

Esmond de Beer

Let us start with Michael Strachan's brief description of Esmond de Beer, on page 11 of his 'personal memoir', *Esmond de Beer (1895-1990), Scholar and Benefactor*:

'Esmond de Beer,' he writes, 'was an illustrious scholar, enormously knowledgeable about history, particularly that of the seventeenth century, literature both English and foreign, art and music of all periods, and indeed about many other subjects. He was also an extremely generous benefactor to learned societies, libraries, museums and art galleries both in the United Kingdom and in New Zealand where he was born and spent his childhood.'

Strachan also remarks that Esmond and his sisters, Mary and Dora, always regarded New Zealand as their real home and London as their second home. It is a remarkable fact, and one for which we must be forever grateful, that, although Esmond achieved scholarly eminence and respect in Britain, one of his strongest desires was to help the growth of scholarship and scholarly values in New Zealand, and particularly in Dunedin, in concert with other members of his extended family who remained here. Mary and Dora, who lived with him in London, shared his aims and were implicated in carrying them out, so that, when I refer to Esmond's benefactions not only to our Library but also to the Art Gallery and the Museum, it must be understood that they were there, too.

When I came to Otago at the end of 1961, Esmond had already given our Library the collection of some 1,200 volumes, consisting mainly of eighteenth century English verse, which he had bought from his friend Iolo Williams. Writing to Peter Havard-Williams in 1958, he said that he thought that Otago 'should aim at a very great expansion [of its Library], not only a first rate teaching library but also a great research collection so that scholars can do valuable original work in as many fields as possible,' and his gifts over many years were designed to help to make Otago the kind of scholarly library that he so enjoyed using in the northern hemisphere, and to inspire others to adopt the same kind of objective.

I first met Esmond when he came to Dunedin at the end of 1963, mainly (though this was not publicly known at the time) to report on the collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. What he wanted to talk to me about was how we should spend his money to add to the Williams collection, but he also made it clear that whenever we found something which was relevant to his interests but which we could not afford to buy we should, as he put it in his very precise way, 'put the nips in separately.' The regular correspondence that we had in the following years reveals how generously he responded to requests as well as how often he and his sisters sent carefully chosen gifts unasked. He paid for the Library's set of the great British Museum printed catalogue and for the journals of various learned societies, but he also looked for single publications which Otago should have.

So Otago was in a special and very privileged position, but other libraries were, too, including that of the University of Essex, whose collection of books on New Zealand it owes to de Beer generosity. When I was visiting the Bodleian Library and was being shown some of its financial secrets, I noticed a fairly substantial ‘de Beer Fund’ in its records and learned later that this was but the tip of the iceberg. Strachan says that Esmond’s financial donations to the Bodleian were ‘frequent, large, and discreet’, and he records that in 1960 Esmond’s name was carved on the great marble slab at the top of the staircase leading to Duke Humfrey’s Library, only the forty-ninth name in a list of major benefactors that begins with Duke Humfrey of Gloucester himself in 1439. In several important libraries in Britain I was asked what I knew of Esmond’s intentions regarding the eventual disposal of his collection and his other assets. He had told me that the collection he had built up to support his work on Locke would come to Otago, but in the end we received many other books as well, and also a substantial sum of money to help us in continuing his work for our Library.

Despite his strongly held opinions on scholarly questions, Esmond was a humble man. He was aware of the importance of his work, but he respected other people’s abilities. He was *interested* in the people he dealt with, and he made a fairly ordinary worker in the vineyard like myself feel one of his own group. When he heard that I would have three days in Rome on my way home, he took the trouble to write notes of the things that I should try to see. Of St Peter’s, for instance: ‘Michelangelo’s Pietà is I suppose in the first chapel on the right; the monument to the royal Stuarts (sentimental value only) is on the aisle side of the first pier to the left. If you can stand Bernini, there’s a lot of sculpture by him.’ And he added, ‘Rome is good for three months’ hard sightseeing. Don’t regret what you don’t see in three days.’

It is important to remember, also, that the de Beers grew up with a deep appreciation of the outdoor life they experienced in New Zealand. Dora was an accomplished mountaineer and a friend of the Grahams of Franz Josef and Mount Cook, whom she remembered fondly in her later years. Esmond, himself, had a slightly earthy side to him. He was, after all, in the British army for a while in France and on the Northwest Frontier, and Strachan quotes a limerick which he suddenly recited to Arthur Stones when he was sitting for his portrait bronze:

‘Said the Duchess of Alba to Goya
 “Remember that I’m your employer”;
 So he painted her twice,
 Once rather nice,
 And the other was nude to annoy her.’

Some time after Esmond’s death there was a story going round that some in the University administration thought that the Library should use his money for its general purposes, and that the Library’s allocation from the University should be reduced while it used its windfall in this way. It was even suggested, one heard, that the building up of collections like the one we are celebrating today was ‘elitist’. I

don't know what truth there was in this allegation, or who knocked the suggestion on the head (if it had got as far as needing such treatment), but the interesting thing is that the reaction to it, from those who heard of it, was so strong. Quite apart from the question of whether a university can, without loss of integrity, be anything but élitist, this kind of fiddling would have caused great scandal among all those, in the great universities elsewhere with which Esmond had been associated, who knew the value of his collection and his work and what they represented. Short-term gain would have earned irretrievable contempt. The idea, it was thought, originated from the fact that Esmond did not lay down in writing precisely what his money should be spent on. But Esmond had always dealt with Otago people who shared his objectives and whom he felt he could trust. He would have known that they would *know* what he wanted, and he would have assumed that they represented the true University of Otago.

The de Beer collection is an important part of the University's *core business*. That, of course, is one of those terms which managers and administrators think are impressive but whose true meaning eludes them. But consider this: The core of the Earth is not prominently visible, but everything on the Earth depends on its existence. All sorts of things, good and bad, can go on in the biosphere, but none of them would survive without the forces exerted by the core. All sorts of things, from the saving of lives as a result of medical research, through the development of music and literature, to the training of the white collar criminals of the future, can go on in a University, but all the University's activities, including the perverted ones, depend on the knowledge and the wisdom accumulated over millennia and preserved, passed on, and sometimes added to in literate records. The de Beer collection represents that accumulation. It might not be of immediate interest to everyone, but it is part of that core, and time will not age it.

It is a great pleasure for those who have worked towards the development of the University Library to see it housed in this magnificent but user-friendly building, and to know that this collection, which is one of its defining features, has been given the kind of accommodation that is regarded as normal in the greatest foreign universities. This, and the beautiful quarters which have been developed for the Hocken Library, meet with strong approval from one who has survived fifteen years of retirement. It is especially pleasing that the building has all that extra space which can be vacated by other units in the future to provide for the on-going needs of the Library over, say, the next fifty or one hundred years. That is indeed admirable forward planning, and I congratulate those who have been responsible for it.

W.J. McEldowney, 20th March 2002