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What happened to the Atlas Catalogue of R.S.A.?

by Odd Gunnar Skagestad

For intelligent communication, common languages and common yardsticks are necessary tools. Likewise, for us stamp collectors, catalogues are a *sine qua non*.

Although the undersigned had been a stamp collector since 1951 - from the age of seven - it was not until 1984 (when I was posted to Cape Town for a 3-year assignment as the Consul of Norway) that I seriously started collecting South (and Southern) Africa.

For me, this was, in the philatelic sense, a totally unfamiliar and uncharted territory. Immediately, the need arose to acquire a stamp catalogue which could guide me into this exciting but slightly bewildering landscape. As a starter, the *Stanley Gibbons Stamp Catalogue* (Part. I) provided a useful tool with a wealth of fascinating information - its colourless, somewhat dull layout and generally drab appearance notwithstanding.

At the same time, however, I discovered the *South African Colour Catalogue* (SACC), and became the happy owner of a copy of the 6th edition (1983-84). From the very outset and up to the present, the SACC - in its subsequent editions - has been an invaluable guide and companion during innumerable hours spent exploring the spell-binding world of South African stamps. After the brutal murder in 2009 of the catalogue's founding editor and publisher Lutz Heffermann, one might well have felt some uneasiness about the future fate of the SACC - would new editions be forthcoming, and would the catalogue live up to the exacting standards which Mr Heffermann had accomplished to create? The 30th edition, which appeared in April 2010, put paid to any doubts in this respect. Or did it really? In a book review in *The SA Philatelist*, June 2010 (p.81), the reviewer Mr Paul van Zeyl (of Rand Stamps) declared that "The long-awaited SACC is squeaky clean but collector unfriendly". Among other peculiarities, it was noted that the catalogue's new co-ordinator/publisher, Mr Nick Troester, omitted placing his name anywhere in the publication (perhaps anticipating some negative feedback?). The reviewer went on to urge collectors to let Mr Troester (who can be contacted at razztro@iburst.co.za) know if and where he could improve the next edition. In my opinion a sensible suggestion.

Reverting to the time (1984) of my initial encounter with collecting South African stamps, I then also had the delightful experience of coming across a slim (108 pages) volume proudly titled the *Atlas Catalogue of R.S.A.* Dealers I spoke to in Cape Town gave the unanimous verdict: This was the very best catalogue of South African stamps, - better than the SACC especially as far as definitives were concerned.

And indeed, with an incredible amount of detailed and useful information, presented with a neatly illustrated and reader-friendly layout, at R8,50 this catalogue did turn out to be an excellent buy. In addition to the main section of definitives and commemoratives in chronological order, the *Atlas Catalogue of R.S.A.* also contained - inter alia - exhaustive presentations of souvenir sheets and miniature sheets, first day covers, S.A.A. flight covers, commemorative postmarks, postal stationery and a whole breathtaking section dedicated to instructions on how to sort out Groups I to IX of the 1st Definitive series, as well as a guide to the specialised listings of the 2nd (de Jong series), the 3rd (Proteas) and the 4th (Buildings) Definitives.

The only obvious shortcoming of the *Atlas Catalogue* was announced in its title: Being confined to the R.S.A. issues, collectors of Union material would necessarily have to rely on other catalogues, like Stanley Gibbons or SACC.

Another matter of more calamitous nature was - at that time - yet to reveal itself. The names of the editors - Glen Carpendale and Coen Slagt, appeared in bold letters on the front cover, proudly announcing that this volume was the 'FIRST EDITION 1983/4' (see illustration). Judging on the basis of the fine quality of this first edition, one would have ample reason to harbour high expectations with regard to the next - and subsequent - issues. Indeed, to leave no doubts about their noble and ambitious intentions, Messrs Carpendale and Slagt made it clear in the catalogue's Foreword that there would be more to come. Appealing to the readers for assistance ('We need your help') in improving the contents of 'our next issue', the editors also made it known that work had started on preparing new catalogues on Union and S.W.A. stamps.

Unfortunately, none of this seems to ever having materialized. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the *Atlas Catalogue of R.S.A.*, First edition 1983/4, turned out to be a one-off event. A brave attempt at achieving excellence of a more lasting nature, but what went wrong? Can anyone tell us what really happened to the *Atlas Catalogue of R.S.A.*?

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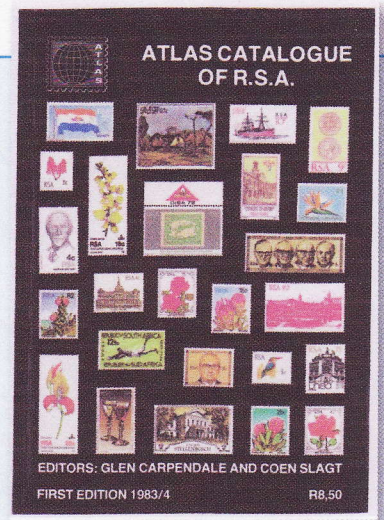
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In Response:

The Atlas Catalogue of R.S.A. - a Brief History

My first catalogue was a simplified one of the whole of southern Africa, done by myself in 1981. It has been very widely used, and did a huge amount of good in promoting the Pre-Union and Ex Protectorates, as well as the Rhodesias. It never sold very well as it was in black and white. Beginners need colour catalogues, black and white is fine for experienced collectors and specialists. However, in colour it would have been too expensive and cost money I did not have in those days. So it was a no-win situation.

Coen and I then got together and did the RSA catalogue between us as that was our main area of expertise. As your correspondent states, it was a perfect catalogue as it catered for beginners in the front in colour and specialists at the back in black and white. The intention at the time was to do Union next, followed by Pre-Union, SWA, Namibia and then the Homelands.

Our print run was 10 000 catalogues, for 5000 the price would have been nearly double, so we opted for the larger quantity at a cheaper rate, which was R8.50, a very reasonable price. Even so, we only sold 5000 in 3 years; the remainder were dumped. (In retrospect this is a pity as they would still be selling.) The reason for poor sales was that everyone said they wanted a combined catalogue like the SACC, so there was a buyers' resistance to it. Most collectors only came to their senses years later when it was too late.

Why did we not carry on with the other volumes?

The main problems were time and costs. Timewise the RSA took us more than 6 months of very hard work all done after hours, as we both had thriving businesses to run at the same time. Expenses involved included Tax, telephones, typing, photocopying, typesetting etc, plus travelling expenses and accommodation. Both Coen and I had trips to Cape Town to supervise the colour separations. With these costs we made such a big loss on the RSA there was little incentive

to continue with other volumes. Another problem was that our biggest buyer by far was the CNA, but their commercial conditions were so biased against us there would have been little if any profit left.

Why did we not do a combined catalogue?

Beside the problems of time and cost mentioned earlier it was our opinion that it was unfair that people who only collected SA had to pay for SWA, Namibia, the Rhodesias, Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. By producing smaller volumes, the initial cost would be spread out over a period, and you only needed to buy the countries you wanted. Seemingly, this was not what the collectors wanted, so we again had a no-win situation.

Contrary to belief, catalogues are not money spinners. If we could include all our costs, and the loss of earnings whilst writing and producing, they would be much more expensive than they are.

In summary, we decided to concentrate on our own businesses rather than absorb time and effort elsewhere. I have tried to keep my explanation short, so I hope it still makes sense.

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