

# Tafelberg's history

## Monumental achievement reads like a blurb

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By the end of 2011, while we were voting to have Table Mountain declared one of the seven natural wonders of the world, Tafelberg Publishers turned 60. This called for an info hunt in the central Naspers archives.

### A solid start

Apparently Tafelberg was registered on 29 June 1951, affiliated to Die Goeie Hoop Boekklub, ironically in Johannesburg, not in Cape Town. Johannes Diederick Pretorius was Tafelberg's first manager, as attested in **In ons goeie boekies: skrywers en redakteurs oor Tafelberg-Uitgewers**, edited by Danie Botha (1991). Pretorius was a legend in the publishing industry as affirmed by the Festschrift **Hulde aan J.D.** (1987), also compiled by Botha.

Right from the word go, Tafelberg was blessed with outstanding leaders who have won personal acclaim over the years. And when appraising the Tafelberg files in our archives, it is evident that over the years a host of dedicated and capable team members collaborated to accumulate an array of awards – too many to mention here: in **Oor grense heen: op pad na 'n nasionale pers** (edited by WD Beukes and published in 1992), more than 200 awards were already listed.

### Ascending the ladder of success

One of many significant episodes in Tafelberg's history occurred in 1959, when it was taken over by Nasionale Boekhandel. Since 1970 Nasboek's general publications also resorted under Tafelberg, which elevated this establishment to an even higher stage: biggest general publisher in South Africa. In 2001 Tafelberg became part of the NB Publishing House, and according to former managing director Helgaard Raubenheimer, since then has consistently raked in more literary awards than the competition.

The inventory of Tafelberg (labelled 'AL 6' in our archival search engine: Acquired Loan number 6 of 65 so far), tells this story, also containing lists of authors – correspondence and sometimes clippings of a who's who of South African writers; the likes of MER (Maria E Rothmann), CJ Langenhoven, 'who taught the nation to read' and people like Audrey Blignault and Alba Bouwer persisted to attain this deserving aspiration.

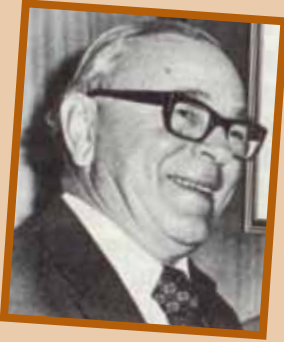
### What to publish, not to perish

Tafelberg covers the whole publishing spectrum, including the youth novel market: for instance, 70,000 copies of **Vaselinetjie** by Anoeschka von Meck was sold, which is an example of successfully gauging recent market trends. In the same vein, Langenhoven's **Versamelde werke** (1933) was re-published during the 1970s – another winner identified by Tafelberg, and proving that the decisionmakers knew their business, back then, as they do now.

The youth market is one sector in which Tafelberg has enjoyed a significant influence since the 1950s, and WO Kühne, Hester Heese, PH Nortjé, et cetera, were launched from Tafelberg's platform. And in Heinz G Konzalik and Ena Murray Tafelberg discovered true pure gold – at least relative to local standards.

### Adapt, adapt, adapt!

Shortly after 1994, due to the changing political landscape, the schoolbook market suffered severe setbacks – expenditure on prescribed books was R600 million less than usual. For Tafelberg this was almost a mortal blow as 70% of its revenue was generated from this market. Competitive marketing and an improved distribution system was the solution: within two years Tafelberg had more titles in book stores, and did more business, than established local and overseas publishers, according to Hannes van Zyl, who had the unenviable task to steer the ship through these troubled waters.



▲ JD Pretorius, General Manager 1951-1974



▲ Danie van Niekerk, General Manager 1974-1992, Managing Director 1986-1992



▲ JJ (Lappies) Labuschagne, Managing Director 1992-1997



◀ Hannes van Zyl, Managing Director 1997-2002



◀ HG Raubenheimer, Managing Director 2002-2004



▲ Eloise Wessels, Chief Executive Officer Media24: Books since 2004



▲ In ons goeie boekies: skrywers en redakteurs oor Tafelberg-Uitgewers, 1991



▲ Boekewêreld, die Nasionale Pers in die uitgewersbedryf tot 1990, 1992

## With the toils, the spoils

Nevertheless, Van Zyl declared: 'To be a publisher is always an enduring joy, with the accent on joy. There is still opportunity for idealism and ample stability to dream realistically.' This sentiment becomes clear when one pages through **In ons goeie boekies**: writers have great appreciation for Tafelberg. In the tough world of market-driven production, which the book industry is, it is commonplace for publishers to be treated like commodities, rather than individuals.

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Annari van der Merwe (a staff member from 1978 to 1994) also ventured a viewpoint: 'Writers are rascals, make no mistake. And they are intelligent and sly. Some have a devilish sense of humour or are simply delightfully eccentric. Others have something angelic about them and their presence is like a balm to one's soul.' She believes that one of a publisher's duties is to keep authors happy, but at times heaven help you – which explains why 'the fluttering of guardian angel wings are heard so frequently at the corner of Waal and Burg Street'.

It seems that the staff of Tafelberg is well aware of the need for these special skills and therefore a culture of sympathetic co-operation is nurtured to ensure successful relationships between publisher and authors. Because, as it is with any marriage, one partner complements the other.

## Taking a bow, but not bowing out

In the 50-year commemoration article in *Die Burger* it was mentioned that Tafelberg inherited works like **Die groot verseboek**, the **Tweetalige woordeboek** and the **Afrikaanse woordelys en spelreëls**, which were subsequently revised and marketed, while well-known poets like Ernst van Heerden, TT Cloete and Adam Small joined Tafelberg's growing list of authors. In fact, there are too many to mention – to the chagrin of Danie Botha, veteran employee of NB Publishers, even though I explained that it is up to the likes of him to write a book on Tafelberg Publishers, while I can only summarise article-wise.

Significantly, since the 1960s more than 20 of Tafelberg's authors had been awarded the Eugène Marais Prize for Afrikaans debutants. This is noteworthy, as most publishers avoid investing in new names, banking on the belief that readers favour a brand name. Therefore it is up to publishers like Tafelberg to ensure that new names become the brand names of the future, for who else will?

Today Tafelberg does not reside at the place where angel wings had once been heard. However, at Heerengracht 40 the view of the sea is better, as well as the view of the mountain this lively middle-aged trooper was named after. And may she live long and fruitfully for the sake of our authors, our readers and our stories.