The Bessie Head Papers in Serowe: Recent Notes

By Tom Holzinger

Working Toward a Catalogue

It is now twenty years since Bessie Head died alone in Serowe, and twenty years since a resourceful and determined curator, Maria Rytter, impounded her papers and moved them to the Khamla III Memorial Museum (KMM). This was done the day after Head’s death, 18 April 1986, before mourners could inadvertently scatter them, and with only a quick permission from Serowe’s District Commissioner to do so. It was an inspired act of improvisation, one which has allowed a remarkably rich literary heritage to remain intact:

In her tiny kitchen there were some dishes and her bed was not made, but apart from that her house was clean and neat and with everything in perfect order. At first Mmatsela [Pearce] and I washed everything in her house. We poured boiling water over all her kitchenware and washed it with soap — she had died from a very contagious hepatitis — the nurses were wearing masks and gloves when they were attending to her. In contrast to Danish tradition, where we burn the sheets from a deceased person with such an illness, we poured boiling water over her linen and we washed it with soap and dried it. I think we both were worried, but it had to be done.

After the cleaning up we collected all that I judged as personal, important material from the house, including her typewriter. To my surprise she had collected all her letters year by year. Under her bed I found a box with theses about her writing sent to her from students in the USA and Europe. I went through her books and collected those with inscriptions (from other writers) or which she herself had written in. In the cupboard I found letters from writers and friends from as far as Denmark. And so on. (Personal correspondance, April 2006)

Although Rytter soon wrote a long, vivid account of that day and of the days that followed, it still awaits a first publication (personal correspondance, April 2006).

The outside world subsequently learned of this heritage through the equally determined and painstaking work of Head’s future biographer, Gillian Stead Eilersen. In 1988 she spent seven weeks in Serowe going through the vast volume of materials; in 1989 she published a book of previously unknown Head writings and two articles on the collection itself, one of which appeared in Botswana Notes and Records (Eilersen, ‘The Bessie Head Papers. Some Preliminary Comments’, Vol. 20, pp 95-99). A succinct summary appeared in the Museum’s 1990 magazine, Lekgapho:

There are over 2000 letters in the collection. Bessie Head exchanged letters with over 300 people or organisations; she kept up sustained correspondences lasting three or more years with over 30 people; and she organised her impressive collection of letters — keeping carbon copies of almost everything she wrote — so efficiently that it may well be one of her most significant contributions to posterity.

As well as the letters, there are 23 short stories in typescript form, some of them unpublished; several typescripts of her published works; a number of short articles and essays, some little known; a series of reviews of comments on books she had been sent or bought; three large notebooks of background material for her historical novel; five dissertations written on her works, gifts from authors; innumerable newspaper cuttings or reviews of her books; some
critical articles on her writings; taped and transcribed copies of some of the interviews she gave, and a miscellaneous collection of photographs and Christmas cards. (Gillian Stead Eilersen, "Serowe, Bessie Head's 'Bit of Ancient Africa'." Lekgapho, the Khama III Memorial Museum Review 1988-89, Vol. 1, pp 61-66)

In more recent years a third Danish enthusiast, Ruth Forchhammer, has left her mark on the Papers by carrying out the mammoth task of cataloguing nearly all of them, with publication of the finished Catalogue scheduled for 2006. For Forchhammer it is the end of a very long road: she and Bessie Head were good friends before Head died, then she was employed to sort and classify the Head materials beginning in December 1986. She has worked on the catalogue project part-time from then until now.

I would note that the Bessie Head Papers are approximately as old as the Serowe Museum itself, to call the latter by its original name. They have always been stored in a windowless, fireproof room with steel shelves and door. In 1984-85 the Museum converted an old lavatory to make a secure closet for the Khama Family Papers; the Bessie Head Papers actually arrived there first. These papers are Head's original documents as hurriedly scooped up by Rytter into cardboard boxes. They are not open to the public. Next to this room, however, is a sunlit and attractive reading room where photocopies of almost all the correspondence may be browsed by authorised researchers.

The KMM curator, Scobie Lekhutile, has worked for the Museum in one capacity or another for over twenty years. He has watched and advised as Forchhammer's work gradually took shape. The assistant curator, Gasenone Kediseng, has supervised and helped out with the meticulous transcribing of Forchhammer's handwritten lists into word-processor tables. The Museum's secretary, Kelly Golekwang, has done the bulk of the actual typing and retyping.

The Museum's announcement of the publication of a large printed Catalogue states: "Altogether [her effects] comprise some 5000 individual items, dating from around 1962 until her death in 1986 and the establishment of the collection a few years later." It goes on to say that the Catalogue will also be offered as a CD-ROM, allowing basic word searches to be made throughout the lists. Thus some scholars are likely to prefer the electronic version of the work.

An Author's Surprising Life

My personal observations below are based on the photocopied correspondence and on the recently compiled computer files. Although I knew Bessie Head well during her years as a novelist, the Papers held a number of surprises for me.

First, she corresponded with literally hundreds of different people over the years, on every possible topic except sex. She was promiscuous in her intellectual contacts and prolific with her words. And in this correspondence she expressed her inner feelings better than in most of her daily conversations. Her vulnerability, privateness, and personal energy emerge strongly in these private writings.

Head had two modes of correspondence during most of these years: one in which she typed a letter with as many carbons as she could squeeze in, and the other in which she opened an incoming letter at the post office, bought an aerogramme, and wrote a handwritten reply on the spot. How many of these letters were eventually saved? I think the collection has 95-99% of the first kind of letter and perhaps 40-50% of the second kind.

Bessie Head did not always have a typewriter. In her early years in Botswana when she wrote by hand, she nonetheless wrote lots of words. Patrick Cullinan, in his recently published
Imaginative Trespasser, mentions receiving a letter that “runs to five foolscap pages, written by hand on both sides in red ink” and another “extremely long, lasting twenty-odd pages”.

I knew Head as a cheerful, hearty person who could be rough and direct in speech. So I found it shocking to discover how much of her correspondence, especially the later correspondence, was either adversarial against the respondent or bitter against a third party. Head harboured some ferocious resentments. And in contrast to her fiction, where her worst characters are men, in the letters she is more often most openly hateful towards women.

Finally, she had greatly increased her personal library of books - fiction and reference books - between the time I said goodbye her in 1973 and her death in 1986. Many of these were gifts from friends and fellow writers (I remember sending her Garcia-Marquez’ Chronicle of a Death Foretold). This collection in particular made and makes me happy, even though Rytter, hesitantly, took rather less than half of what she found on Head’s shelves.

Omissions and Commissions

The collection is almost entirely documents and books, with few of Head’s personal effects. One important item in storage, however, is her second and final typewriter, a small Silver-Reed portable in a large carrying case. One significant item that was not acquired was her bicycle. Lekhutile believes it has exchanged hands several times in Serowe over the intervening years; it may still be possible to locate it.

Bessie Head wrote notes to herself as all writers do, voluminously. But she did not think spatially and rarely sketched. Thus there are few drawings or maps or diagrams among her papers, unless made by others. There also seem to be relatively few financial documents.

In what may be startling to some people, there is nothing that remotely resembles a romantic letter, either to or from an enamoured. And yet we do know that during a few fleeting weeks, probably in the mid or late 1970s, a German man declared his love to her and she contemplated flying to Germany to join him. We know this by third-person references in other letters and notes. As there is apparently nothing to him or from him - scholars will soon confirm or refute this - we have to conclude that Head did sometimes destroy correspondence, though obviously not very often or very much.

There is also a mystery omission. In 1985 Head accepted an advance to write her autobiography. She subsequently made enquiries in South Africa about her early years, and some or all of these letters exist. However, neither Rytter nor Forchhammer nor Eilersen nor anyone else has ever found any notes or notebook for this proposed book (she often kept a notebook or notebooks dedicated to just one project). Eilersen concluded that she had not started work on the autobiography.

My own view is that perhaps the key notebook existed but was never found. Since no one had an opportunity to remove anything from her house, it is possible that Head tucked it into her bag and carried it with her to the hospital. It was a last-minute decision to pack up and go, one that was urged on her by friends, including Forchhammer. Head finally agreed, thinking of course that she would come home. In my imagination, after her body had gone to the morgue, the notebook was found under a pillow by a cleaner and met a fiery fate.

I must be quick to say that Forchhammer strongly disagrees. She writes: “Shortly before Bessie died - I think it was sometime in March - she told me that she had everything in her head about her autobiography, and that it would be easy to write, because, as she said: ‘I am the main person’.” (Personal correspondence, April 2006.)
Restrictions and Slanders
Several correspondents have allowed their letters to be retained by the Museum on the condition that they not be made available to the public for 20 or 50 years. Without naming names, I would point out that several of these are among Head's most important and long-term correspondents. There will be fresh work for scholars for some time to come. On the other hand, as we have just passed the 20-year mark of her death, I believe some materials have entered the public realm.

Forchhammer herself debated whether or not to hold back some of Head's most abusive letters until a later date, but I believe in the end she decided against it. There are some violent, obscene slanders against people in the literary world. And in 1985-86, when Bessie and Howard Head were estranged, she wrote some dreadful things even about her son. I note that Howard himself seems unfazed by the idea of making these letters public.

Pulling Bessie up to the Stars
The Bessie Head Papers do not gather dust. Scholars and students come every year to Serowe to turn the photocopied pages. Museum staff estimate that well over 100 people have obtained the necessary permissions and made use of the archive since it was first opened to the public. Two volumes of her letters have already appeared (A Gesture of Belonging - Letters from Bessie Head, 1965-1979, edited by Randolph Vigne. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1991. Imaginative Trespasser: Letters between Bessie Head, Patrick and Wendy Cullinan 1963-1977, compiled by Patrick Cullinan with a personal memoir. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1995), and at least two more are planned.

Is a Catalogue the final word? Post-modernist scholars may regret that the letters are catalogued by correspondent rather than by date or subject. It doesn't help in understanding Head's mindset at the critical turning points in her life.

I myself was intrigued that the catalogue project employs long, simple lists with very few cross-references, until I realised that in 1986 the world did not have PC databases. Although there has been no time to restructure the lists, the Museum staff did type the final versions into Word tables. A future investigator with technical expertise will be able to construct a database that can report Head's correspondence and thus her preoccupations by day or month or year.

The remarkable Bessie Head, leaving behind a nearly complete and intact record of her battles with the gods, her insatiable curiosity, and her love of ordinary folk, is clearly well placed to advance her 'people religion' far into the literary future. Bravo our beloved Bessie!