SMUTS HOUSE MUSEUM

The Library of Jan Christian Smuts

THE GENERAL SMUTS FOUNDATION

INFORMATION SERIES: NO 7
Introduction

Doornkloof – an unlikely home for a statesman, the big old house fashioned from wood and iron looms over the landscape just as Jan Christian Smuts dominated South Africa’s political scene for over 50 years. Smuts secured this erstwhile officers’ mess in 1908 from Middelburg in the then Transvaal for £300. He had it transported and re-erected on his farm near Irene, where it soon became the Smuts family’s spacious and well-loved permanent home.

The enormous billiard room was commandeered by the General as his study, and it was here that he housed his personal collection of books. These originally numbered some 6 000 and spilled into the passage beyond. The many margin notes reveal that they were well used, and the uniqueness of the collection is reflected by its wide-ranging subject matter. Further insight into the mind of Smuts as international politician, soldier, botanist, philosopher, and the man himself could be provided by an examination of his books, the main focus of this booklet.

The full circle: Travels of the study

In terms of Smuts’s will, on his death in 1950 his collection was bequeathed to a South African university. The University of the Witwatersrand was selected as the recipient but the library remained undisturbed for a further four years until the death of his wife, Isie. Thereafter the quest for its security became imperative, owing to souvenir hunters and its vulnerability, given its rural location, should a fire break out.

At that time, the University of the Witwatersrand lacked the resources to house the study in a manner befitting its importance, and the books were likely to languish in storage. In a wise move, it was decided to house them temporarily in the Africana Museum at the Johannesburg Public Library. The then Librarian, Mr R.F. Kennedy, gave the project the benefit of his expertise and had the material catalogued. Each book and pamphlet was recorded, together
with its exact shelf location, and extensive photographs of the study in its original location ensured a faithful reproduction of the room as it was at Doornkloof. A major drawback was that the new room was not high enough to reproduce the lofty dimensions of the original billiard room, and the open ceiling with its timber roof trusses and purlins was missing.

The study was destined for another move, this time to Jan Smuts House, headquarters of the South African Institute of International Affairs on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand. This building owed its inception to the Smuts Memorial Trust and was intended as a living memorial to General Smuts. The dimensions of the study were an exact replica of the original billiard room and no detail was spared in duplicating the ceiling, woodwork and even the blinds on the doors. The study enchanted many visitors through the years, each with his or her own story to tell of the General. It was proclaimed South Africa’s first National Cultural Treasure in 1989.

Once more, in 1995, the study was packed up for its final return home to Doornkloof where it belonged. The heart of the house had been missing for 45 years and
the house once more became intact. Stringent moves have been taken to ensure its safety from fire and theft, and the study has become the focal point of the many visitors to the Big House. There is no more perusing of the bookshelves, however, and visitors are confined to a viewpoint at the entrance.

The architectural context: The study’s interior and artefacts

If one looks at the interior arrangement of the furniture and artefacts in the Smuts study, the overall impression is that of utter simplicity and modesty, lacking any traces of self-importance or inflated ego. And yet – on the surrounding shelves are priceless treasures created by eminent scholars of all ages.

What does this tell us about General Smuts, the statesman and politician, who must have spent many hours of his working life in this study? That his foremost interest was in matters of the intellect and the mind; that a superficial and ostentatious lifestyle did not suit him; and that outward display was not important.

There are two desks in the study, one small and almost modest, the other quite grand and imposing, made of Cape stinkwood and highly polished – obviously not acquired by the General, but presented to him as a gift by the United Party in 1934. It is said that he used the smaller desk for his personal and private matters – the
ink spots on the blotting paper still bear witness to his writings so many years ago. The large desk was apparently reserved for official business and matters of state. It came with a matching chair, which was personalised, as it has Smuts’s monogram, JCS, carved into the back.

A gift from the Cape branches of the United Party is the small riempie bench, which was placed back-to-back to the smaller desk, facing the upholstered sofa and the larger desk. Ouma’s homemade cushions, now slightly faded, contribute to an atmosphere of comfortable informality, a place where one could curl up with a book, relax and be oneself, and yet – it can be presumed that momentous decisions were taken between these four walls!

Smuts’s colleagues, family members and friends must have sometimes been invited into the study – a large chair, matching the sofa, and several almost modern-looking tube chairs lining one wall provide ample seating space.
One can imagine them filling the study with earnest discussions on urgent state matters or lively debates on the many topics which interested the Oubaas.

The officer’s field chest in the corner with its many drawers, the small occasional table carved from a tree trunk during the Anglo-Boer War, the folding riempie seat, a miniature spinning wheel presented to Smuts by Emily Hobhouse, and the fabric-lined wastepaper basket (to prevent naartjie pips falling through the basket work) – all contribute to the ambience of this modest, yet so significant, room.

Two porcelain cups, bearing the insignia of the Kaiserhof (an hotel in Windhoek or Berlin?), were also kept on top of the field chest.

In a metal hat box, on the far side bookshelf, a cap belonging to General Louis Botha has been preserved. Unfortunately, no further details about this cap are known.

Gnl Botha’s cap, donated to the museum by his family (cap removed from its metal cap box specially for this photograph)

Gnl Louis Botha (after whom Louis McIlldowie (née Smuts) was named)
The framed pictures in the study include a number of political cartoons, portrait studies of Louis Botha and one of Smuts as a young man, as well as photographs of the National Convention members and another of the Imperial War Cabinet. There is also a print of a drawing depicting the Dutch scholar and theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536).

A “golden record” placed high on a book shelf is a synopsis of a series of 13 programs on the life of J C Smuts broadcast to hundreds on radio stations throughout the United States of America in 1944.

Further relics housed in the study are a plaque taken in 1914 from a German locomotive during the South West Africa campaign and a German bayonet from the First World War.

However, the most important component of the study will always be the fine collection of books which Smuts collected over the years.

The Golden Record commemorates recordings on the life of J C Smuts broadcast on radio stations throughout the United States of America in 1944.

The collection

During Smuts’s lifetime the collection grew, as did international admiration for this remarkable man. This is evidenced by the many authors’ inscribed copies, ranging from the works of luminaries such as Lloyd George and Winston Churchill to unknown scholars seeking his approbation. He retained the myriad compliment slips or accompanying letters within their relevant volumes. They remained there for some 30 years after his death, until they were eventually collected together to ensure their preservation. In addition, an annotated catalogue of this material was published as Letters to Smuts,¹ which makes fascinating reading.

Smuts’s interest in the classics is reflected in his small collection of Greek and Latin texts, mainly acquired during his student days at Victoria College, Stellenbosch, several of which are dated 1897 in his handwriting. One recalls his son Jan’s description of his mastery of Greek:

“My father tackled it for the first time during the six-day holiday before his final term, and locking himself up in his room memorised the books and mastered Greek to such an effect that he not only passed his exams, but actually headed the Cape lists in this subject. He considered that the most remarkable feat of memorising in his life.\(^2\)

In 1891, Smuts graduated from Victoria College, having taken his degree in science and literature and obtained Honours in both. He was accordingly awarded the Ebdin Scholarship for overseas study and decided to read law at Cambridge. He simultaneously obtained Distinction in both parts of the law tripos; this outstanding feat was followed by the presentation to him of the George Long prize in Roman Law, awarded only in exceptional cases. After practising law, at the early age of 28 he was appointed State Attorney to the South African Republic.

With this legal background, it is hardly surprising that one of the largest and most significant collections in his study comprises his classic and modern law books. Noteworthy in respect of the former are the many fine folios and quartos, 70 of which bear a pre-1806 imprint. Most of the important jurists are represented in the Latin, French, Dutch and German texts, and there are a considerable number of English law books, including Maritime Law.

Worthy of note are works by Covarrubias (1638); Cujas (1618, 1658); Glucks Pandects (66 volumes, 1797-1896); Grotius (1736, 1767, 1777); Huber (1689); Justi (1793); Mattheus (1664, 1645,1694); Nieustad (1654, 1667); Peck (1668); Pothier (1802); Schultingh (1717); Struve (1682, 1684); Voet (1704, 1723, 1729); Wesel (1666); Wesenbeck (1665) and Zurck (1764).

Oldest among the collection are Volumes 2, 3 and 4 of Doneau’s Jurisconsulti commentariorum de jure civili libri, which are dated 1595 to 1596. Apart from losing their metal clasps, these vellum folios have well withstood the ravages of their 400 years. Of interest is the Infortiatium of the Corpus juris

\(^2\) Smuts, JC. *Jan Christian Smuts*. Cape Town: Heinemann and Cassell, 1952, p. 19. He had a small Bible in Greek that accompanied him everywhere. It was stolen from a display cabinet in the early 1970s.
civilis, which unlike its companion volumes, the Codex and Digesta that are dated 1618, is erroneously dated 1418, some 30 years before Gutenberg’s first attempt at printing an Astronomical Calendar on parchment!

Some 230 of the books in the study are on religion, one tenth of which are Bibles or parts thereof, in diverse languages such as Afrikaans, Dutch, English, German, Greek and Hebrew. Oldest in the collection is the New Testament in Dutch: Het Nieuwe Testament ons salig-makers Jesu Christi (Antwerp: Mourentorf, 1599) and a copy of the Psalms, also in Dutch: Die Psalmen Davids: oude en nieuwe rymen (Amsterdam: Duisberg, 1689). There are two handsome Statenbybels, dated 1714 and 1748. Smuts by no means confined his reading to Judaism and Christianity in all its facets, including Quakerism. This is revealed by a copy of the Koran (in English), the Bhagavad Ghita, and books on Buddhism and Hinduism, among many on religious thought and experiences. An analysis of the titles shows a fascination with the link between science and religion, and also with the mystical elements.

Philosophy, metaphysics, ethics and evolution are well represented among the collections, reflecting Smuts’s intense interest in these subjects. This culminated in the publication of his Holism and Evolution (London: Macmillan, 1926). Of interest in this wide-ranging section is Kant’s Kritik der praktischen Vernunft (Riga: Hartknoch, 1787); John Locke’s An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, privately printed in London in 1768; and two small volumes: The Philosophical Dictionary from the French of M. de Voltaire (London: printed for Lackington, 1785).
History comprises another major section, encompassing Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Pacific, with the concentration falling on British, European and South African works. Among the latter is a fascinating collection of newspaper cuttings spanning the period from the Jameson Raid to the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902. Unfortunately many of the cuttings have not been properly referenced, but the preponderance appear to be British.

Smuts was reputed to have read only one detective story, which took him an evening, and he was never to read another! Literary works, therefore, include mainly the classics with an emphasis on Shakespearean material and critical commentary thereon. Goethe and Walt Whitman were other obvious favourites. Of interest is a copy of the latter’s *Complete Poems and Prose 1855 to 1888* (Philadelphia: Ferguson, 1881) which was autographed by Whitman and contains a chronology and notes in Smuts’s handwriting. Books on the arts are conspicuously lacking, and the few examples focus on the architecture of Windsor Castle, catalogues of the principal art works at Chequers, and the Society of the Inner Temple. Most noteworthy are 45 reproductions of Jan Steen’s principal works (London: Bodley Head, 1927).

An abiding involvement in international affairs in all its diversity, including economics, is evidenced by his collection of books on the subject. Many of these are autographed and inscribed by the authors, as previously mentioned. Winston Churchill, in sending Smuts a copy of his *World in Crisis 1915* (London: Butterworth, 1923), inscribed it with “Though the opportunity was lost, the cause continues.” Lord Reading, to whom Coleman Phillipson dedicated his *Termination of War and Treaties of Peace*, sent a copy to Smuts and wrote, “Do let me give you this copy – if only to mark my regard for you which is the highest and warmest, 1918.” As was often the case, Smuts already had a copy of his own. Important to this section is the forty-volumed series of
Die Grosse Politik der Europaischen Kabinette 1871-1914, edited by Johan Lepsius (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1922), as well as numerous periodicals.

The many government publications reflect his ministerial portfolios and his grasp of the internal workings of matters of state. They cover reports on transport, mining and pensions, to mention but a few. South African Commissions of Inquiry are numerous and include works on the local friction such as that by G A Mills on the causes that led to the ill-feeling between the Boers and Zulus that culminated in the attack on the Boers by the Zulus under Chief Sikobobo at Holkrantz in the district of Vryheid on 6 May 1902 (Pietermaritzburg: Times, 1902). Race Meetings and Betting (1909), Sunday Observance (1913), Education Administration (1923), and Cost of Living (1932) are among the wide variety of topics.

Histories of the two World Wars are numerous, and mention should be made of von Lettow-Vorbeck’s Official War Diary 1914-1916, a typescript copy with an English title page prefacing the German text. Biographies abound, on both the leading statesmen of the time and others of note including Sir Isaac Newton, Thomas Hart, Charlotte Brontë and William Booth.

In addition to books on agriculture, anthropology and education are those on science and the natural sciences. His outstanding collection of botanical books, which was housed outside his study, was given to the University of Cape Town on his death, save one treasure compiled in 1787 by the Vicar of Pucklechurch, of grasses in Gloucestershire arranged in the order of their flowering. The Library at Kew has two copies of this special

Albert Einstein’s dedication to Smuts in his book The World as I see It, 1934
book. Found too, on the shelves among Smuts’s books on Darwinism, plant and animal life are two little notebooks, which Smuts with his deep love of nature obviously found worthy of retention. They are entitled *Birds Seen at Rooikop, November 12-16 and December 4-6 1928*, and *Birds Seen at Irene October 31 1928 to January 7 1929*, compiled by Arthur B Gillett and his son A Nicolas Gillett, whose contributions are in his still rounded and unformed handwriting. A pretty bookmark still marks the page noting a Redbill and a Crowned Lapwing, together with their Latin names.

**Conclusion**

This collection fuelled and enhanced Smuts’s intellect and bears testimony to his diverse interests. It reflects the man and his fine mind, and we are fortunate that it remains as a reference point to one of South Africa’s finest sons.

Procession following Smuts’s installation as Chancellor of Cambridge University, June 1948

Smuts signing the United Nations Charter. Cpt Jannie Smuts Jnr to the right
**BIOGRAPHIES OF SMUTS**


BIBLIOGRAPHIES ON SMUTS


Ratcliffe, U.M. *A bibliography of books and speeches by the late General J.C. Smuts*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town, School of Librarianship, 1953, 47p.


The Smuts family during the Second World War
Front: Kathleen Mincher (née de Villiers, foster daughter), Isie and Jan Smuts, Dr Louis McIlbowie (née Smuts), Sylma Coaton (née Smuts); Back: Jan Smuts Jnr, Jack Coaton (son-in-law), Japie Smuts; Inserts: Top Left: Daphne Smuts (née Webster, wife of Jan Smuts Jnr); Top right: Santa Weyers (née Smuts). Cato Clark (née Smuts) was in England at the time
Other publications in the Information Series:

No 1  Jan Christian Smuts 1870 - 1950: A Chronology
No 2  An Introduction to Holism
No 3  The Smuts Koppie Grasslands
No 4  The Oubaas Trail
No 5  Die Oubaas Voetslaanpad
No 6  History of the Big House

Smuts House Museum
P O Box 36
0062 Irene
Tel: +27 (0)12 667 1176/1180
Cell: +27 (0)71 100 8481
e-mail: smutshouse@iburst.co.za

ISBN  978-0-9869751-3-4