

Recalling how it was

The essence of journals is not best conveyed by cold statistics but by the usually warm (and often surprising) relations among the main players.

My last issue as editor of the *South African Journal of Science* seems a good occasion to recall a highlight or two from the many memorable experiences of an association that proved as long as it was unexpected.

Back in October 1970, in the lift up to the office on my first morning at *Nature*, I bumped into my boss-to-be, John Maddox, who had that very morning flown back from his first visit to South Africa. As editor of that illustrious publication and managing director of Macmillan Journals in London, he was abrim with plans to reach out to scientists wherever they might be. Impressed by some of the science being conducted in this part of the world, he wrote an editorial entitled 'Science is a Trojan horse', as a provocation to give the horse some fodder. If South Africa was ever to emerge from its political quagmire, he believed, it would need excellent science and technology. And its scientists would need excellent publication outlets.

In the meantime, the *SAJS* was grinding to a halt. In mid-1972, the late Denys Kingwill, then head of Information and Research Services at the CSIR, finally persuaded Maddox to take over the journal and save it from collapse. A few months later, there being no suitably qualified local editor, I was dispatched to Johannesburg (just for a few months) to give the journal a facelift.

What I found when I arrived was precious little journal—of the three articles in the pipeline, ready for review, two were immediately rejected. There was clearly work to be done. As a newcomer to the scene, I was warmly welcomed—and kindly (but firmly) led to understand that the best scientists would never send us their papers. A decade later I was still in place, and still trying. By then we had

become ISI listed. I knew that the *Journal* had 'arrived' when articles from the likes of the late Frank Nabarro began to land on my desk. And I knew that the international community was taking us seriously when, finally, we reached the second quartile of the ISI grouping of international multidisciplinary natural sciences journals, and managed to stay there.

It's hard to say what stands out most in the three and a half decades of my time with the *SAJS*. To get going, and to stay in business, we had to set up and maintain the highest standards, which included dealing with peer reviewers, and with radical papers that bucked the trend. When Don Gilbert submitted a preliminary write-up on a series of experiments on the temporal variation of light-absorbing properties of cell suspensions in aqueous culture, it was given the thumbs down by two senior biochemists. Everybody knew that cells didn't behave in that way, they told me ('this effect is an artefact of the experiment, and not described in the textbooks'). I reported back to the author. He invited me to visit his tiny laboratory in a Johannesburg suburb, to see for myself. It looked convincing, so we published the article and held thumbs. Ten years later, the phenomenon he observed had become recognized as an inherent property of living cells and is now in the textbooks.

Raymond Dart, forever associated with the Taung skull, also tended towards a 'publish and be damned' attitude to unorthodox ideas. One afternoon, I arranged for him to meet an exceptionally gifted (but unknown) scholar and to hear him expound on the evolution of languages in the Classical age. Early next day there was a follow-up call from Dart. 'What do the professors think?' he asked. I reported that the linguistic interpretations had been rejected out of hand. 'That's a relief', he bellowed down the phone: 'The man's clearly brilliant. But,' he added, 'if the pro-

fessors thought so too, you could be sure that he was wrong! Just make certain the work is published.'

Less controversial, but indelibly remembered, was Ron Clarke's visit in October 1998 (after an alerting phone call from Phillip Tobias), who told me, over the kitchen table, the story of the Little Foot skeleton discovery at Sterkfontein. Two months later, in the *SAJS*, he published the first formal announcement of the find (see page 443 of this issue for the anniversary update).

Once published, articles take on a life of their own, most often unbeknown to authors and editor. Shortly before apartheid ended in 1994, two authors wrote us a pair of thoughtful and powerful papers on ways to overcome the legacy of racial segregation at our universities. They were nervous prior to publication, fearing that their university (UNISA) might fire them for their politically incorrect views. They were still at their posts a few months later, but had received disappointingly little feedback. Then, by chance, at a cocktail party, I discovered that the articles were being used as a blueprint for the transformation of the student body at at least one university (Wits).

Sometimes feedback comes after a long gestation period. One highly regarded review of evolution and punctuated equilibrium, which we published in the early 1980s (after at least three years in preparation), was our longest-ever article at 24 pages. It led the author triumphantly, in short order, to a professorship at Yale. And a pair of articles in the *SAJS* on a novel mathematical analysis of productivity (rejected by a local economics journal on the grounds that it was too sophisticated) led to three offers of chairs and a string of invitations to lecture widely.

It's good, looking back, to remember the impacts that go beyond what's recorded in the databases, and the unexpected ways in which the *SAJS* seems to have been able to make a genuine difference in people's lives.