

**Sylvia Cooke (1930 - 2018)**

*Sandy Grant\**



This week (in November 2018) brought the sad news that Sylvia Cooke had died recently in the UK after a long stay in hospital. Sylvia was Executive Secretary of the Botswana Society from 1978 to 1990, a spell which coincided with much of its glory years when she formed, with the two heavy weights, Gobe Matenge and Alec Campbell, a remarkable trio. Sylvia, theoretically the junior partner, was the perfect foil for the other two. Alec was quiet and introspective; Gobe, particular and pedantic. Sylvia was outspoken, direct and jolly, a tonic. She was also a softie, generous and extraordinarily kind.

The Botswana Society office could very easily have become a sober and intimidating place but Sylvia revelled in her job and with her infectious laugh ensured that it was always a pleasure to visit. Laughter is not something that is a normal ingredient in most offices. Indeed, it is usually regarded as inappropriate and improper, offices being serious places where serious work is being done. In that respect the Botswana Society office was no different. A great deal of serious work was carried out there, but it was all done with a smile, with obvious enjoyment. Sylvia had time for everyone. No one left the office doubting that a return visit was worth attempting, feeling that they had been out of place or that they had been given a brush off. All were welcome.

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For perhaps 30 years, the Botswana Society, with generous Scandinavian support, was a big hitter organising 13 major seminars and conferences with guest speakers from all over the world. These seminars and conferences were major affairs and a significant element in the democratic life of the country. They were vibrant and exuded a marvelous sense of togetherness. Gobe, punctilious as ever, ensured that each morning's session began sharp on time, unlike the customary hour or so late, that key speakers were allowed some but not too much extension of their time and contributors from the floor were reined in when they began to waffle. Behind the scenes, Sylvia and those with whom she so often co-organised, Doreen Nteta and Janet Hermans, ensured that everything ran smoothly without any embarrassing hitches. These seminars and conferences provided a voice for a significant cross section of the general public which was not otherwise available. But when Botswana was rated a middle-income country, Scandinavian financial support was withdrawn, and the Society was no longer able to pull off those major set piece occasions. The result was to become evident in the years that followed with a contracting of the democratic state and a lessening of the right and opportunity of self-expression.

When the Cookes left this country, they settled in a new home just inside the Welsh border with England which gave them the chance to walk the hills and for her husband, John Cooke, to try and learn the language. My wife, Elinah, and myself spent a few days there with them, a cherished and fondly remembered visit. I was dead keen to watch a rugger test match between the British and Irish Lions and South Africa. Sylvia got permission from a local rugby club for us to come and watch the match. The place was packed to the rafters and with several Welsh players doing the job for the Lions, the atmosphere was remarkable. I much doubt that Sylvia knew one end of a rugby ball from the other, but she made it clear afterwards that even for her, it was a new found experience to be caught up in such Welsh fervor, especially when it was their boys who were winning the game.

The next day, we went shopping, Sylvia advising Elinah where she could get various bits of female this and that. John suggested that it would be better if Sylvia re-thought her planned programme but was smartly told off by Sylvia. He then plaintively commented that he was only trying to help but was promptly told that his help was not needed, thank you very much!

John who survives Sylvia, will be remembered by many from the years when he was Professor of Environmental Science at the University of Botswana. At first sight, it might have seemed that the two were an unlikely couple but being married for no less than 62 years demonstrated that they were a perfect couple with a lovely family. Sylvia was, of course, only one of several people who were Executive Secretaries of the Botswana Society. Each made their own contribution, but Sylvia was special. Alec has gone, Gobe has gone, and now Sylvia; and we are left to remember and be thankful for them and for her for the very different Botswana of those years. For many of us, it was a privilege to have known her.

### **Acknowledgement**

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