

LIVING HISTORY

Clarke's Bookshop has moved but it's lost none of its charm. This shop is much more than just a working enterprise – it's a celebrated literary and cultural haven.

PHOTOS JAC DE VILLIERS
WORDS LIN SAMPSON



01 Andre Sales, who has been working at Clarke's Bookshop since he was at school, in The Prints Room, which is usually kept locked. A table is piled with a six-volume set of *British Intelligence in the Second World War*.



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ituated on Cape Town's Long Street, which can turn from banal to barbarous overnight, Clarke's Bookshop has always provided a cultural oasis that remained comfortably unchanged, which was part of its charm. It was unlikely that you would arrive one day and find muzak and rows of cashiers behind veneer counters. Thus it was with trepidation that book buyers and bibliophiles heard it was going to move.

But stage-managed by owner Henrietta Dax, with her acute eye, the change is so imperceptible that customers ask: "Something has changed here; have you put in new stairs?"

The bookshop iconography remains intact, with its sweet, dry smell and the rows of books with marbled endpapers, Morocco-leather bindings, half vellum and calf, and figured cloth. Its excitement lies not only in the books but the collections of prints, ancient



maps, handmade books with their treasured papyry look, aquatints and botanical prints.

There *are* changes: the books are better displayed and the upstairs area is airy and open to the road, where the passing mob – the sulky silhouettes of loiterers and surreptitious sellers of sunglasses – confirms that one is on the African continent. A woman clips by, wrapped in a bright green cloth that makes her look like a moving caterpillar.

Henrietta has gone to trouble to retain the shop's tradition. The gold lettering remains the same, the walls are now decorated with old prints, and bookcases from the original owner have been salvaged and restored.

Dr Nigel Penn, a professor in the Department of Historical Studies at the

University of Cape Town, is a bibliophile who particularly likes Clarke's because "it has the atmosphere of a library". But the atmosphere is even more than a library; it is layered with history, fugitive romance and adventurers' lore, as travellers wash up on the Long Street shores, an activity encouraged by its first owner Anthony Clarke, who opened the shop in 1956. Apparently Graham Greene dropped in once, and after that some people from abroad would say: "Graham Greene sent me."

Clarke was the sort of man often found in the colonies – solitary, scholarly and brave, but with little commercial sense. He could be rude, particularly to people wishing to buy a book he loved. Sometimes when he could not part with a book, he would suddenly say: "The shop is closed." In the days when I bought books from him – or wrenched them from his hands – I had no idea of his exotic past.

During World War II, as part of the British Army Chestnut Troop in Italy, he was ordered to shell a town called Sansepolcro, a name that rang a bell. He recalled he'd once read an essay by Aldous Huxley describing Piero della



Francisca's picture, *The Resurrection*, as "the greatest painting in the world". He disobeyed orders, halted the bombardment (a serious crime in the British Army), to save the picture. After the war, he was given the Freedom of the City and a ticket to Italy for the feast. There now stands a rather forlorn street in the town named A Clarke, the origins of which younger generations might never guess.

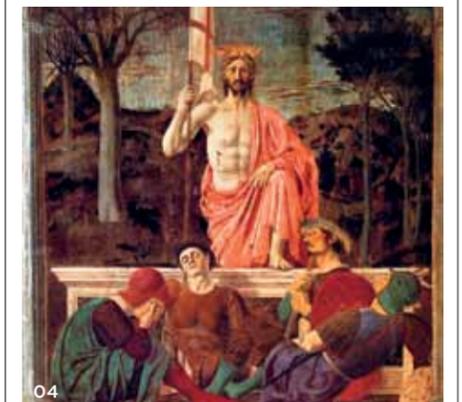
Although he is long since dead, his spirit is kept alive in Clarke's, one of the few remaining independent bookshops. In essence, it's eclectic – with new and secondhand first editions; signed copies by, among others, Gertrude Stein, Ted Hughes and Roy Campbell; and books that are out of print, as well as political ephemera, stickers, badges and posters that mark the ever-changing times of southern Africa.

Most of all, it is a shop of modern Africana, which Henrietta has collected over the years. This is Henrietta's special interest and she regularly visits various countries in Africa, selling, bartering and buying books. For years these trips into the African interior gave her an

air of mystery. What was she actually doing? "I just get into my car and drive, very often alone. Wherever there are people, there are books. I have been to many places – Zimbabwe, Swaziland... but my favourite is Mozambique," she says.

Small collectors often console themselves with the thought that money cannot buy all the rare books they want – they have to be found. In Clarke's you have a good chance of finding what you have long searched for. In the age of the Kindle, bookshops like Clarke's are more buoyant than ever – a feast for the eyes of a lush treasury of tradition and modern erudition, a serendipitous journey through the cultural background of the world. **V**

• 021 423 5739, clarkesbooks.co.za



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BOOK, HE WOULD SUDDENLY
SAY: "THE SHOP IS CLOSED."

01 The Secondhand Room: Art Deco chairs covered in Bevan Christie's Turkish-inspired fabric are the perfect place to dip into a PG Wodehouse novel, stacks of which are piled on the floor.