



Professor of Greek Piet Conradie with colleagues, senior students, and Mrs Kotie Smuts, widow of Latin Professor, Frans Smuts, circa 2000.

Photo courtesy of the Conradie family.

IN MEMORIAM

PIETER JACOBUS CONRADIE (1931–2021)

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South African Classics is the poorer with the passing, in his ninety-first year, of Piet Conradie, Professor Emeritus of Greek at Stellenbosch, doyen of scholarly Reception Studies of Greek drama in South Africa, but also a kind and beloved teacher.¹

After one year at the University of Cape Town, Conradie transferred to Stellenbosch, achieving a BA degree *cum laude* (Greek and Latin, with minors in History and Afrikaans) in 1950, and continuing immediately with his graduate studies (1951), while also embarking on a first stint of teaching. Four years in the Netherlands (1954–58) culminated in a doctorate at the University of Utrecht on the literary portrayal of Herakles in Greek drama, published in 1958.²

Piet Conradie had long been interested in the use of myth in Greek literature, and he was further inspired by the prescribed preliminary reading of all the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles and also a number of Euripides' plays, set by his supervisor at Utrecht. Greek tragedy became his lifelong passion. Soon after his permanent appointment as lecturer at Stellenbosch, Piet collaborated with Professor Frans Smuts and various other colleagues to institute a three-year course in Classical Studies (at Stellenbosch termed 'Classical Culture') to complement students' linguistic studies.³ Here Piet's three drama modules, featuring not only Greek drama in translation, but also its tremendous *Nachleben*, kept students fascinated from first to third year. Many of South Africa's best-known actors were, as students, among these proselytes.

Students were introduced to the dramatic works of modern European authors, ranging from Anouilh to Brecht, Corneille, Eliot, Racine and further, but also to South African authors who wrote in Afrikaans, such as Brink, Van

¹ For earlier appreciations of Conradie's work, see Thom 1996a; 1996b; Claassen 2008.

² Conradie 1958.

³ Conradie later wrote an obituary for Frans Smuts (Conradie 1987).

Wyk Louw, and Wassenaar. These authors also featured in the numerous academic articles Conradie published, not only in Classics journals, but also in other literary and theatrical journals. Later he started working on other African authors who worked with Greek tragic themes, such as Soyinka and Rotimi. Seven books came from his pen and he also served as editor of *Akroterion* from 1987 until 1995. Piet was promoted to Associate Professor in 1972, and to full Professor and Chair of Greek at Stellenbosch in 1977, where he retired in 1995.

Yet the Greek language was not neglected in Piet's teaching portfolio, and his scholarly approach earned him the soubriquet of 'Piet Grieks'. He was a kind preceptor to generations of Dutch Reformed theological students, guiding them to pass the compulsory two years of Greek for entrance to the Seminary. Former students of his fill pulpits throughout South Africa and still remember him fondly. A former student, a local pastor, after thirty-five years still recalls Piet's quasi-dramatic declaration that 'the perfect tense is an action in the past that has an influence on the present.' In that sense, Piet Grieks' teaching was 'perfect'.

Here, too, Piet favoured the reading of drama with senior students, who chose to continue with Greek studies in their third year for the love of it. I remember reading Euripides' *Ion* in Greek with him when I took up Greek studies at Stellenbosch, where the two languages were then offered in separate departments. On occasion Piet also 'helped out' in the Latin Department at Stellenbosch, so that I had the privilege of reading the Roman historian Tacitus with him in my Latin Honours year. Piet was always impeccably prepared, and *demande*d the same from his students, though, as he himself explained, he did not really *expect* them always to comply. For him, *errare semper humanum est* and he led his all-too-human students by example rather than precept. All remember his approachability and humility.

This kindly attitude, combined with a dry and often mildly wicked sense of humour and frequent laughter, was carried over into his relationship with his family and colleagues, but also into extensive committee work at the University (such as acting as secretary of the local University Teachers' Association), while serving, in a wider context, the South African Classical Association in various roles (chairing CASA, 1975-76, editing *Akroterion* for many years and being elected as Honorary President of CASA in 2003). Conradie was a modest and generous colleague, on occasion translating one of his Afrikaans-language articles into English for the express benefit of a well-known British proponent of Reception Studies. Within the South African literary establishment, Piet served for some time on the board of the South African National Library, and also acted as treasurer of the Afrikaans Writers' Circle. He also served in the Stellenbosch chapter of the South African Academy of Science.

Piet was a dedicated mountaineer in his youth. As a student he was active in the Stellenbosch University 'Mountain and Touring Club' and later he joined the Mountain Club of South Africa, climbing until about 1976. His thick-tyred bicycle with its bulky saddlebags full of books and papers took him to the Faculty and home for most of his teaching life, clocking up enough mileage on its pedometer to circle the earth several times.

Piet was married to Marietjie Hugo of Porterville and the couple had two sons. Marietjie predeceased Piet by some four years. He at first stayed on in his home in a retirement complex, but about three years ago he was obliged to move to a frail care establishment; failing eyesight and increasingly poor health made independent living impossible for him. Ultimately an inability to read even the largest print was a sad fact, borne cheerfully, however, by the ever-optimistic Piet Conradie. When Covid 19 struck, an extreme lockdown at the facility prevented even his sons from visiting him. His gratitude at the occasional phone call from former students and colleagues was palpable.

Piet Conradie's passing does not mark the end of an era in Reception Studies in South Africa. He was an inspiration to many former students now active in South African theatrical and academic circles, but also within the Dutch Reformed Church.

List of publications to supplement *Akroterion* 14.3-4 (1996) 199-203

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- 1996b. 'Bibliografie: P.J. Conradie'. *Akroterion* 14.3-4:199-203.