

Bid to Save Legendary Lovedale Press

By Sandiso Phaliso

The 200-year-old Eastern Cape press is in a shambles, but there is a plan

At the entrance to the Lovedale Press in Edikeni in the Eastern Cape is a plaque on which is written: “The earliest record of anything written by any Bantu-speaking African in his own language in South Africa, was made at the small printing press at Old Lovedale.” These are the words of famous Xhosa author AC Jordan, who published many books through the Lovedale Press.

But today, the place is a shambles. Electricity has been cut off and there is no running water. The rooms are full of dusty boxes and broken pieces of old machinery. Papers and books wrapped in brown paper — Bibles, textbooks in isiXhosa — are piled up.

The Lovedale Press last published a book — Unxibelelwano Olululo lwesixhosa, a reader for primary school children — in 2015. It owes R1-million in rent according to the owner of the premises. The former employees who took it over in 2001 have not been paid any salaries for years. But now an ambitious project led by the Thabo Mbeki Foundation and involving several Eastern Cape universities may breathe new life into the legendary printing house.

Lovedale Press was established as a small printing press in 1823 by the Glasgow Missionary Society. It was destroyed twice during wars and the present press dates from 1861, according to Rhodes University Library .

At first Lovedale Press focused on evangelical and educational material, publishing the first translation of the Xhosa Bible. It provided a vehicle for black authors to publish their work and was a pioneer in printing African literature. Black South Africans were trained there as apprentices in printing and book binding.

The press was auctioned off to 18 former employees in 2001 and the building was sold. Seven of them have since died and only three are still active: Cebo Ntaka, Bishop Nqumevu and Bulelwa Mbatyothi, who have kept the place open every day.

“We are desperately in need of funding, any kind of support,” says Ntaka. “We have sacrificed our time, energy and money to save this place. Every day of the week we come here to guard this place because the day we don’t come and open will be the day we will be locked out. We are facing threats of closure from the landlord.”

Juan Harlgreen, the landlord, said Lovedale owed more than R1-million in rent and the matter was now with his lawyers. “We understand their challenges and we are lenient to them but we need that space,” said Harlgreen, who also owns a fruit and vegetable shop in the building.

Eastern Cape Department of Sports, Recreation, Arts and Culture spokesperson Andile Nduna told GroundUp his department had held several meetings with Ntaka. “The Department has supported the institution by buying books for libraries in the Eastern Cape. The institution holds an important part of the literary heritage of the province.” “In the last few years Lovedale Press has been noted to be struggling with its business

operations to a point where it was unable to do business particularly with the government.” This was partly due to unpaid taxes, Nduna said.

Lovedale Press “owes SARS an undisclosed amount, implications being inability to conduct business with the state”, said Nduna.

GroundUp asked the National Heritage Council, the Eastern Cape Heritage Resource Agency and the South African National Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) whether anything was being done to preserve the historic press.

Tebogo Shilakwe of the National Heritage Council said the situation of the Lovedale Press had been “a recurring emergency” for years but the council did not manage heritage sites. Azola Mkosana, manager at the Eastern Cape Provincial Heritage Resource Agency, referred GroundUp to SAHRA.

Spokesperson Ben Mwasinga said SAHRA “recognises the significance of the Lovedale Press” but this was “a provincial competency”.

However, since late 2023, plans have been made to revive the Lovedale Press. Rhodes University spokesperson Christelle du Toit told GroundUp that in June 2023 the Thabo Mbeki Foundation had approached the Rhodes University Library as a potential partner in “re-imagining the Lovedale Press”. The Foundation, together with representatives from Rhodes University, Walter Sisulu University, Fort Hare University, and Nelson Mandela University, had met in August in Makhanda to discuss a model for the future.

A committee had been appointed and was “well underway with a plan, seeing as the year 2023 marked 200 years of the Lovedale Press”, she said.

Bongani Kupe of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation told GroundUp that the aim of the Foundation was not merely to preserve Lovedale Press “as a relic of the past”, but to “reimagine it as a vibrant institution equipped to meet the demands of the present and the future”.

“An institution that has been in existence since 1823 carries within it a history and heritage – in other words it carries the story of our people in its totality.”

“Lovedale carries a rich history and African heritage in education, religion, culture and literature.”

But, he said, Lovedale Press also offered an opportunity to revive creative writing and reading in African languages, especially in isiXhosa.

Kupe said along with the Eastern Cape universities the Foundation had started a fundraising process. “This will include the settling of the debt with the landlord and finding a home for the Lovedale Press assets.”

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