

Shelagh Marjorie Willet (1931-2015)

By Sheldon G Weeks and Gudrun H Weeks



Shelagh Willet grew up in South Africa on a farm near Pietersburg (now Polokwane), where she felt close to nature and formed a love of all life, which gave her the great strength she had in all her doings. After she completed studies at the University of Witwatersrand in Social Anthropology and Afrikaans she taught at Morija in Lesotho for a few years. She returned to Wits to earn a diploma in librarianship. Her Social Anthropology dissertation was on the San (Bushman) from 1652 to 1662. In 1965 she became the deputy librarian at the University of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland (UBBS) whose main campus was at Roma in Basutoland (now Lesotho). At Roma she initiated the Boleswa (Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland) Collection of documents on the three countries. In 1980, with David Ambrose, she published the first definitive annotated bibliography on Lesotho, with over 2500 entries and 500 pages.

Shelagh first met Quakers, including David Richie, from Philadelphia, at a workcamp at Wilgespruit in Johannesburg (one of a very few places where multiracial groups met during apartheid). She became a member of the Religious Society of Friends and introduced them to Lesotho.

When she moved to Botswana to be the foundation Librarian and to develop the library at the Gaborone campus of UBBS, she brought her mother with her. They soon began assisting refugees and started the first refugee centre in Gaborone. Eventually she ended her University of Botswana librarian job, a huge decision, giving up a comfortable lifestyle to care for others. With the assistance of British Quakers, and many others, she helped to establish Kagisong Centre for refugees in Mogoditshane where she had a small rondavel set amongst the other shelters. In her long retirement she lived in a house in Gabane, with her garden, her cats and dogs, sometimes chickens, and took in others who needed shelter and accepted her loving care. At the time of her death a secondary school student from Zimbabwe was living with her.

She was a person of spiritual substance, carrying out the testimonies of peace and simplicity in her life, guiding the refugees in her counselling role at the Kagisong Centre, always even in her relationships, living a message of non-violence. She travelled in Africa and to England and the United States for international meetings of Quakers. She participated fully with Quakers in Southern Africa and gave the Richard Gush Memorial Lecture at the 2013 Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meetings on a deep personal concern of hers –a reverence for all life.

Writing the history of the Kagisong Centre was her last activity in a long fruitful life. *Voices of Kagisong: History of the Refugee Programme in Botswana* caps a number of other resource books she wrote, often with colleagues, on Lesotho (1980) and Botswana (1992), including two volumes of *The Khoe and San: An Annotated Bibliography, Volume 1* (2002) which she co-authored with Janet

Hermans, Stella Monageng and Sidsel Saugestad, and *The Khoe and San: An Annotated Bibliography, Volume 2* (2004). She also wrote for *Southern Africa Quaker News (SAQN)*. Shelagh assisted local scholars with great humility by reading and editing drafts of their work, without expecting remuneration or recognition. For many years she collected materials for the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, USA. After a number of years around 2008 she returned and worked at the Botswana Collection of the University of Botswana library.

Shelagh lived a long life in the spirit of love and kindness, a belief in the inner light in each person and in all living creatures. She would help others before herself, often give away resources when little was left to meet her own needs. Her beliefs and humanity made her trust people, sometimes with unexpected consequences, but these never caused her to waiver in her convictions and way of life. In recent years, faced with declining health, a loss in hearing, and other problems, Shelagh stayed steadfast. Among her final words she said to those helping her, 'I am such a trouble to everyone'. Shelagh Willet left us as she lived –thinking of others. May she rest in peace.