STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY – DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

“In Service of Education and Culture”: The Robertson Literary Society from 1883-1918

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Introduction

The small Western Cape town of Robertson is probably best known for its various wineries, racehorses, and Klipdrift Brandy. However for 131 years of the towns 161 years of existence a literary society has operated within the town, a society which many people are still oblivious too. The Robertson Literary Society, originating from the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society was founded in 1883, making it the oldest existing literary society in South Africa. Yet, barring an article on the 12th of March, 2013, in the district Gazette, there is no prior material to be found on this remarkable society. The following dissertation is the first step toward gaining an insight into this remarkable and enduring society. The dissertation focuses on the period of 1883, when the society is inaugurated as the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, to 1918 with the conclusion of the First World War. The 35 year period being covered provides a good length of time over which to illustrate how the society changes from a fairly philosophical society to a staunchly British-oriented society, and gradually into a South African oriented society starting with the conclusion of the war. Furthermore one of the benefits of covering a longer period of time is that it enables the plotting of trends which extend over a number of years which would not be possible to note when covering a short period of time. Thus the dissertation is able to plot a number of trends, such as the overall direction of the society over a given time, as well as more specific focuses, such as how the society develops from an initial British focus to a South Africa focus, as well as how the position of women within the society changed over the space of thirteen years.

In order to best understand the society the dissertation makes use of six chapters, each of which discusses a different element of the society. As no prior literature exists on the Robertson Literary Society the first chapter acts as a basic literature review which provides an understanding of what a literary society is and how it typically functioned by discussing three different literary societies. These are the *Bradford Library and Literary Society* and the *Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, as well as the *South African Philosophical Society* as a way of illustrating a typical category of literary society through which the Robertson society can be viewed. Furthermore a brief analysis of Robertson in the mid- to late-nineteenth century is provided in order to explore the possible reasons for why such a society developed in Robertson. The dissertations second chapter concerns a discussion on the first literary society to develop in Robertson, the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, which would later become the Robertson Literary Society, and how this society functioned

until it petered out in 1886. This chapter illustrates some of the functions, rules, debates and essays, and composition of the membership of the society. This society is illustrated in the manner that it acted as a basic blueprint for the later Robertson Literary Society. Chapter three of this dissertation is on the Robertson Literary Society which developed in 1905 and, as with the previous chapter, illustrates the basic activities of this society, its membership, and how it differed from its predecessor. Chapters four and five provide a discussion on more specific aspects within the Robertson Literary Society. Chapter four confronts the changing role of women within the Robertson Literary Society between 1905 and 1918. Women were first admitted into the society in 1905 and gradually became more incorporated into the society to the extent that by 1918 more women than men were joining the society. This chapter also makes use of two subsections, the first of which concerns a brief discussion on some of the first women in the society to make a contribution to the society, and thereby gradually advance the position of women within the society; the second subsection is devoted to the changing position of women within the society up to 1918. Chapter five of the dissertation concerns the British-centred nature that the society began to adopt in the years leading up to South Africa becoming a Union, a trend they would continue along with deep into the First World War. This chapter also makes the argument that the society inadvertently, or perhaps even consciously, performed a similar function to the home reading union initiative in South Africa in the early twentieth century. These home reading unions were regarded as a way to subtly co-opt South Africans into compliance with the British Empire through various educational schemes which were believed to lead South Africans into a sense of pride in their belonging to the British Empire. With the literary society's imperial slant on its educational agenda it is more than plausible that the society performed a similar function to these unions. Chapter six, the final chapter of the dissertation, concerns how by 1918 this imperial slant of the society was gradually being replaced with a domestic and South African focus on a larger scale than even the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society had adopted. The argument is presented that a literary society enables its members a way of understanding the society and times which surrounds it and with Britain emerging from the war in a bad state, South Africa had to take its own reigns to a greater extent. In essence the literary society seemed to no longer 'report' to Britain, of course figuratively speaking, but now instead reported to South Africa as the greater entity which surrounded them. Following the end of this chapter a brief conclusion brings the dissertation to a close.

Methodology and some problems

With regard to the methodology of the dissertation, the work is based primarily on the original minute books of the society, of which a complete set are kept in the Robertson Museum Archives under the Robertson Literary Society Collection. Where necessary additional journal articles or books have been used to substantiate a claim or flesh-out a piece of information. The complete set of minute books offer a first-hand account of the day-to-day activities of the society as they happened. Furthermore the seminal work on early Robertson, *Robertson 1853-1953* by A.H. Tromp has also been greatly used as it provides a useful chronological history of Robertson over the period being discussed in this dissertation. With regard to the approach to the material an inductive approach has been used, as theory has been formulated following the conclusion of the research. There are, however, one or two issues when it comes to using these minute books as a source. Firstly, minute books provide a fairly bare outline of a society, making it difficult to gain an in depth view of how a society functioned. Minutes books are only records of the most important events that have taken place in a meeting and only note them as having happened, they do not provide much information regarding the background of events. Secondly, as the society elected a new secretary each year whose responsibilities included recording the minutes of meetings, the style of minute taking varies from year to year. Thus even though the minutes record a uniform thing, as in the meetings of the society, each year's minutes have a personal touch to them as different secretaries chose to record or exclude different facets of meetings, as well as recording them in different manners. Some minutes span three pages per meeting, whereas others barely cover a page. Some minutes describe the essays or debates that were conducted and who said what and what their argument was, whereas a different secretary would only note the title of the essay or debate and note who the members were that spoke on the topic, without giving any additional details on the matter. Finally, the legibility of the minutes is often an issue as they are all handwritten. Handwritten documents which are well over one hundred years old often have faded ink and deteriorating pages, making it difficult to discern any words. Furthermore the nature of minute taking is something which happens quickly, meaning the person making the notes was not attempting to write neatly, but simply quickly, and in handwritten documents this is often difficult to read. Then there is also handwriting style, with some people merely having a difficult handwriting to read which is accentuated when having to write quickly.

The following chapter thus acts as a basic literature review in order to illustrate what a typical literary society entailed. The three societies which will be discussed all in some way relate to the Robertson Literary Society, whether it be in terms of how they functioned or with regard to their activities.

Chapter One: The Literary Society as a Phenomenon

Before an adequate discussion on the Robertson Literary Society can be undertaken it is necessary to create a framework as to the understanding of what a literary society entails. The reader may perhaps be caught up in the contemporary and somewhat distorted version of a literary society as a "book club" where middle-aged women gather to discuss the latest romance novel over a cup of tea or something stronger. However a literary society of the time in question presented a stark variation from this example. In order to later discuss the society which originated in Robertson in the late nineteenth century, this dissertation will make use of the *Bradford Library and Literary Society* and the *Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester* in order to illustrate the functions of a literary society. Despite originating over a century earlier, both of these societies provide good examples as to how literary societies of the time functioned. Furthermore these societies are useful to the matter at hand as they were in various aspects very similar to the society which developed in Robertson in 1883.

The *Bradford Library and Literary Society* was established in 1774 and served as a major cultural institution for the towns prosperous middle-classes.[1] The society came into existence largely due to a need for and as a way of transferring knowledge among those who were not financially endowed to the extent of being able to purchase books. Books were at this stage a relatively new phenomenon and were mainly in the hands of the wealthy and were not widely available outside of major centres such as London. At the time of the society's creation, Bradford was in the process of becoming the commercial centre of the region, especially after the opening up of the Bradford Canal, which was linked to the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, and hence with other centres of trade, meaning an increase in the quantity of human traffic in the area.[2]

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[1] Daphne Roberts & Bob Ducket. "The Bradford Library and Literary Society: 1774-1980," *Library History* 22 (2006): p. 213

[2] *Ibid.*

Interestingly this has parallels to late nineteenth century Robertson which as a consequence of the discovery of diamonds in Griekwaland-West and gold on the Witwatersrand had a positive effect on the town.[3] These discoveries made Robertson for two reasons an important stop over point for travellers trying to reach the interior. Firstly, Robertson became essentially a refuelling station for travellers crossing the near 80 kilometres between Worcester, 45 kilometres to the west of Robertson, and the *Kogmanskloof* pass, 25 kilometres to the east of Robertson through the Langeberg Mountains and into the interior, a long haul by ox-wagon. Secondly, Robertson had become at this same point in time a major centre for wagon building, making it an important stop over point for those on the road into the interior. Both of these features meant a large increase in the human traffic through the town, as well as the creation of a large employment opportunity, which drew a fair share of people. Furthermore with the *Cape Central Railway Act of 1883* permission was obtained to build a railroad from Worcester through Robertson to Roodewal (Ashton), and later extended all the way to Mosselbay, which had the effect of making Robertson more easily reachable and consequently also increasing the human traffic too and through the town.[4]

Furthermore with regard to the composition of the society, the Bradford society attracted many of the most important and educated men of the day in their respective fields – many of whom had made their way to Bradford following the town becoming a larger, more reachable centre. Clergymen and teachers were well represented in the society, along with medical professionals and a spattering of those in the commerce, trade, and industrial sectors. Members had to abide along a set of rules which were set forth by a committee who were tasked with the day to day running of the society. Furthermore offices of governance were elected from the committee by members at the annual general meetings. Any major decisions concerning the society were handled by the committee, but ultimately decisions were made by all the members with a two-thirds majority vote needing to be obtained in order for any decision to be passed. Members were also obligated to pay a subscription fee of five shillings, which was used to pay the committee members, as well as purchase new material for the society, along with paying for guest lecturers.[5]

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[3] A.H. Tromp. *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953) p. 133.

[4] *Ibid.* p.122.

[5] Daphne Roberts & Bob Ducket. "The Bradford Library and Literary Society: 1774-1980," *Library History* 22 (2006): p. 215.

The Bradford society provides a good exoskeleton of a certain style of literary society by demonstrating the structure of such a society with regard to rules, subscription fees, membership, and governing bodies. However with regard to the internal functioning of the Robertson Literary Society and the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society it was closer to that of the *Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester* (1781). This society was structured along similar lines to the Bradford society, but differed internally with regard to what the society concerned itself with. This society dealt in a wide array of topics for discussion, ranging from essays and debates on scientific experiments to more philosophical questions. Members were encouraged to deliver papers on topics of their interest, thus creating an intellectual climate in which new knowledge and unique ideas or insights would receive a hearing. Furthermore individuals from outside of the society, usually those belonging to similar societies or educational institutions, were regularly requested to deliver a paper at the societal gatherings.[6]

The variety of topics covered in these gatherings is an indication of the shared spirit of intellectual enquiry possessed by and expected of the members of the society. It is this spirit of enquiry which is depicted to be the main aim of the society. In a paper on this Manchester society, Carson Bergstorm elicited that, "This Enlightenment ethos [of the society] privileged an individual's search for knowledge, not as a form of self-aggrandizement but as a means both to greater personal understanding and to social tolerance."[7] This sense of understanding appears to be what societies of the time aspired towards, as was in accordance with the ethos of enlightenment.

It must therefore be argued that the literary society of this sort as a phenomenon is a product of the enlightenment, and by extension a product of modern society. The desire to learn and understand and express ones ideas in an intellectually aware and stimulated environment is the ethos of enlightenment. A removal of the blind acceptance of that which been for so long been professed to be the one and only truths. The literary society, as portrayed by the Bradford and Manchester societies, offered the opportunity for likeminded people to further their intellectual understanding and fulfil their desire to understand and learn.

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[6] Carson Bergstorm. "Literary Coteries, Network Theory, and the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 26, 3 (2013): p. 182.

[7] *Ibid.*p. 183.

One of the earliest mentions of a literary society in South Africa is the *South African Literary Society* founded in Cape Town in the 1820s.[8] The society only lasted for a few months as there was concern that the society might threaten the autocracy of Lord Charles Somerset, the Cape Governor of the time. However this society bore the fruit for two subsequent societies, both of which developed in 1829 with the conclusion of the Somerset reign.[9] These were the *South African Institution* and another *South African Literary Society* and, in 1832, the two merged to become the *South African Literary and Scientific Institution*.[10] This society broadly speaking performed the same function as the Manchester society as it created a place which drew together educated people who were interested in improving and sharing their knowledge, and even had some of their findings published. This society, however, as with its predecessor petered out by 1857.

By 1877, however, a new society was spawned with the help of *The Cape Monthly Magazine*.[*] This society was to be called the *South African Philosophical Society (SAPS),* and was a catalyst for the formation of the later *Royal Society of South Africa* which formed in 1908 and is still in existence at the time of writing.[11] The SAPS described its aims as:

> "Its object shall be to promote original research and record its results, especially as concerned with the natural history, physical condition, history, geography, statistics, industrial resources, languages and traditions of South Africa."[12]

Roughly speaking these were the same focuses as adopted by the Robertson Literary Society, although perhaps not as aggressively researched as the SAPS, as well as not having the ability to publish their findings. The Robertson Literary Society also had a much more internal focus

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[8] Jane Carruthers. "Scientists in society: The Royal Society of South Africa," *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 63, 1 (2010): p. 1.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[*] The Cape Monthly Magazine presented a large range of intellectual material which was published in the journal, together with reports on various Cape societies, such as the Horticultural Society and the Albany Natural History Society. Increasingly, however, attention was focussed on literature and art, and it was this which gave rise to the *South African Philosophical Society*.

[11] Jane Carruthers. "Scientists in society: The Royal Society of South Africa," *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 63, 1 (2010): p. 1

[12] *Ibid.*

as it sought to educate its own members, whereas the SAPS sought to both further educate their members as well as present their findings as a way of potentially altering the existing knowledge in the above mentioned fields. Furthermore the SAPS, as with Bradford, Manchester, and indeed the Robertson society (as will be illustrated) drew the most important and intellectual men of the day and place, with, for instance, John X. Merriman - later to be Prime Minister of the Cape – attaching himself to this society.

Section 1.1: Why Robertson?

The question on why Robertson bore the fruit for the development of a literary society is a difficult one to answer as there is no resolute answer which can be given. This is further aggravated by the fact that there is, outside of the literary society's immediate material, very little mention of this society. Even the seminal work by A. H. Tromp, *Robertson 1853-1953*, compiled for the town's centenary makes no mention of the existence of such a society, despite the society containing some of the town's most influential inhabitants. However when considering the nature of the largely English literary society, it would have had little place in the Afrikaner focus of Tromp's book. An Afrikaans town like Robertson sought no need to in 1953 identify with an established society which to this day bares a strongly English nature. Furthermore with a Nationalist Party supporter like Roelou Barry as Meyer and part of the committee who sanctioned the writing of the book – and with a business which had ties to the *Broederbond*[13] - an established English and SAP (South African Party) society would not have slotted into the greater plans for the time and the book.

It is thus not possible to say that the literary society came into existence because of reason x, y, and z. Clearly there must have been enough interest for such a society to take shape. Thus there must have been a demand among Robertson's intellectual class to create a society, as with the Manchester society, where new and unique knowledge and ideas would receive a hearing, as well as providing a way of gaining an understanding of the current state of affairs in southern Africa. This is most likely when considering the Robertson society's inaugural name, the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society. The name clearly evokes the sense of a society in which members would seek to mutually improve their own and others' ability to make sense of and understand things happening around them through the presentation and

[13] Ivor Wilkins & Hans Strydom, *The Super Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2012), p. A4.

discussion of unique ideas or insights. The society ultimately became and developed as a network for the exchange of ideas among its members.

Although it is difficult to provide a resolute reason for the society's existence outside of the fact that there would have been a demand for one, it is possible to provide an analysis of Robertson in the latter half of the nineteenth century which may have increased the likeliness of an institution such as a literary society coming about. The Cape, in the time of Robertson's official creation, 1853, had been under the control of the British Empire for some forty years and, despite being a self-governing territory since 1872, maintained a heavy British influence. Since 1822 Lord Charles Somerset's Anglicisation policies in the Cape had drawn Britons to the Cape, who naturally brought along with them what they had until then considered as a way of life.[14] One feature of colonialism which has been regularly noted is the transference of culture from the colonizer to the colonized, to the extent that initially foreign cultural artefacts often become an engrained feature of the colonized society in time.[15] Susantha Goonetilake has conducted a study on what she calls "cultural colonization" and states the following:

> "The cultural artefacts created in the West and transmitted [through colonization] include a wide variety of items including forms of dress and styles of music, languages, religions, methods of looking at literature, theories of criticism and of social reality."[16]

This can be applied to the literary society phenomenon, as it appears to be a well-established feature of British society and, even further, European society as a whole. Apart from the above mentioned societies in Bradford and Manchester, literary societies of similar sort were established in Leeds and Halifax (1768), Sheffield (1771), Whitby and Hull (1775), not to mention the Royal Society, the largest of them all, to name a few.[17] Thus what must be argued is that the literary society is a piece of European culture which appealed to enlightened intellectuals and which arrived in the Cape with British settlers. It could even be argued that a literary society was created in Robertson as a manner of obtaining further

[14] FJ Stemmet. *Die Robertson-kontrei ABC* (Swellendam: Private Publication, 2004): p. 55.

[15] Susantha Goonetilake. "Colonial Culture," *Social Scientist* 4, 6 (1976): p. 26.

[16] *Ibid.* p. 31.

[17] Carson Bergstorm. "Literary Coteries, Network Theory, and the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 26, 3 (2013): p. 183.

civilization in this relatively new territory, to have something which resonated with what many had known and experienced in British culture.

There would, however, still be the need for a number of distributers of such a cultural phenomenon on the ground in order to install this cultural feature in a society, and this is where Robertson comes in. It appears for all intents and purposes the Robertson contained a fair portion of Britons, or former Britons. However, judging this merely by the amount of English surnames would not bring complete accuracy and justice to the claim. Tromp's book on Robertson can, however, also offer evidence to the fact that there was certainly a British presence in Robertson. Tromp quotes a section in Dutch which essentially is a complaint about the fact that in the mid-1870s by and large the public school administration was in the hands of "Engelsche inwoners" (English inhabitants) who didn't understand the needs of the Dutch speaking population.[18]

Apart from these there were also a high proportion of British clergymen, most of whom were of Scottish decent, who had come to southern Africa to further their evangelical duties. Importantly there were a number of Britons among those founding members of the Robertson Literary Society. Rev Andrew McGregor, Rev William Edwards, and Rev W. J. R Morris were all Scotsmen, born and bred, who had come to the Cape for evangelical purposes. Furthermore there was a well-established Anglican church in Robertson since 1859, shortly after the town's inception. The presence of this church stands as further evidence of a large British community as the expansion of the Anglican Church and Anglican Clergy was targeted at "providing spiritual instruction to European settlers and existing Anglican communities" which were beginning to expand into the interior and accordingly threatened to become religious dissenters, or worse, Roman Catholics.[19]

Thus the climate was right for the development of literary society. There were enough people in the town that would have had a vested interest in the creation of a literary society. The literary society as a phenomenon appears as something which was part of European and British intellectual society, and with a fair portion of Britons in Robertson it seems plausible that such a society could in time develop. With Robertson also fast becoming a central Town

[18] AH Tromp, *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953) p. 105.

[19] Joseph Hardwick. "Anglican Church Expansion and the Recruitment of Colonial Clergy for New South Wales and the Cape Colony, c. 1790–1850," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, 3 (2009): p. 367.

in the district it became a hub for intellectuals and those important men of the day as the schools, magistrate, churches, medical centres, and major industries were based in the town.

Chapter Two: The Robertson Mutual Improvement Society: 1883-1886

The following chapters of the dissertation concern the discussion of the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, the first society to be established in Robertson the predecessor of the Robertson Literary Society, and various aspects of the society's existence. While trying to paint a general picture of how this society functioned, there will also be certain aspects of the society which are highlighted, such as the debates and essays the society conducted before it petered out in 1886. The Mutual Improvement society was essentially the foundation for the development of the larger Robertson Literary Society which came into being in 1905, and will thus be discussed as how it laid the initial blueprint for the later literary society. In order to understand the Mutual Improvement Society it is necessary to understand the composition of the society with regard to who formed part of the society, how it functioned, and what it concerned itself with.

On the evening of the 5th of October, 1883, a group of six men gathered at the Robertson Court Room as had been previously arranged[20]. These men would be the founding members of the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, a philosophical society meant for gentlemen and concerned with intellectual discussion on current and other events. Among these six men were Rev Andrew McGregor of the Robertson branch of the Dutch Reformed Church, a Scotsman who had been brought to southern Africa by Dr William Robertson, also of the Dutch Reformed Church and after whom the town Robertson is named; Rev William Edwards of the Robertson Wesleyan Church, also a Scotsman who had come to southern Africa to further his evangelical duties; and William Henry Dutton English, the Robertson

[20] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 5 October 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

district magistrate since 1881.[21] The other three gentlemen were C.J. Leibrandt, W.M. Dodds, and John S. Lewis.[22]

This meeting is meant as the inauguration of the society and with the meetings conclusion Misters English, Edwards, and Lewis were tasked with drafting a set of societal rules. It was agreed that the society shall be formed and consist of the present gentlemen along with eight additional gentlemen. Among these additional eight gentlemen were Rev W.J.R. Morris of the Robertson Anglican Church, another Scotsman; Mr H. Hill, a university graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree, who became the second principle of Robertson's first sectarian public school; Mr M. Nicol, a teacher in the town's public school; Mr F. Rossouw, who would become the assistant magistrate to the Robertson district in 1903; E.J. Neethling, Ed Barry, and J.H. Lewis.[23] Gert W. Borcherds, a local racehorse breeder, was also requested to join, however he declined.[24]

School principals, teachers, magistrates, and clergymen were among the most educated intellectuals of the day, and with Robertson becoming the centre of the district it is not surprising that they conglomerated here as the schools, magistrate, and churches were based in the town, and naturally were drawn to a society with its educational and improvement agenda. The society presented a network for the transference of knowledge among members through various unique insights and arguments originating from debates and essays. As with the earlier mentioned Manchester society, members of the Robertson society were encouraged to deliver essays or lead debates which contained original information as a way of stimulating an intellectual environment. The society's name refers to 'mutual improvement' which clearly emphasises the diffusion of knowledge among its members, a constant theme throughout the society's existence. With the more educated members of the town being part of the society this would have added to the appeal and prestige of the society,

[21] AH Tromp, *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953): pp. 71, 95, 128.

[22] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 5 October 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[23] AH Tromp, *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953): p. 95.

[24] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 5 October 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

as others joined to perhaps further their own intellectual understanding, but also to add to one's understanding and tolerance of the greater society of the time. Joining a society of intellectuals could also further one's own social prestige purely through association.

By the society's following meeting on the 10th of October a complete set of rules for the functioning of the society had been drawn up. Here follows a brief list of those rules relating to the direct functioning of the society:

- Rule II: Each member shall pay an entrance fee of two shillings and sixpence, and a quarterly subscription of one shilling and sixpence payable in advance.[25]
- III: Any member being three months in arrear with his subscription shall "ipso facto" cease to belong to the society.[26]
- VI: The meetings of the members shall be devoted alternatively to the reading and discussion of an essay delivered by one of the members, and to a debate upon some proposed subject.[27]
- VIII: Theological discussions are strictly forbidden.[28]
- IX: The affairs of the society shall be managed by a committee of five members, with three to form a quorum[29]
- XIII: The offices of the society shall be a President, Vice-President, Treasurer and Secretary to be elected by the societal members[30]

In keeping with the times it was also accepted that neither women, nor people of colour were to be permitted to join the society, with both being seemingly regarded as intellectually inferior for a society of this nature.

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[25] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 5 October 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[26] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 10 October 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*

With the society being established it was agreed that the gathering would meet on Tuesdays every alternate week, and that from October to March they would meet at 8 o'clock in the evenings, and for the remainder of the year at 7 o'clock in the evenings.[31] With regard to the reading of essays and the leading of debates, members were balloted for in the previous meeting. According to the societal minute books the first member to have been elected to read an essay was Mr John S. Lewis who, on the 20th of November, delivered an essay entitled "Political Government".[32] The society's first debate was held on the 4th of December when Mr C.J. Leibrandt led a debate on "*Ought the aborigines of this country to be educated on the same platform as the colonists*?"[33] This was a contentious issue at the time in the Cape and greater southern Africa as it was widely believed that the 'rural African' should be educated in the manner which best serves the need of the colony. This issue even led to the creation of the influential book by Charles T. Loram entitled *The Education of the South African Native* (1917) which famously stated that "On the necessity of industrial training for the Natives of South Africa there is remarkable unanimity…industrial training should be made the chief end of Native education", a conclusion which the mutual improvement society also seem to have reached.[34]

While essays only received a hearing, debates were a different story as members divided themselves into factions and consequently sparked lively debates before putting the said topic to a vote. As according to the societal minute books here follows a list of the essays and debates conducted in 1884:

- January 15: Debate – "*Is it expedient that the Franchise of this Colony should be raised; If so, Should it be an educational one*" Rev W.J.R. Morris (the notion is affirmed with 4 votes to 3)
- February 12: Essay – "*The Legitimate Aims of the Farmers Associations*" W.M Dodds

[31] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 10 October 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[32] *Ibid.* 20 November 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[33] *Ibid.* 4 December 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[34] Andrew Paterson. "The Gospel of Work Does Not Save Souls": Conceptions Of Industrial And Agricultural Education For Africans In the Cape Colony, 1890-1930," *History of Education Quarterly* 45, 3 (2005): p. 377.

- March 11: Debate – "*Is the movement in favour of total abstinence as a favourable sign of the times*" Rev Andrew McGregor
- March 25: Essay – "*The Colonial System of Education*" M. Nicol
- April 8: Debate – "*Does poetry decline as civilization advances*" H. Hill (the notion is victorious in the negative with 9 votes to 1)
- April 29: Essay – "*On Ensilage*" William English.
- May 20: Debate – "*Is protection likely to be beneficial to the colony*" Rev William Edwards (It is declared that protection will not be beneficial to the colony)
- July 1: Essay – "*Political Morality*" John S. Lewis
- July 15: Debate – "*Will imperial intervention in our native policy be beneficial to the country*" W. Dodds (the notion is victorious in the affirmative with four votes to one)
- August 12: Debate – "*Is it the duty of the state to support the poor*" W. Nicol (the notion is victorious in the affirmative with seven votes to one)
- August 26: Essay – "*Folk Lore*" Rev W.J.R Morris
- September 9: Debate – "*Is the study of classics or natural science best calculated to develop the mind*" Rev William Edwards (majority victory for the study of classics)
- September 23: Essay – "*The Nature of Virtue*" Rev Andrew McGregor
- October 22: Debate – "*Are animals endowed with reason*" William English
- November 4: Essay – "*Fishing in the Waters of Table Bay*" C.J. Leibrandt
- December 9: Debate – "*Is party government suitable to this colony*" John S. Lewis (the negative is victorious with nine votes to one)
- December 16: Essay – "*On the history of words*" H. Hill [35]

These provide a sample of the genres seen as worthy of discussion among members of the society, ranging from fairly philosophical topics to domestic concerns. These also reveal an interesting insight as to the nature of topics and how they vacillated between greater concerns for the colony, and more domestically focused topics. The topic of ensilage, as an example, was an important one for the early Robertson district as livestock farming was an important feature of the areas agriculture, either as a tradable commodity or as a manner of self-sustainability. Fodder for cattle would have been of concern to farmers as cattle could no longer roam and graze freely as they once did due to carving up of the district into privately

[35] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Activity Roster of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

owned tracts of land. This is also an interesting aspect of district history, as questions relating to rural inhabitants' immediate way of life often preceded in importance larger mainstream historical concerns, as will be illustrated later in this paper.

With regard to the admission of additional members, the society had a policy that those wishing to join the society must apply for entrance, after which current members of the society would ballot for that person's acceptance, as was in accordance with any change to be undertaken in the society. This ensured that not just anyone could join the society, and that anyone wishing to join needed to be capable of adding to the objective of 'mutual improvement'. The first member to be added to the society was Mr S.D. Cloete on the 20th of November, who was later removed after failing to pay his subscription.[36] At the same time Mr Cloete was being admitted, the society was in the process of electing its first committee and leadership. Misters English, Edwards, McGregor, Morris, and John S. Lewis were elected to the committee, with Mr English being further elected as President, a position he would hold for the following three years; McGregor as Vice-President, and John S. Lewis being elected as Secretary and Treasurer.[37] The society seems to have drawn interest in the town as on regular basis new members were balloted for, and by the end of 1884 the society had grown from the original eight members to 24 members. One of these new members was Mr W. Fouche, who would in 1908 become the principal of the Robertson High School. Fouche also seems to have acquired a minor status of fame for his publication of numerous school textbooks.[38]

Despite the society taking a few dips in attendance to the extent that meetings were abandoned or postponed, by the end of 1884 meetings were being more regularly attended with regular attendance of 10 or more members. With William English, a prominent figure in the town, being re-elected as president for 1885 the society continued to draw attention from the public. One of the society's members, Mr Abraham Albertus Cilliers, held considerable social prestige in the town and district as he had been one of the seven church appointed

[36] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 20 November 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[37] *Ibid.* 13 November 1883, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[38] AH Tromp, *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953): p. 110.

directors of Robertson when the town had first been instituted in 1853.[39] Cilliers was well landed as he owned the farm *Wolfkloof* and part of *Oudekraal* farm, and also later became a church elder in the Dutch Reformed Church of Robertson, a position which commanded much respect in a community.[40] The society appears to have greatly grown in prestige as the intellectual and influential upper-middle class attached themselves to the society. Those men who were prominent at the time, or who became prominent, were all linked to the society. With 1885 drawing to a close the society appears to have slightly altered its focus as it partially converted into a parliamentary debating society. This notion was put forth by John S. Lewis who argued that the society be converted into a parliamentary debating society, but still maintaining its original ethos.[41] Lewis proposes that meetings be held weekly instead of fortnightly, and that meetings be devoted alternately to the usual business of the society and parliamentary debating. The society now became known as the "Robertson Mutual Improvement and Parliamentary Debating Society".[42] This alteration however does not seem to have sat as well with members as was anticipated and the society took a sharp decline in both members in attendance and those wishing to join the society. The society followed this trend until the end of 1886 after which the society disappears for the next twelve years.

Chapter Three: The Robertson Literary Society

When consulting the societal minute books there appears a noticeable gap from 1887 to 1904, which is mirrored in the president's roster, where there is no information on the society anywhere to be found. Oddly at the end of 1886 the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society minute book is taken into possession by the committee of the Robertson Public Library – perhaps reflecting a local paper shortage - with no indication of the society's continued existence to be found. It must thus be argued that the information on this period has not gone amiss, but that the society in fact ceased to exist over this period. There is certain evidence to substantiate this claim. Despite having in excess of 24 registered members, meetings were not

[39] AH Tromp, *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953): p. 20.

[40] *Ibid.*p. 93.

[41] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the Meeting of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 3 November 1885, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

[42] *Ibid.* 10 November 1885, Minute Book One (5 October 1883 – 13 July 1886).

well attended and consequently led to regular postponements of meetings due to this lack of attendance. It is likely that this lack of interest and the society's routines becoming a little stale after three years of the same activities over and over led to the collapse of the society. The lack of change may very well have stifled the society's growth to the extent that members lost interest. In an essay in 1912 the societal president of the newly established Robertson Literary Society, John Menzies, discusses the "Rise and Fall and Rise Again of the Robertson Literary Society", of which he considers the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society to be a part of and seemingly acknowledges this disappearance of the society over the above mentioned time period.[43]

At the start of the twentieth century the society briefly reappeared for a year, still under the name of the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, and with still broadly speaking the same activities with regard to its functions. However at the end of 1900 the society disappears once again, presumably for similar reasons, as well as the Cape Colony's declaration of martial law during the Anglo-Boer War curbing the freedom of discussion the society had previously held.

However by 1905 a society emerges in Robertson with roots in the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society. With this society's emergence (or re-emergence) in 1905 it appears as a starkly different society, with virtually only the societal rules (as set out in 1883), and initially the name, tying it to the society of old. None of the founding members or indeed any of those formerly part of the society appear to have been involved with this society at its inception. Importantly the society at its first meeting in 1905, on the 6th of April, underwent a name change. It became the Robertson Literary Society, a name which it still uses at the time of writing.[44]

With regard to the initial membership of the newly established society it remained those educated and informed members of society, as with the Mutual Improvement Society. Among the members of the society were Magistrate John Coenraad Gie, who presided as magistrate of the Robertson district from August 1902 to November 1909; Rev E. Matson, reverent of the Robertson Anglican Church from 1901 to 1913; Hamilton Barry, Mayor of Robertson from 1912 to 1929, making him the longest governing mayor in the town's history; Dr

[43] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 16 April 1912, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[44] *Ibid.* 6 April 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

Thomas Henry Osler, a prominent academic and town doctor, who would also become mayor from 1931 to 1933; Mr W. Fouche, principal of the all-Boys High School (Fouche was also the only remaining member of the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, having joined that society in 1884); Alfred E. Armour, a B.A graduate and principal of the Robertson Sectarian Public School in 1905; Miss F.M. King, the first principal of the Robertson Girls High School; as well as a number of teachers from the various schools.[45] Clearly this society, as with its predecessor, was drawing those intellectually endowed individuals to its ranks, as well as those who were keen to further their knowledge. The society also provided an opportunity for those educated members to further their own understanding of certain topics. As John Gie, one of the society's more intellectual members stated at a meeting on August 11, 1908, "[I have] come to the meeting with an open mind and a desire for information."[46] The topic of debate that evening had been on "That phrenology is to be depended upon in judging character."[47]

With regard to the functioning of the newly established society, it remained similar to its predecessor, with its priorities lying in the conducting of debates and the reading of essays. There were, however, a few additions made to the society, perhaps to avoid the stagnation of earlier years. One of the more profound introductions to the society was the opening up of the society to women, a topic which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four. In addition to this there was the introduction of music events, whereby members, mostly the ladies of the society and occasionally some of the men or outsiders, would deliver either a song, piano forte, or a violin solo at the start of meetings and at interval breaks. Furthermore there was also the addition of a journalist to the society, who was elected alongside the committee for the following year's duties.[48] This seems to have been a position which was bestowed upon a lady in the society, perhaps as it was a way of involving the women in the activities of the society. As will be discussed later, women rarely participated in the general activities of the society with regard to essay reading and debating. The journalist only had to read an extract from a journal to the society at each meeting, such as a newspaper or magazine section which she had selected. Apart from these additions there was also the appointment of two or more

[45] AH Tromp, *Robertson: 1853-1953* (Elsiesrivier: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1953)

[46] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 11 August 1908, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[47] *Ibid*.

[48] *Ibid.* 11 March 1906, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

critics whose job it was to discuss and criticise the essay which was being delivered that night, instead of it being a free-for-all as was the case in the earlier society.[49] This, however, died out as the society grew and more members were eager to speak on selected topics of discussion.

Perhaps the Robertson Literary Society can be best understood when considering its later stated aims. "That the object of the Society be to enable the members mutually to improve one another by considering certain subject by means of Debates, Essays, Readings, Recitations etc."[50] This was later adapted to read "To assist members to self-improvement by means of programmes on literary and other subjects of general interest."[51] Since the days of the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society the enduring theme or purpose of the society has been to mutually improve oneself and one-another through education or whatever means available.

Members of this society were not joining a social club, but instead an organisation with an intellectual, educational, and cultural agenda, and thus those who joined were required to contribute to the society on a level which would fulfil these requirements. The availability of a well-stocked public library in Robertson meant that members of the society had ample opportunity to research topics of interest, and thus contribute to the society an essay, reading, or topic of debate. This is what was expected of members. And although the regular insult of certain members being "dead heads" was occasionally flung around, the majority of members did contribute in some way to the society.[52]

What makes the Robertson Literary Society remarkable is that at the same as the question of Federation or Union was being raised at the first sitting of the National Convention in Durban in 1908, the same topic was being hotly debated a thousand kilometres away in the court room of a small town unknown to most of South Africa. Once South Africa was declared a

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[49] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 25 April 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[50] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Constitution and By-Laws of the *Robertson Literary Society 1905-2014.*

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 22 September 1923, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

Union within the British Empire, the society hastily arranged for a lecture to be delivered in the local YMCA hall (Young Men's Christian Association) on how a closer Union could be obtained in South Africa, beginning with Robertson.[53]

The literary society, as with the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society, but to a greater extent, discussed the major topics of the day, both domestically and internationally. The period of 1910 to 1920 brought major changes to South Africa, changes which would ultimately shape it for years to come. Perhaps the relative passivity of Robertson compelled these individuals forming part of the literary society to search for something which would seemingly connect them to the world, making them feel part of the greater chain of events unfolding at this time. Perhaps a fear of missing out on a period with huge ramifications for the world compelled these individuals to adopt the specific focus they did, when they did. When the First World War broke out, Robertson, it is safe to say, was relatively far removed from harm's way, barring perhaps the effects the war had on the economy and agricultural economy. This, however, did not stop the literary society from holding "empire evenings", partaking in singing of the national anthem or "God Save the King", in depth discussions on Britain's position in the war, and even contributing two members to the German South-West African cause - all of which will be further discussed in chapter five.

Chapter Four: Women and the Robertson Literary Society

As mentioned earlier the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society was founded exclusively as a gentlemen's society, hardly something unusual for the era. As with the societies in Manchester and Bradford, delving into intellectual debate and conversation was not seen as the territory of a woman, who, presumably, was expected to concern herself with domestic issues. As evidenced by two debates conducted in 1900 by the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society entitled "The intellectual nature of women" - which was argued as being equal to that of men - and "The intellectual power of the two sexes are equal", both of

[53] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 20 October 1908, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

which suffered heavy defeats, women were not seen as fit to partake or contribute to such a society of learned gentlemen.[54]

"Learned culture has traditionally been created and sustained by the privileged and powerful male members of society" argues Judith Zinsser in her study on women in learned culture.[55] Although the literary society did not necessarily appear among a 'learned culture' in the largely rural Robertson district, the smaller sub-culture of men who took part in the literary society were learned. "A woman is, by the fact of her female sex, unfit to join the ranks of the learned." Zinsser continues.[56] The very concept of 'learned' has for much of history been fixed to masculinity alongside a male monopoly of intellectual authority.[57]

Yet in 1905, for no apparent reason, or at least not according to the societal minute books, perhaps even to avoid similar stagnation to the previous society, women are permitted to join the newly established Robertson Literary Society. At the society's inaugural meeting in 1905, on the 6th of April, Mr G.P. Nel, a future societal president, moves that "ladies be eligible to membership in the society and that Rule Three be amended accordingly."[58] The motion was carried by the majority of the present members, most of which were men. On the same night ten women were elected to join the society, most of whom were elected alongside their husbands, or whose husbands were already members of the society. The newly elected ladies were subjected to the same rules that the male members of the society abided by and had to be proposed and balloted for when wishing to become part of the society, as well as having to pay the same subscription fee as men. This, however, changed after May 22, 1905, when it

[54] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the *Robertson Mutual Improvement Society*, 20 April 1900 & 1 June 1900, Minute Book Two (9 March 1900 - 12 October 1900).

[55] Judith Zinsser. "Forum: Women and Learned Culture: Introduction," *Gender & History* 26, 1 (2014): p. 1.

[56] *Ibid.*

[57] Judith Zinsser, "Imagining Patterns of Learned Culture: A Cross-Cultural View," *Gender & History* 26, 1 (2014): p. 5.

[58] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 6 April 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

was proposed that ladies pay only one shilling entrance fee and three shillings annual subscription, exactly half of what men had to pay.[59]

The fact that women had to pay half of what men paid in order to belong to the society provides a fitting description of the role that women played in the society: they were half-members. Despite being eventually admitted to a society of intellectuals, women played the role of entertainment or onlookers, and were not really considered as intellectual contributors to the society. Women were responsible for providing opening and interval musical performances, most commonly violin or piano solos, or the singing of a song, occasionally accompanied by male members of the society, after which the men would (re)take the floor and continue their debates or essays. Furthermore women did not partake initially in debates or essay reading, and when they did it tended to be the reading of already established essays (rather than creating their own essay) or discussing rather mundane topics such as "horses versus bicycles" on the society's "hat nights"[*], which in general were still dominated by the males of the society.[60]

Women were also initially not selected to form part of the society's governing offices or committee. Instead a "ladies sub-committee" was created which consisted of three or four ladies elected by the other ladies in the society.[61] The ladies committee also did not perform the same function as the male committee did with regard to the running of the society. The ladies committee appears to have been a way for the men's committee to give instructions to the ladies of the society with regard to the arranging and planning of events, as well as arranging for the societal musical items at each meeting. For instance from 1905 onward the society regularly held open evenings where members of the public were invited to attended in order to see how the society functioned and potentially thus recruit some new members. These events were often put in the hands of the ladies committee with regard to the catering

[59] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 22 May 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[*] The society's hat nights were more a social and fun occasion. Fittingly the topics of discussion reflected this more casual evening and did not relate to the more serious matters generally undertaken by the society.

[60] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 30 May 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[61] *Ibid.* 25 April 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

or arranging of musical entertainment, while the men in the society would be on show as they conducted debates or read essays on the topic of choice. It could be said that the ladies were still very much in charge of the 'domestic' sphere of the society's functioning, and still very much secondary to men on the intellectual front. Even topics of discussion which related directly to women, such as Mr J.H. Hock's debate on whether "women of South Africa should be allowed parliamentary franchise", were discussed predominantly among the men of the society, with women having little input in the matter.[62]

It appears for all intents and purposes that women were admitted into the literary society so they could gain access to a form of 'men's' learning. They were not perceived as the equals of men and would therefore not have been able to provide a valued input into the discussions or contribute to mutual improvement, but were merely allowed to witness the men duke it out in debates, thus providing some access to being 'learned' for the women present. It must be said, however, that the women of the Robertson Literary Society were, more than likely, not of the same intellectual standard as their male counterparts, but not because of they were mentally inferior, as was so readily thought, but because women were rarely afforded the opportunity to obtained the same level of learnedness as the men of the time.

When in 1909 "Ladies Evenings" were introduced into the society, these seemed to mimic the position woman played in the society. These evenings were more social and fun in nature, where ladies presented plays or delivered musical items and generally appealed to a more entertaining aspect of life, perhaps again as a strategy to avoid any stagnation within the society.

Section 4.1: Some Women in the Robertson Literary Society

There were, however, some female members who made an impact on the society despite the relatively minimal role women played in the early years of the society. The most prominent of these women in the literary society's early years is only ever referred to as Miss Menzies in the minute books, and was most likely the daughter of John Menzies, president of the

[62] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 27 June 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

society in 1906 and 1912.[63] Throughout the period of 1905 onward Miss Menzies is regularly referred to in the minute books and was certainly one of the more involved female members of the society. She appears to have been the first female speaker in the society when she discussed the topic of "horses versus bicycles" which had been drawn on a hat night, perhaps not the most intellectually stimulating of topics considering the nature of hat nights, but nevertheless a female speaker among a majority of male speakers.[64] Miss Menzies was also regularly involved with delivering recitations in front of the society to the extent that she was frequently praised by the men of the society for the quality of the recitation. She on occasion would also partake in the discussions on debates conducted by the male members of the society, generally being the only women to do so.

In March, 1906, at the society's first meeting of the year Miss Menzies was elected to be the society's 'Journalist'.[65] This meant that she would at each meeting read a piece from a journal (magazine or newspaper) which she had selected. In addition to being the first female speaker and the society's first journalist, Miss Menzies was the first female speaker to deliver an essay to the society. An essay in this sense was a piece of work which the speaker had researched and compiled, not a reading of someone else's work. On August 14, 1906, Miss Menzies delivered an essay on "Newspapers" to the society.[66] The essay was promptly declared "the first contribution by the lady members of the society", even though it was said by her father who was president at the time.[67]

Following her initial contribution to the society Miss Menzies delivered a number of subsequent papers on, for instance, the "Unity of America" and the "Life of Sir Charles Lyell".[68] On June 16, 1909, a general meeting was put in the hands of the ladies in the society (what would later that year become known as ladies evenings).[69] Perhaps unsurprisingly considering her contributions thus far in the society it was Miss Menzies who was elected to

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[63]. Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 7 November 1905 & 19 September 1911, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[64] *Ibid.* 30 May 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[65] *Ibid.* 11 March 1906, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[66] *Ibid.* 14 August 1906, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[67] *Ibid.*

[68] *Ibid.* 7 September 1909, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[69] *Ibid.* 16 June 1909, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

take the presidents chair for the duration of the meeting, once again the being the first women to do so.[70] Although little is known about Miss Menzies outside of the society, it is most likely that she was slightly more informed than the average women in the society, even prior to joining the society, as she came from an educated household, with her father, as mentioned earlier being elected as president of the society in 1906 and 1912. The position of president was generally bestowed on the more educated members of the society, such as, according the presidents roster, magistrates, school principals or teachers, bank managers, academics, medical doctors, or church leaders.

It seems however that Miss Menzies was to some extent an anomaly in the early years of the society as she was one of few women who ever took part in societal activities outside of musical events. Some of the other ladies who became more involved in the society were Ms Lydia de Smidt, who regularly took part in the hat evenings and debates, as well as being the society's journalist in 1910[71]; Miss Meiring, who also took part in debates and "favoured the society with an excellent paper on English poet, Robert Browning"[72]; and Ms F.M. King, the first principal of the Robertson Girls High School in 1912, who also regularly took part in debates and delivered an essay on English author, George Henry Burrow, as well as a discussion on "Irish Home Rule"[73].

Although these few women were far and few between in the early years on the literary society, they were in essence trailblazers, as they broke the ice with regard to women's involvement in the society. They setup the path for women to become increasing contributors to this society, as will be illustrated in the following section.

Section 4.2: The Changing Dynamics of Women in the Society from 1914

It was only from as late as 1914 that women were admitted into the societal committee (not just the ladies committee) when Miss F.M. King and Miss Meiring were elected to serve on

[70] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 19 June 1909, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[71] *Ibid.* 23 November 1909, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[72] *Ibid.* 19 August 1912, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[73] *Ibid.* 5 May 1914 & 19 May 1914, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

this committee.[74] There appears to be a general increase in the participation of women in societal affairs from 1914 onward, with an increase in the number of women joining the society, as well as more papers being delivered by the female members of the society. In fact with regard to the election of new members, women regularly comprised the majority of the newly elected members. In fact when looking of at the First World War years – from 1914 to 1918 – of the 72 members who joined the society over this period, men comprised 31 of these members, with women comprising the other 41 members, the only time since the society's inception that women have outnumbered the number of men elected.

The greater participation of women in the literary society appears at the same time as a general reshuffling of the positions women played in society. The demand for wartime goods meant women were increasingly represented in the job market, as men were either drawn into the war itself or drawn into industries producing wartime goods – or in South Africa's case, an increase in manufacturing its own products as British production was needed for the war - leaving many other positions previously held by men unoccupied. However, the wartime period also heralded the introduction of further subdivision, routinization, and mechanisation of work, leading to an overall dilution of skills required for the job market.[75] This dilution of skills facilitated the entrance of women into newly developing jobs in industries and vacant positions previously held by men, particularly in the form of sales, clerical work, and telephone operation, all of which required less skilled labour. Naturally women could also be expected to work for less pay than their male counterparts. Department stores in Robertson such as *Barry's Limited* and *I. de Smidt Limited*, both of which marketed their "Dames Departement" (ladies departments) in *The South-Western News,* are bound to have offered employment to cheaper female labour in clerical positions.[76]

It must therefore be consider that the influx of women, and especially single, young women, into the literary society is as a product of this greater than before financial availability women experienced at the time, and thus potentially allowing women to more readily pay the

[74] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society,* 22 September 1914, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[75] Natalie Sokoloff. "Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States by Maurine Weiner Greenwald," *Contemporary Sociology* 12, 3 (1983): p. 277.

[76] Advertisements for "I. de Smidt Limited, Robertson" & "Barrys Limited, Robertson", *The South-Western News* 5, 253 (14 January 1921): p. 1.

subscription fees of the literary society instead of being dependent on their husbands to pay the subscription fees. When looking deeper into the above illustrated statistic, of the 41 women who joined the society between 1914 and 1918, only 15 of these appeared under the title of "Misses" – and generally joined alongside their husbands - with the other 26 all appearing under the title of "Miss".[*] This also indicates the participation age in the society was dropping, as well as that younger women were more readily able to gain access to the society. This did, however, do little to equal the ratios between men and women when it came to participation in the society, with men still heavily outweighing women in contributing to the society.

Along with the greater incorporation and participation of women in the society, there was also an increased interest in questions on women in South Africa. A number of discussions were held on topics such as "The position of woman after the war"[77], "Women's Suffrage"[78], "That South African women should be given the vote"[79], and "Women doing the same work as men should receive the same pay" – a debate which seems to signify the incorporation of women into what were previously regarded as men's jobs.[80] Interestingly these debates or essay were all opened or led by the men of the society, and seem to represent a change in approach to women when compared to the society's early discussions and attitudes toward women.

[*] When extending this period to ten years (1914-1924) the ratios between women joining under the titles of "Mrs" and "Miss" climb to 60 women joining under "Miss" and only 26 women joining under "Mrs". This is indicative of a large interest among younger women in the Literary Society. Naturally the Literary Society was also a place where single women could meet an educated, potentially well earning man.

[77] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 14 August 1917, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939). - This debate discussed the reshuffling of female roles during the war and how women entered the job market on a greater scale than before.

[78] *Ibid.* 30 April 1918, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[79] *Ibid.* 14 May 1918, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[80] *Ibid.* 27 April 1920, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

Chapter Five: The British Empire and the Robertson Literary Society

With the emergence of the Robertson Literary Society in 1905, it is born into a fractious period in South Africa's history. With many Dutch-Afrikaners still recovering from the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War and adjusting to being under the rule of the Crown, tensions were high between Afrikaners and English-colonials. With the society's brief one year emergence in 1900, it was unanimously decided that discussion on the raging Anglo-Boer War were to be strictly forbidden, partly as under the Cape's martial law decleration discussion on the war could have landed one in hot water.

In the years building up to South Africa becoming a Union the society begins to engage on a much greater basis with issues concerning Britain, perhaps reflecting many of the underlying loyalties still felt by many members toward the empire. This marks a substantial change from the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society which concerned itself with more philosophical matters and issues concerning the Cape Colony, as opposed to the Robertson Literary Society which seems to have, figuratively speaking, chosen a side. Discussions such as the following regularly made it into the minute books in the literary societies early years:

- "Preferential trade is not for the good of the empire" – Alfred Armour (The motion was lost)[81]
- "The great loss to the world the death of Sir Henry Irving" – Dr Thomas Osler[82]
- "South Africa would not be a bilingual country, that English was the future" – Mr Hauptfleisch (The motion was carried by the vast majority)[83]
- "The life of Lord Dufferin" – John Gie[84]
- "Is Kingship Waning" with special attention being given to the British Monarchy and constitution – Mr T.E. Scaife[85]
- "The British Empire will decline as have empires of the past" – The motion was lost as the large majority of the society opposed the claim.[86]

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[81] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 22 April 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[82] *Ibid*. 17 October 1905, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[83] *Ibid*. 4 June 1906, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[84] *Ibid.* 14 May 1907, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[85] *Ibid.* 16 May 1911, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

- "The Development of the British Empire: 1815-1915 – Mr W. Fouche[87]
- "Queen Victoria"[88]
- "Ought the empire to Federate" – Dr G.J. Melle[89]
- "That conscription would be to the benefit of the British Empire" – P.M. Orton (The motion lost by a single vote, however it appears that the objection had more to do with the idea of conscription than opposition to the Empire)[90]
- As well as frequent renditions of "God Save the King"

The society seems to have concern itself regularly with issues of the empire or British culture, perhaps unsurprisingly so seeing as the Cape was governed by a pro-imperialist government for much of the early 1900s, as well as the pro-empire South African Party and Unionist Party commanding a substantial electorate through most of the Breede River Valley.[91] The fact that the society concerns itself with topics of this nature provides a comment on the membership of the society at the time. It is highly unlikely that pro-independence Afrikaners would have associated themselves with a society discussing the sort of topics that the Literary Society concerned itself with. They would certainly not have taken kindly to debates such as "South Africa would not be a bilingual country, that English was the future". And it is also unlikely that a society containing Afrikaners of the nationalist dispensation would have conducted such discussions. Therefore when considering the nature of the topics the literary society concerned itself with, as well as the presence and popularity of the South African Party (SAP) in the district, it must be argued that the literary society's membership from 1905 onward consisted of English imperialists and SAP and anglicised Afrikaners, which presents a microcosm of the larger Robertson population at the time.

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[86] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 4 May 1915, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[87] *Ibid.* 23 May 1916, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] *Ibid.* 6 June 1916, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[90] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 6 September 1910, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[91] Archie Dick. "To Make the People of South Africa Proud of Their Membership of the Great British Empire: Home Reading Unions in South Africa, 1900-1914," *Libraries & Culture* 40, 1 (2005): p. 3.

When regarding the nature of the debates and discussions conducted by Robertson Literary Society in the years just before and after union, it can be considered that the Robertson Literary Society performed a similar function as that of the home reading unions in South Africa. These unions were essentially reading circles which rose to prominence in the years following the Anglo-Boer War as a way of, often subliminally, co-opting South Africans into understanding the benefits of belonging to the empire, and essentially necessitate South African compliance with the empire.[92]

These home reading unions were essentially a way of making the Union of South Africa useful and compliant with the empire as far as possible by educating South African's in, among other things, political, historical, and cultural studies, naturally all with an imperial slant to them.[93] Imperial reading and education was seen as an effective manner of incorporating South African into the empire and consequently reading circles permeated many spheres of life (churches, women's groups, labour unions, Sunday schools, adult classes and Sunday Afternoon Associations, schools, and public libraries) in order to reach this objective.[94] This would be done through the distribution of and the reading of English history and literature as it was believed that the people of South Africa would thus find pride in their membership to the British Empire.[95] The Cape Colony appeared especially susceptible to this tactic as the Guild of Loyal Women in South Africa[*], which was heavily involved with the home reading initiative and had by 1900 already spread to 42 towns and continued to grow in the colony.[96] Although it is difficult to say with any certainty whether such a branch existed in Robertson, it appears that the Robertson Literary Society, perhaps inadvertently, or perhaps even consciously, performed a similar function in that through discussions devoted to the understanding of the empire this would lead to the consolidation of an imperial presence

[92] Archie Dick. "To Make the People of South Africa Proud of Their Membership of the Great British Empire: Home Reading Unions in South Africa, 1900-1914," *Libraries & Culture* 40, 1 (2005): p. 1.

[93] *Ibid.*

[94] *Ibid.* p. 5.

[95] *Ibid*. p. 7.

[*] The Guild of Loyal Women in South Africa was a pro-imperial group committed to keeping the Cape Colony under British rule. They were also largely active in supporting the home reading union initiative as it was a way of fostering pro-imperial sentiments among South Africans.

[96] Archie Dick. "To Make the People of South Africa Proud of Their Membership of the Great British Empire: Home Reading Unions in South Africa, 1900-1914," *Libraries & Culture* 40, 1 (2005): p. 6.

among the literary society's members, and perhaps even provide a foothold for further expansion into the greater Robertson society. The fact that the literary society devoted substantial time to the discussion of British, and specifically English culture through the analysis of various authors, poets, and personalities from Britain lends credibility to the argument, as cultural studies was believed to be one of the key ways through which home reading unions would obtain their objective.

The reading unions also gave special attention to reaching the younger members of South African society in order to build a grassroots foundation from which South African and imperial unity could be built. The literary society had among its ranks a considerable following of younger members, who were thus accordingly exposed to the British cultural endeavours of the society's older, more seasoned colonial members. After delivering a sketch on the life of Lord Dufferin (Frederick Hamilton Temple-Blackwood) in 1907, John Gie, a former Robertson district magistrate, addressed the young members of the society by saying: "In giving you this speech tonight I have tried to interest the young members of the society."[97] A discussion on one of the great public servants to Britain of the time, and one at that who had lost a son to the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War, in order to interest the youth comes across as a rather blatant way of herding thought toward the quality and heroism of imperial servants. Furthermore one of the seminal works which was incorporated into the school syllabus by the National Home Reading Union was William Henry Fitchett's *Deeds That Won the Empire*, a piece which was also avidly discussed among the literary society in 1912.[98] For a society whose stated aims were to educate, the regularity of pro-empire material cannot be ignored or taken for granted.

The fact that the society seems to have ignored South African or Dutch-Afrikaner cultural endeavours and focuses mainly on British personalities adds to this notion of trying to bolster the image of the empire as something to identify and unify with. Whether the society had active intensions to further the Empires image is open to debate, but for a society which

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[97] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 7 May 1907, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

[98] Archie Dick. "To Make the People of South Africa Proud of Their Membership of the Great British Empire: Home Reading Unions in South Africa, 1900-1914," *Libraries & Culture* 40, 1 (2005): p. 8. & Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 20 May 1912, Minute Book One (6 April 1905 - 14 July 1914).

sought to educate or further educate members the amount of discussion devoted to different facets of the empire cannot be taken for granted and must be considered to have had an impact on members in a similar fashion as those of the home reading unions.

Although briefly between 1911 and 1913 the society appears to have reverted to more philosophical and general topics, the imperial focus never fully subsided as there were still discussions linked to the Empire, such as, to name a few, those on William Wordsworth, the major English Romantic poet; Marie Corelli, the British novelist; William Pitt the Younger, the British Prime Minister from 1783 to 1801; Captain Robert Falcon Scott of the Royal Navy who led two expeditions to the South Pole.

However from 1913 onward as the prospect of a world war became ever more likely the imperial focus returned on a greater scale to the society's roster. On the eve of the First World War when the empire called for the union to enter the war on the side of Britain, two members of the society were eager to respond, with the at that stage president, Dr Thomas Osler, and vice-president, Dr Van Zyl volunteering for duty, both serving as medical doctors for the South African troops in German South-West Africa, and being commended by the society for doing so.[99] Furthermore alongside the President Evenings and Ladies Evenings the society now also introduced Empire Evenings. These Empire Evenings were devoted to discussions on, for example, Queen Victoria, England's status in the war, as well as papers being delivered such as "The Development of the British Empire: 1815 to 1915."[100]

However as will be illustrated in the next section, the society concerned itself much more with the status of wartime Britain than with the war itself. Although the society's regular renditions of *God Save the King* could be construed as evidence of a deeply patriotic society, the rapidity with which much of the imperial discussion was dropped from the society as soon as Britain became less involved in South Africa after the war begs to differ. The following chapter illustrates how, by the end of the war, the society's allegiances had begun to change from Britain to South Africa.

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[99] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 20 April 1915, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[100] *Ibid.* 23 May 1916, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

Chapter Six: From World War to Post War: 1914-1918

The final chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to a discussion on how the society underwent a change in its nature during the conclusions of the First World War. By 1918 with discussions on the war being of seemingly minimal importance, the society began to give more focus to South Africa, similar to that in the years of the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society. The above chapter on the society's imperial preoccupation provides a glimpse of the nature of the society and its discussions during the war, whereas this chapter seeks to illustrate how the genre of the society's 'regular business' had begun to change by 1918, and how it adopted a South African focus.

The raging First World War brought to the Robertson Literary Society few topics of discussion, most of which, as discussed in the previous section, were related to questions on the empire. These discussions tended to ignore the impact of the war on South Africa, and indeed South Africa's involvement in the war, and instead focused on Britain and the war, as well as wartime issues being dealt with by much of the rest of the western world. An example of this can be is the society's 1915 debate on "That the Yellow Peril is likely to be advanced by the present war."[101] Yellow Peril was a term which referred to the perceived threat of "…possible military invasion from Asia, perceived competition to the white labour force from Asian workers, the alleged moral degeneracy of Asian people, and the potential genetic mixing of Anglo-Saxons with Asians", a fear held by much of the western world, and in particular by the United States of America.[102]

It does seem, however, that in general the society was not too concerned with the war itself, but instead gave more attention to the British context. In fact the society seems largely uninterested in the war. Barring discussions on the yellow peril and a once off discussion on Germans in Africa, discussions on the war were few and far between.[103] Although there was

[101] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 13 July 1915, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[102] Neil Nakadate. "The Yellow Peril: Chinese-Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940 by William F. Wu," *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 10, 3 (1983): p. 92.

[103] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 18 June 1918, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

an early motion made by a member of forming a reading circle purely for discussion on the war, this never materialised[104]. In fact between August 11, 1914, and November 11, 1918, of the 60 combined essays and debates held by the society, only 6 related to the war, three less than discussions on whether women should smoke.[105] Discussions on various literary works, preparing soil for vegetables, horticulture, farming, or whether knitting should be permitted in the society all seemed to outrank the war in importance, both in regularity of discussion and with regard to the number of people who participated in such discussions.

It is necessary here to differentiate between discussions relating to the war and discussions relating to Britain. Wartime discussions were few, but continuing the trend from 1905 discussions on Britain and the Empire were still heavily intertwined with the society's regular business. However what does appear is that within the final year of the war, the society's imperial jingo declines in favour of more domestic and South African oriented discussions, despite South Africa still being under British rule. It was not that these topics had ever entirely vanished during previous years, but had simply taken the back foot to the larger British concerns, but were now coming to the fore even stronger than before. Naturally there was not the entire abandonment of international and British topics, but there was certainly a greater focus on South Africa and South Africanism, as well as topics of a more general interest. With the threat of a German take over seemingly vanquished, the literary society turns its attention largely to South African issues of governance and maintenance of the country, instead of concerns over the empire.

At the risk of perhaps reading too deeply into this change, it seems that the society may reflect an acceptance of South Africa as a country free from British reach as the future. For much of this starkly English society's existence it has functioned under the presumption of a society concerned with the success and sureness of Britain's imperial presence in South Africa. However with Britain being in a bad state after the world wars conclusion South Africa was forced to take its own industrial and economic reigns for the immediate future, and in essence develop itself and not rely on Britain for its development. The literary

[104] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 18 May 1915, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[105] *Ibid*. 11 August 1914 – 11 November 1918, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

society's sudden greater interest in South Africa as an entity is surely linked to this notion of South Africa's potential for becoming a free standing and self-supporting country in the wake of the First World War, with Britain barely being able to look after itself, let alone support its colonies.

This seems to relate back to the notion mentioned earlier in this dissertation that a literary society is a manner through which people can make sense of the times in which they live and the society which surrounds them. The sudden greater interest in South Africa can thus accordingly be explained as a manner through which the society's members engaged in understanding the new times South Africa was entering with the conclusion of the war and declining involvement of Britain in the country. The society began engaging on a more regular basis with questions such as "that the poor white question is solvable"[106]; whether women should be given the vote in South Africa[107]; whether the country's chief industries and communication methods should be state owned[108]; "the development of national character"[109]; provincial councils[110]; "whether primary education in South Africa should be free"[111]; as well as cultural discussions such as early Dutch and English poets in South Africa, old Cape customs, and Bantu folklore.[112]

Furthermore there was greater interest given to South African academia with a notable increase in the number of external lectures given to the society by outside academics. Although the society had since its inception in 1905 made use of inviting lecturers from abroad to speak to the society, these lectures had gradually declined in popularity within the society to the extent that they virtually disappeared from the society's annual business. However since 1917 onward there was a notable increase in the number of lectures given per year, as well as a marked increase in the number of those attending these lectures. The society

[106] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 28 August 1917, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[107] *Ibid.* 14 May 1918, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[108] *Ibid*. 30 July 1918, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[109] *Ibid.* 10 June 1919, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[110] *Ibid*. 22 August 1922, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[111] *Ibid*. 24 July 1923, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[112] *Ibid.* 10 June 1919; 22 July 1919; 28 April 1922, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

on average invited three lecturers a year, who were paid for by the subscription fees of members and entrance fees asked at the door on the night of the lecture. Some of these lectures included lectures by a Professor Goddard, who lectured the society on numerous times across various genres; another was Professor Nolcult of Stellenbosch, who delivered a lecture on when Shakespeare acted in Hamlet.

With the society having a number of academics among their ranks, there were also regular readings of essays by these academics which then took the form of a lecture. It soon became apparent that lectures on literature were proving especially popular and generally received the highest attendance. In fact this seems to mark a trend within the society starting in the late 1915's where discussions on authors and literature were becoming increasingly popular. Essay readings regularly constituted the discussion on specific authors or a genre of authorship, as well as more than frequent requests that these "author evenings" be held more regularly[113]. These author evenings do, however, not reflect the same interest in the South African genre as the rest of the society's discussions, illustrating that, at its core, the society remained concerned with literary studies as a genre, and not necessarily how these literary works related to the South African context.

From 1918 onward South African related discussions became firmly established as a genre within the society, with its previous imperial focus being seemingly something of lesser importance, and at times vanishing all together. The new direction sparked a "new lease on life for the society", as put by former societal president, A. van Alphen, as a large influx of new members entered the society's ranks and there was in general greater participation by members in discussions.[114] Although it is difficult to prove that an influx of members occurred because of the society's new direction, it is unlikely that those planning to join the society would have been oblivious to the direction and practices of the society when considering joining. Furthermore, in addition to publishing their yearly syllabuses in *The South-Western News*, the society also held numerous open-evenings and open lectures, as well as encouraged members to bring their friends to meetings. Although as illustrated in Section 4.1 a large portion of new members were females who had likely acquired the

[113] Robertson Museum Archive (Robertson Literary Society Collection), Minutes of the meeting of the *Robertson Literary Society*, 10 June 1924, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

[114] *Ibid.* 16 April 1920, Minute Book Two (11 August 1914 – 19 September 1939).

financial means to join the society, this would not mean an automatic desire to be affiliated to the society, but instead the direction of the society would have determined whether a person would be inclined to join or not. Furthermore the decline in imperial jingo would likely have made the society more accessible to Afrikaners uncomfortable with the imperial slant of discussions.

Thus by the time of the society's 40th year of existence, 1923, much of the character of the society had changed in favour of this new South African outlook. Although it is difficult to link the First World War directly to this change, it is plausible that the effect the war had on Britain, in essence virtually crippling it, gave South Africa a greater opportunity to stand on its own feet and function, even if only temporarily, as an entity of its own. It is this which drew the attention of the literary society, with connections with Britain temporarily reduced as it tried to rebuild itself, South Africa became the entity to which the literary society, so to speak, "reported", and not Britain. As mentioned earlier a literary society aids its members in understanding the times and society in which it lives, and it seems that in South Africa's new roles this is what the Robertson Literary Society now proceeded to do, try to understand South Africa and engage more readily with it, in the same way they had tried to understand and engage with Britain in the years of greater British involvement in South Africa.

Conclusion

A study on the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society and Robertson Literary Society provides access to a wealth of information regarding little known district history, from an angle which is rarely considered. This information provides insight as to how certain sectors of the South African population reacted to the events happening around them at the time. For this reason the study is a social history, as it illustrates how a society outside of the mainstream of the time experienced certain settings in South Africa's history. This is a valuable and rare history as much district history still remains undiscovered, or unconsidered, with South Africa's oldest existing literary society being a prime example of this.

The period of 1883 to 1918 which is covered in the dissertation is a period a great change for South Africa, both politically and socially. This study on the literary society offers an interesting insight as to how this specific society coped with these changes. What is interesting is that the material does not necessarily offer the sort of content expected when

considering the times which are being covered. For example the material is relatively uninformative with regard to content on two major events in South Africa, namely the Anglo-Boer War and the 1910 Union of South Africa. Even the First World War does not necessarily spark massive interest, as is illustrated. District history is an entity of its own and does not necessarily ascribe to the same timeline as the rest of a country with regard to the importance of events. The isolation of these areas means that they are not necessarily affected by a major events to the extent which major centres are, and accordingly do not attract as much attention from these smaller areas. For this reason rich district history is very often ignored by mainstream historiography.

With regard to the discussed literary society, this dissertation has illustrated that the literary society which developed in Robertson was of a certain strain of literary society, similar to those which developed more than a century earlier in England. Furthermore it is illustrated that Robertson bore a number of potential catalysts for such a society to develop and endure, such as a relative British and intellectual population, as well as the town itself being in the process of growing economically and physically. Furthermore this society of intellectuals performed an important educational and enlightening function for those who became part of the society, with the constant theme of mutual improvement guiding the development of the society. The society also performs the important function of allowing those who took part in the society a means of making sense of the society and times in which they lived – an aspect of the society which is argued to be a keystone in the shift of societal focus in 1918.

Along with a general discussion on how both the Robertson Mutual Improvement Society and the Robertson Literary Society functioned, the dissertation also gives specific attention to certain aspects of the society. Firstly, it is illustrated how the role of women in the society changed between 1905 - when women were first admitted into the society - and 1918, at which point women began to outnumber the amount of men in the society. This chapter illustrates how women initially did not take part in the society's activities, but through the endeavours of a few women, as well as the overall changing role of women in the greater society, their position began to change as they became ever more involved in the literary society.

Secondly the dissertation illustrates how the society emerges in 1905 with an imperial agenda, as it gave special and regular attention to the activities of Britain at the time. In doing so it is argued that the society bore similarities in its educational function to the home reading

unions of South Africa. It is argued that the Robertson Literary Society, through educating the society on British imperial matters, inadvertently or perhaps even consciously bolstered the image of the empire through cultural and political studies to the same extent that the home reading unions did so.

Finally the dissertation concludes by illustrating how the Robertson Literary Society altered its focus from one concerned largely with British issues to a focus which concerned itself with South African issues to a greater extent than ever before, starting in 1918. It is argued that this altering in the literary society's nature away from a British focus comes at the same time as Britain has to withdraw slightly from South Africa in order to recuperate with the conclusion of the First World War. This withdrawal to some extent leaves South Africa to fend for itself, as it is forced to take its own reigns for the immediate future. As a consequence the literary society also alters its focus as Britain no longer has the presence in South Africa that it used to, and in essence South Africa briefly becomes self-sustaining to a greater extent than before, making it the entity with which the literary society now had to identify.

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