IN MEMORIAM

ALBERT VICTOR (BERT) VAN STEKELenburg

31.03.1940 – 11.03.2003

The South African Classics community and a large circle of friends in Stellenbosch, Cape Town, and virtually every other corner of the globe, were saddened to hear of the loss at sea of Bert van Stekelenburg, former Chair of the Department of Latin at Stellenbosch University. He fell overboard about four sea miles from the coast of Chile from the ship in which he was returning from Patagonia to watch a particular species of penguin in its own habitat. He will be missed by colleagues and friends for his warmth, sense of humour and consistent self-irony (an ostensible pose of being a ‘bombastic Hollander’ hid true humility and deep kindness).

Born at Eindhoven in the Netherlands in the early part of World War II, Van Stekelenburg at a very young age decided both that he liked birdwatching and that he did not want to stay in the bleak, cold climate of his native land. In 1965 he started his career teaching Classics at Dutch academic high schools. In 1971 he received a doctorate in Classics from the University of Leiden, after a stint of research that took him to Rome (1968 to 1969). His thesis was published as Redevoeringen bij Cassius Dio (1971). Dio was to feature only once in subsequent research, in a paper delivered at the 19th biennial conference of the Classical Association of South Africa, reported as an abstract in Acta Classica 36 (1991), but never fully worked out or published.

During 1972 the young graduate took some time off to travel through Africa, literally from Cairo to the Cape, and gravitated to Stellenbosch, where he found a vacancy in the Department of Latin. In the following February he started out here as lecturer, beginning a career that lasted until 1996, when he took early retirement as Professor and Head of the Department of Latin, but continuing as part-time lecturer in the newly formed Classics Department, until 1998, after which time he on occasion taught as guest lecturer, as well as acting as a frequent and popular public speaker.

His facility with languages, both ancient and modern, and his deep learning were phenomenal. Within the first year of his migration to Stellenbosch, he was already publishing in Afrikaans. His first article, in Akroterion 18.2 (1973), examined the Roman practice of dedicating a ver sacrum. Although his doctoral dissertation on Dio’s rhetoric had involved a
literary rather than an historical topic, his research interests (published in *Akroterion*) during those first years were largely historical or didactic. Papers on the *Zeitgeist* of the Augustan era (1973), on Roman gladiatorial shows (1974-75) and on the Stellenbosch coin collection (1978 – numismatics remained one of his abiding interests and teaching specialities) alternated with articles on aspects of teaching at secondary and tertiary level.

Between 1980 and 1985 Dr Van Stekelenburg collaborated with the late Professors Frans Smuts and Suretha Bruwer on the ambitious *Tria Saecula* series, trilingual annotated Latin texts for school and university use (Stellenbosch 1980-1982), and the useful *Lexis Latina* (Pretoria 1985), a basic 1500-word Latin vocabulary, featuring high-frequency word lists suitable for both literary and legal Latin studies. In these endeavours he was continuing the tradition of close involvement of Stellenbosch with Latin teaching in the schools, and this involvement was also reflected in his composition of a flyer featuring arguments for the retention of Latin at school level that was distributed under the auspices of the Classical Association of South Africa, and in a conference contribution (later also appearing in *Akroterion* 1985) that related to teaching the classics to gifted pupils. Later he published, as editor, the set of legal Latin texts that he had annotated for student use during many years of dedicated teaching of first-year law students (*De Iure*, Pretoria 1991), a volume that is still in use at Stellenbosch University in spite of the suspension of statutory Latin for law.

Over time Van Stekelenburg's research interest focused on the continuation of the Classical tradition, at first leading to various articles on the mediaeval and Renaissance reception of ancient archeological artifacts, in particular the re-use of antique spolia in early Christian basilicae. This research took him to Rome on several occasions and between 1987 and 1993 it resulted in four articles and a number of conference papers, published in *Akroterion* 32.3&4 (1987), *De Arte* 43 (1991), UNISA Medieval Studies 4 (1991) and Papers of the Netherlands Institute in Rome 51/52 (1992-93). Related topics were a history of the Colosseum during the Middle Ages, *Akroterion* 35.3&4 (1990) and the history of the expression 'Ex Africa aliquid novi', in the same journal, vol. 33.4 (1988).

As with any good teacher, his teaching interests were reflected in his research, and vice versa. We have noted his early interest in numismatics. Ten years were to lie between his first article on the pagan reception of early Christianity, in a Festschrift for Professor Smuts, *Akroterion* 28.3&4 (1993), and on the last stance of pagan rhetoric in 384 AD with the unsuccessful appeal of the pagan Symmachus for the restoration of the Altar of Victory to the Roman Senate, id. 38.1 (1993). These were topics that formed part of his syllabus for post-graduate students, who found in Professor Van
Stekelenburg a fascinating, inspiring teacher who was also a strict task-master.

Neo-Latin studies were from 1994 onward the main topics of his continued research, for papers delivered at CASA conferences and reported in abstract form in A da Classia (1995 and 1997), both on Renaissance poems, about Rome, and on the travels of Columbus. Another paper on a Renaissance poem was published in Akroterion 39.3&4 (1994). In spite of extensive travelling after his retirement, Bert spent some time every year polishing papers earlier presented at various conferences. The breadth of his interests is reflected in the those topics that were completed between 1996 and 2001, being, respectively, on the southern limits of Africa in ancient geography (Akroterion 41.1&2, 1996), whistling in antiquity (id. 45, 2000) and an early practitioner of Latin at the Cape, the Hollander Jan Willem Van Grevenbroek (Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans 8, 2001). This latter paper was first delivered at a conference on Neo-Latin studies in Avila, Spain, in 1997. At the time of his death Bert Van Stekelenburg was working up the topic of ‘Latin in the Cape and the Cape in Latin’ that he had first offered as a popular talk at a meeting of the Western Cape branch of CASA held at the University of Cape Town in February 2001.

One of the public lectures offered by Van Stekelenburg in the late seventies lives on in the annals of the Western Cape branch of the Classical Association as a tour de force of resourceful ingenuity. The meeting, held at the University of the Western Cape, was to have concluded with a lunch, to be catered for locally. Just before it commenced, word came that the caterers had filed for bankruptcy. Van Stekelenburg obligingly stretched his prepared slide-show on Etruscan art far beyond the normal limits traditionally set for a public lecture, thereby gaining enough time for alternative caterers to be found and for them to shop for and prepare a meal for about thirty hungry members of the audience.

Bert is gratefully remembered by the wider Stellenbosch community for his whole-hearted work in many different community projects as member, first, of the Stellenbosch Round Table, and later of Rotary International. During his term as President of the Stellenbosch Chapter, he instituted innovative ways of fund-raising for the Hospice movement and other charities.

He was a loyal and devoted friend and colleague. In 1982 he cut short his participation in an international ornithological expedition to Nepal in order to take over when his predecessor, Professor Suretha Bruwer, became seriously ill. He took over the running of the Department virtually overnight, as well as spending a large part of his free time tending to her personal needs, and those of her young son, like a singularly devoted
brother and uncle. The continuation of his Nepalese trip had to wait for his next Sabbatical, almost five years later, when he also visited the United States of America.

Perhaps as the result of his war-time experiences in Nazi-occupied Holland, Bert had a great sympathy for Israel and the lot of the Jewish people. He had many friends in the Jewish community of Cape Town, and would frequently share in their Friday night family meals and other festivities. At a moving memorial held for him by these friends his interest in and facility with Hebrew scriptural discussion was remembered, as was his great love for the children of all his friends, who heartily reciprocated the interest that ‘Oom Bert’ showed in them. Yet he had remained extremely self-contained, a gregarious loner.

In the seven years since his official retirement Van Stekelenburg undertook many bird-watching expeditions, travelling in turn to various parts of the world. He walked the length of the Pyrenees in two segments, about a year apart, criss-crossed South America, went on a motorcycling trip through Kenya, spent a long time in the jungles of Indonesia, travelled to Nepal and India, watching birds and living with the locals. His little albums of a select few photographs were interesting to examine after any such trip.

Before and during each expedition he would read, not travel books, but books typical of whichever area he was travelling in, such as limiting himself to books in Spanish during his South American travels. The last book he read before his untimely death, as he told friends in an e-mail, was the story of Scott of the Antarctic. He was very impressed with the frozen death of the members of that fateful expedition. Sadly, an almost similar fate befell him.

None of his friends owned Bert, but he took a piece of each with him when he went.

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Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

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