle" while sitting on wooden benches in the Prisoner of War (POW) Camp Post Office in Stalag VIIA near Moosberg in German Bavaria.¹ Their dull daily routine involved sorting mail for fellow POWs for a couple of hours each day but the rest of their day was dedicated to planning and writing the dialogue for their musical, "China Belle".

The inspiration for "China Belle" struck Douglas de la Harpe during a one-act drama performed by French POWs in Stalag VIIA. He immediately focused on creating a play rooted in an ancient Chinese legend, which seemed ideal for a musical adaptation. Enthusiastically, de la

as a transit camp through which prisoners, including officers, were processed on their way to other camps. At some time during the war, prisoners from every nation fighting against Germany passed through it.

¹Stalag VII-A (in full: *Kriegsgefangenen-Mannschafts-Stammlager VII-A*) was the largest prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany during World War II, located just north of the town of Moosburg in southern Bavaria. The camp covered an area of 35 hectares (86 acres). It served also

Harpe began crafting lyrics and melodies with the assistance of Francis Lowry. Their collaboration was so productive that within three weeks, de la Harpe was ready to launch a new POW camp-life play called "The Magic Blower." This play laid the foundation for what would eventually become the musical "China Belle."



Douglas de la Harpe

"The Magic Blower" proved very successful, motivating de la Harpe to dream bigger. He envisioned a full-scale musical production, pooling talent from various small camp concert parties. One of the leading roles was assigned to

² Read The full story of the life of George Burnett Cormack at

George Cormack, a British parachutist captured at Arnhem, and the previous year's gold medal winner as the best junior tenor of the British Isles.² However, just as rehearsals were about to begin, the Germans unexpectedly dispersed the camp's inmates across different parts of Germany, forcing the abandonment of the play.

The original script of "China Belle" was lost in London in 1951 when De la Harpe had flown to England via Italy to retrieve the script of another musical comedy, "A Jack for a Jill," which he had written while hiding in the Apennine Mountains after escaping from an Italian POW Camp in September 1943. The script for "China Belle" had been buried in an oilskin tobacco pouch inside an empty Red Cross parcel tin under rubble in the cave where the escaped prisoners hid. Eight years later, with the help of Italian friends, the manuscript was unearthed, along with de la Harpe's diary documenting their mountain adventures. Despite some moisture damage, most of the penciled writing was still legible.

In August 1947, a rewritten version of "A Jack for a Jill" was produced in Graaff-Reinet. Meanwhile, de la Harpe, having lost the original "China Belle" script, took eighteen months to rewrite the entire show. He expanded the female roles,

<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12003518.george-cormack/>. He died on 24 June 1999.

which were originally minimal due to the scarcity of good female impersonators in the POW camp, and nearly doubled the number of songs in the production.

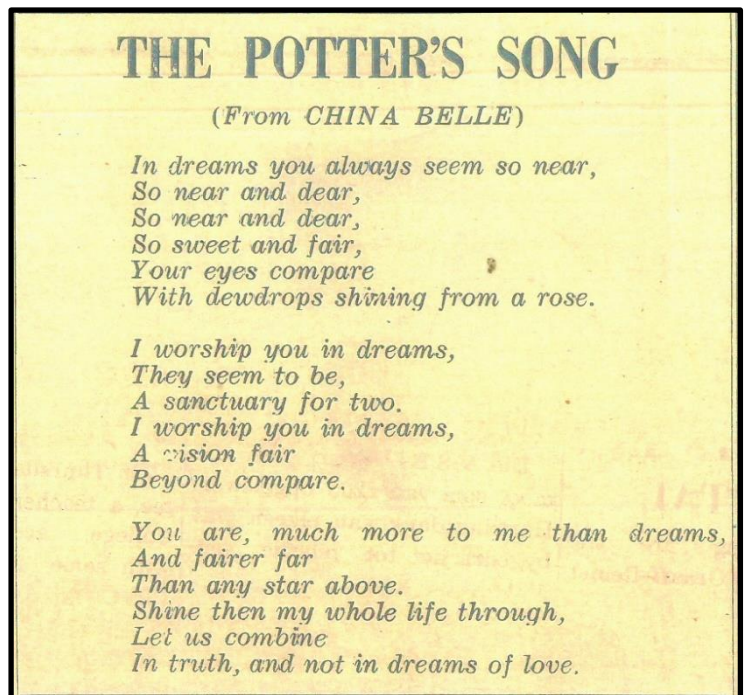
“CHINA BELLE” GOES TO THE STAGE

"China Belle" was first staged in the Graaff-Reinet Town Hall in 1957. Sponsored by The Graaff-Reinet Round Table, the production featured none other than the playwright himself. The musical tells the story of Swing Ling, the daughter of a wealthy mandarin, Fu Woo.³ Fu Woo has set a challenging test for all suitors seeking his daughter's hand in marriage: the suitor must make a set of bells, hidden in the pocket of the palace music master, reverberate with his singing.⁴ Failure meant forfeiting his life and facing the palace executioner.

Swing Ling, frustrated and agitated by this difficult condition, breaks one of her father's precious vases. The play opens with the arrival of Hi Sing, who is actually a wandering Englishman named Marcus Polus. His arrogance and self-importance greatly annoy Fu Woo's spinster sister, No Can Du. Another suitor arrives but gets cold feet, and meanwhile, Swing Ling breaks another vase. A potter named Yang is called in to repair the vase and strikes up a conversation with Swing Ling. They

³ In the context of Chinese history, a "mandarin" refers to a scholar-official who served as a bureaucrat in the government of imperial China. The term "mandarin" is derived from the Portuguese word "mandarim," which was used by early European visitors to describe these officials.

fall in love, but Swing Ling knew that her father would never permit a marriage to Yang.



**Published in The Graaff-Reinet Advertiser of
04 March 1957**

Swing Ling is distressed when her father informs her that the Great Mandarin, another suitor, will also compete for her hand. Her heart set on Yang, she confesses her love for the potter. Her father then set out to kill Yang. Seeking to warn Yang, Swing Ling enlists the help of Marcus Polus, who has meanwhile found love with her cousin. However, Marcus and Yang are captured by a mean bandit and his gang. Upon learning of the Great Mandarin's visit, the bandit devises a plan to pose as the Great Mandarin, win Swing

Mandarins were part of an elite class of civil servants who were selected through a rigorous examination system and were responsible for the administration and governance of the empire.

⁴ From which the name of the play "China Belle" was derived.

Ling's hand, and exact revenge on his rival, which appears to be none other than the Great Mandarin himself. . He arrives at the palace and chaos ensued. The story is full of surprises and plots, culminating in a happy ending with no more broken vases.

"China Belle" was described as "delightful from beginning to end." The dialogue was witty, the lyrics exceptional, and the cast outstanding. John Gardell played the bandit leader Ko King Ming, while Lalla van Heerden portrayed No Can Du. The Archdeacon Byrne "breathed a benedictive spirit" over the whole production, and author-turned-actor Douglas de la Harpe shone as the executioner. Herby Arnot, former headmaster of Union High School (1947–1968), performed a delightful dance, and Jack Meyer was convincing as Hi Tone, the music master. The decor, glittering costumes, and supporting cast all contributed to an outstanding production, with tickets flying off the shelves.

When bookings opened, there was a wild rush for seats, and within the first few days, all the 15s and 10s seats on the ground floor were sold out. Mothers with small children were accommodated in an afternoon show. Following the success of the show, it was produced by other Round Table branches throughout South Africa, including in Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage,

and Kempton Park. "China Belle" seemed poised to become a lucrative and enduring musical hit.

THE 1986 PRODUCTION

In May 1986, The Graaff-Reinet Round Table staged a second production of "China Belle" in the John Rupert Theatre as part of the Graaff-Reinet 200 Festival. This ambitious undertaking, guided and directed by Mrs Issie Theron, went smoothly.⁵ This time, Colin Mathews, the local pharmacist, played the music master, and John Gardell took on the role of Fu Woo (the same John Gardell from the 1957 production). Anthony de la Harpe, the son of Douglas de la Harpe, starred as the leader of the bandits, with Lalla van Heerden reprising her role as No Can Du.

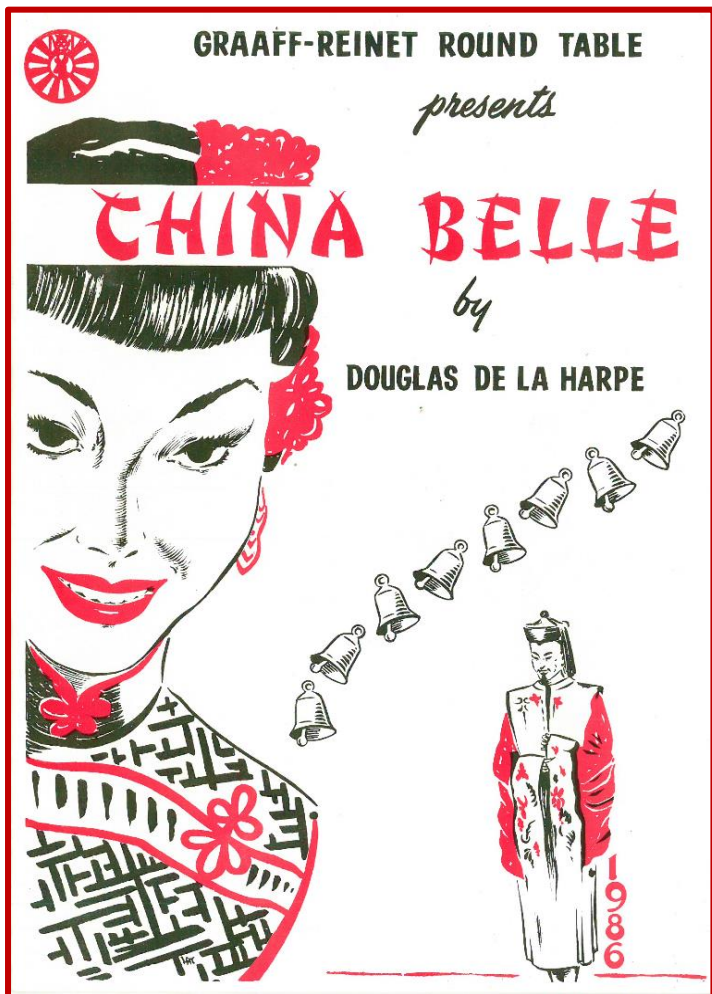
Liesl Erasmus (née Fürter) joined the cast of the 1986 production as one of the palace dancers at the age of eighteen. After months of rehearsals, she underwent two weeks of intensive ballet training, mastering pirouettes and pas de deux. Dress rehearsals were a significant effort: costumes were intricate, and applying makeup was time-consuming. Liesl even made the umbrellas herself, using thick cardboard and dowel sticks, which she decorated. Such was her involvement in the play that she jokingly admitted she almost failed her matric

⁵ Louisa (Issie) Theron was a teacher at Volkskool who obtained a BA degree. She later taught speech and drama at the Graaff-Reinet Teachers' Training College, where her passion for drama flourished. Douglas de la Harpe's "China

Belle" was considered the tour de force of her career. For her significant contributions to the arts and culture, she received an award at the Feather Market Hall in Port Elizabeth. Louisa Theron passed away at the age of 100 on September 25, 2022.

exams! The play was so popular that it was staged every evening from Tuesday to Friday, May 20–24, 1986.

remained as beloved as ever. Some members of the cast still recall the fun they had had up to this day..



Front Page of the "China Belle" Programme

Despite the Graaff-Reinet Advertiser being preoccupied with covering the numerous events of the town's bicentennial celebrations, and thus not publishing any follow-up articles or reviews about the play, "China Belle" was an enormous success.

The cast excelled, the theatre was packed, and tickets sold out for all five performances, proving that "China Belle"



China Belle Advert in The Graaff-Reinet Newspaper: 07 May 1986

MORE ABOUT DOUGLAS DE LA HARPE (3/10/1911 - 24/1/1963)

Douglas Claude de la Harpe was born in Graaff-Reinet to Henry Southey de la Harpe and Katie Margaret de la Harpe. Raised on the family farm, "The Glen," he attended Union High School in Graaff-Reinet and later St. Andrew's in Grahamstown. Known for his progressive

approach to sheep farming in the Graaff-Reinet district, he also served on the Directorate of two prominent firms in the town. Despite his many responsibilities, Douglas dedicated himself to the production of "China Belle," showcasing his remarkable vitality and commitment to his craft, a source of pride for Graaff-Reinet. His son, Anthony, recalled Douglas's lifelong passion for music. While working on the farm, melodies would come to him, and he would hum them until he could share them with Mrs. Edna Labuschagné of Park Street. Mrs. Labuschagné, with her keen ear, would then compose the music to Douglas's tunes, a seamless collaboration born of mutual understanding. "China Belle," crafted through this creative partnership, stands as a testament to Douglas de la Harpe's musical talent, ensuring his legacy endures. He passed away at the age of 51 on the family farm, Glenagain, in Graaff-Reinet.

SOURCES:

- Graaff-Reinet Museum: File 21: Arts, Drama & Music
- Anthony de la Harpe
- Liesl Erasmus
- Graaff-Reinet Advertiser: 04 March 1957, 07 March 1957, 25 March 1957, 21 March 1957 and 01 April 1957



Anthony de la Harpe (left) Colin Mathews (in front) and other cast members



The "China Belle" cast (1986)

In Conclusion...



Prof. Noëleen Murray

Source: <https://www.up.ac.za/anthropology-archaeology/article/2952961/prof-noleen-murray>

The Annual General Meeting

Our guest speaker for this year is Professor Noëleen Murray. She is a distinguished South African architect and academic with significant contributions to the fields of architecture, urban studies, and heritage. Over the course of her multi-decade career, she has played a key

role in redefining the conversation around architecture in post-apartheid South Africa.

Murray holds a PhD in African Studies and a Master's Degree in Architecture. She has authored several scholarly articles and book chapters focusing on the impact of colonial and apartheid-era planning on today's urban spaces. Some of her notable works include "Desire Lines – Space, Memory and Identity in the Postapartheid City" (2007) and "Becoming UWC, Reflections, Pathways and the Unmaking of Apartheid's Legacy" (2012).

In addition, "Hostels, Homes, Museum: Memorializing Migrant Labour Pasts in Lwandle South Africa," co-authored with Leslie Witz, was published in 2014 and received the Michael M. Ames Award for Innovative Museum Anthropology from the Council for Museum Anthropology of the American Association of Anthropologists.

Save the date for our Annual General Meeting, which will be held on Friday, 5th July at 12:00 PM at The Old Library. We look forward to seeing you there!

