

THE OWL CLUB



Founded 1894

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Committee 2022/2023

President: Mike Bruton

Senior Vice-President: Geoffrey Ashmead

Junior Vice-President: Ron Duff

Secretary: Hugh Amoore

Treasurer: Richard Morris

Imm. Past President: Richard Morris

Additional Members: Bill Coetzee,
Geoff Everingham, John Green,
Nigel Gwynne-Evans, Mike James,
David Little & Paul Murray

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Dinner bookings

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The Owl Club

Standard Bank of South Africa

A/c No. 071 818 006

This month's edition:

Editor: Ron Duff

Contributors: Hugh Amoore,

George Branch, Mike Bruton &

Sheila Camerer

Photographs: Ron Duff

"Antarctica. You know, that giant continent at the bottom of the earth that's ruled by penguins and seals'

C.B. Cook

NOTICE

Tuesday 17th May 2022 : Notice of meeting #1338

Dear Fellow Owls

THE 1338th MEETING OF THE OWL CLUB, PRECEDED BY DINNER, WILL BE HELD ON TUESDAY 17th MAY 2022, 6:00 PM FOR 7:00 PM START, IN THE GRILL ROOM, KELVIN GROVE CLUB.

Chairman: **President Owl Mike Bruton**

Guest Speaker: **Associate Professor Ross Hofmeyr**

Extreme Medicine: Antarctica and Beyond

As humans continue to explore the planet and the universe, our need to perform and understand physiology under extreme conditions is pushing boundaries within medicine. Drawing on personal experiences of expeditions to Antarctica and other wild places, Ross will explain how life at the extremes is translating into everything from improving our fundamental understanding of oxygenation in critical care to reducing blood loss under spinal anaesthesia.

Music: **Jenny and the Jameses' Celtic Band**

Original folk music & traditional Celtic tunes

This accomplished trio, comprising songwriter **Jennifer Eaves** (vocals, guitar and piano), **James Harper** (violin and vocals) and multi-instrumentalist **James Harvey** (accordion, harp, bouzouki, vocals and anything else he feels like playing on the night) are guaranteed to get you foot tapping through the evening. They will be performing a selection of original folk music, combined with traditional Celtic tunes, and you can expect to get transported back to misty isles and a rousing, *uisge beatha* fuelled *cèilidh*.

WPB: **Owl Norman Hooper**

A story whose time has come - Win in Washington

Between September 1965 and October 1977 two Rhodesian officials, supported by many American friends, maintained an Information Office in Washington DC for the post-UDI Government. Through personal letters to her family Win showed how they stood firm for 12 years. Her letters provide an entertaining glimpse into the unofficial diplomacy of Rhodesians in the USA.

Dinner price: **R290 for Owls and guests alike.**

(Note: Full Covid-19 protocols will still be observed, including the wearing of face masks, hand sanitising, social distancing as well as restricted seating arrangements).

Dress: **Black tie (or similarly elegant attire).**

RESERVATIONS & PAYMENTS:

Any Owl who does not have internet access is welcome to telephone the Secretary Bird at **082 440 8204** or **021 671 3121** to book a perch.

All other Owls are encouraged to use the **Pay'n'Perch** procedure by paying their dining fee into the Club's bank account by EFT and instructing the bank (using the option provided) to send a remittance confirmation email to secretary@owls.capetown whereupon their perches will be booked.

No further emails will be needed from you unless you have special dietary needs or if you are using a dining credit.

In all cases, bookings will close at 6:00 pm on Saturday 13th May 2022.

All bookings will be acknowledged.

The April 2022 meeting

A total of 69 Owls and 8 guests met for the 1337th meeting of the Owl Club, held in The Grill Room at Kelvin Grove Club, Newlands on Tuesday 19th April 2022.

Many Owls took advantage of the earlier birthday the day before), gathering time (18:00) to socialise and to spend time examining the *Ambassador to Bulgaria's* display of personal mementos and artefacts (as mounted in the foyer).

The proceedings commenced at 19:00 sharp, with **President Owl Mike Bruton** welcoming all and inviting **Owl Peter Steyn** to deliver the Grace.

The dinner started with a tomato and bell pepper soup drizzled with basil oil followed by roast sirloin steak served with a green peppercorn sauce, new potatoes and seasonal vegetables. The dessert was a pear crumble served with whipped cream and the meal ended with a welcome filter coffee. A selection of fine red and white wines from *Hawksmoor* (at *Matjieskuil*) accompanied the meal (and were enjoyed throughout the evening).

The *President* then asked Owls to charge their glasses and to rise for the *Toast To South Africa*, which then led into a short break whilst the tables were cleared.

The 1337th meeting of **The Owl Club** commenced with congratulations being bestowed upon those Owls celebrating birthdays during April, viz: **Geoff Davies, Bruce Dietrich, Leon de Wet, Paul Murray, Kit Vaughan** and *Past President John Webb* (who had celebrated his 80th

In a special announcement the *President* then announced the election of **Owl John van der Linde** as an *Honorary Life Member* of the Club (a tradition normally reserved for the AGM but at which **Owl John** had been unable to attend).

President Owl Mike Bruton then had the honour of inducting three new Owls ... **David Bridgeman, Sean King and Bjorn Salsone** ... into the parliament and invited them to dwell in harmony with their fellow Owls and to be prepared to bear their part in future Owl Club assemblies.

The *President* (requesting that guests remained seated) then proposed the traditional *Toast To Our Guests*, following which he introduced the guest speaker for the evening.

Professor Emeritus George Branch (giving full credit to his wife, **Margo Branch**, for her valuable contribution) gave a very informative and thought-provoking talk entitled "*The debts we owe to the sea*" (but more of this later, in much more detail).

The musical entertainment for the evening was fairly unique to most present with distinct Indian overtones and comprised of **Akash Srikewal** (sitar) and **Ronan Skillen** (tabla). The musical performance was

Grace

Heavenly Father

We thank thee for feeding us
As thou feedest the young Owls

When they call upon thee

Give us such trust in thy providence
That carefree we may hoot on our perches
But before we take our knives and forks

Or hear the popping of the corks

Let's pause

And thank the Lord divine

For these his gifts of food and wine

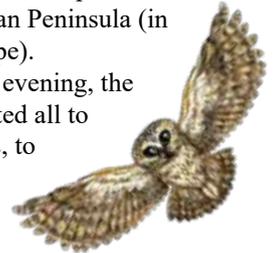
Amen

split into two sessions and more about this Indian classical duo is included herein.

The bar interval was highlighted with birthday celebratory Port most generously provided by **Owl John Webb**.

Owl Sheila Camerer (previously the Republic of South Africa's *Ambassador* to the Republic of Bulgaria) was then invited to fill the *Waste Paper Basket* - a talk filled with anecdotes and her experiences of "*Facing the Russian bear*" whilst resident in this country which occupies the eastern portion of the Balkan Peninsula (in south-eastern Europe).

To conclude the evening, the *President* then invited all to charge their glasses, to rise and proposed the *Toast to The Owl Club* and wished all a safe flight home.



Guest speaker: George Branch *The debts we owe to the sea*



George Branch

In giving due credit to his wife **Margo Branch**, for her contribution to his presentation, *Professor Emeritus George Branch's* informative talk follows:

There are multiple debts that we as humans owe to the sea, spanning practically the entire history of Earth. Our talk unpacks four aspects of this:

- 1 - Benefits to modern humans.
- 2 - Deep-time influences on the origins

of life's diversity

3 - How modern animals and plants shape marine ecosystems.

4 - How co-operation among species is proving to be as important as competition and predation in shaping the evolution of species.

We begin with a recap of the different ways in which the oceans benefit humankind in the modern world, which can be categorized into four types. **First**, there are regulatory functions, in which life benefits us by controlling such things as climate, floods, erosion and carbon uptake (and, hence, global climate changes). As an example, mangrove swamps dampen the effects of storms on our coasts. **Second**, there are provisioning functions such as the supply of food or materials for housing construction ... and fish from the sea are an obvious example of the former. **Third**, there are supporting functions, in which the sea supports other activities, such as the nursery role of estuaries as a safe haven for juvenile fish, or as stop-overs on the long

migratory routes of birds. **Fourth**, humans benefit from many cultural functions which are associated with the sea, including recreation, scientific research, education and religious activities.

Moving further (much further!) back in time, we need to recognize that we would not even be here if it were not for the deep-time origins of the diversity of life.

For almost 2 billion years, bacteria and their relatives, the *Archaea*, were the sole occupants of Earth, but around 2.5 billion years ago a union took place in which an Archaean engulfed a bacterium in an act of what is known as 'endosymbiosis'. The bacterium lost its independence and became the mitochondria that are found in the cells of all life within the kingdom Eukaryota. This was one of the greatest steps in the evolution of life, without which we would not even be here today.

All life that is now classed in the kingdoms Animalia, Fungi and Protozoa have inherited this type of cell structure.

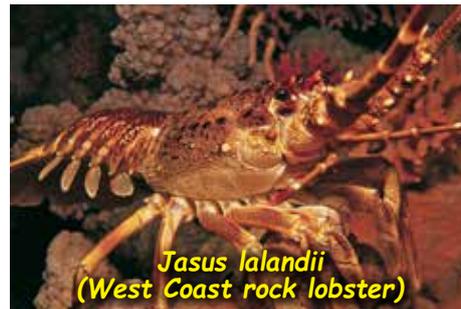
But this act of endosymbiosis was not the only one to take place. In a second series of other engulfments, a different kind of bacterium ... one of the cyanobacteria ... was taken in by eukaryotic cells and was destined to become chloroplasts capable of photosynthesis in the kingdom Plantae. It is humbling to think that the foundations of most of the major kingdoms of life were founded in endosymbiotic engulfments of bacteria, and that the kingdoms to which animals, fungi, protozoans and plants belong are tiny end points on the bush of life.

While we are contemplating how some of our genetic make-up extends back to bacteria, let us not forget the role of viruses. Our modern world is jaundiced by Covid-19, but viruses are responsible for many aspects of the evolution of life. They can transfer genes from one host to another, and generate novel adaptations as a result. For example, it is likely that quintessentially mammalian feature, the placenta, developed because of genes transferred by viruses.

Thirdly, we turn to some examples of individual species that have the power to transform the ecosystems in which they live. By way of example, West Coast rock lobsters have shifted south-east from their traditional strongholds on the west coast of South Africa to 'invade' a region on the

south-east coast. Their arrival has resulted in declines in herbivores, such as urchins and winkles which has, in turn, allowed seaweeds to proliferate and to smother encrusting coralline algae that coat the rocks. The entire ecosystem has been turned on its head! It's a warning that disturbing populations by overfishing or by altering the climate can profoundly alter ecosystems.

Finally, some examples of commensalism that show that evolution is not only about 'nature red in tooth and claw'. Staying with lobsters for a moment, one of George's PhD students, Amos Barkai, investigated why two adjacent islands in Saldanha Bay were entirely different in terms of the biotic communities that they support.



Jasus lalandii
(West Coast rock lobster)

One had an abundance of lobsters and, as a result of their predation, not a great deal else. The other had no lobsters and a rich diversity of other species.

Amos undertook experiments in which he introduced lobsters to the lobster-less island, expecting them to begin to alter the community there. In reality, the lobsters became overwhelmed within minutes by whelks which, in a gory act of mass predation, eliminated the lobsters.



The result of commensalism between whelks & 'moss animals'

But what has that all got to do with commensalism? The heart of the story lies in the fact that the whelks are coated with humble 'moss animals' that are toxic and protect the whelks from predators. Far from the lobsters eating the whelks, as we had expected, the tables were turned, and the lobsters were the ones that ended up being devoured!

The commensalism between whelk and 'moss animal' was pivotal in flipping the predator-prey relationship on its head!

Let's end with one other example of commensalism: on coral reefs, cleaner shrimps and cleaner fish serve a thoroughly

1
Regulatory
Climate
Flooding
Erosion
Carbon uptake

2
Provisioning-
Food
Wood
Reeds
Craft

F

G

Ecosystem services (1-to-4 clockwise)

C

E

4
Cultural
Recreation
Religion
Culture
Research
Education

D

3
Supporting
Refugia
Nursery
Export
Migratory stop over



George & Margo Branch

useful function by cleaning fish, removing parasites and cleansing wounds. They get food, and the fish get cleaned! Remove these cleaners from reefs, and the fish stop coming. In the absence of fish, seaweeds proliferate and smother the coral, leading to the death of the entire reef.

There are many messages that emerge from this talk. One is that evolution acts on processes that we do not usually associate with it: endosymbiotic mergers, transfers of genes by bacteria, and mutually beneficial co-operations.

But there is also a deeper message.

By allegoric comparison with the cleaner shrimps, wouldn't we as a human society get on much better if we were to focus on co-operation instead of antagonism?

Too wit to whit, to whoo!



Tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whooooo!
 Tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whooooo!
 Tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whooooo!

Musical Notes: Akash Srikewal & Ronan Skillen Indian classical duo

Ancient Indian scriptures define a *Raag* as a composition of sounds capable of bringing joy to the human heart while attaining beauty through specific movements of notes and phrases.

The phases of the duo's performance included: *Alaap*, which is the solo section performed only on the Sitar, *Bandish* / composition / melody, which was accompanied by the Tabla on a 16-beat cycle and was followed by *Jhala*, which was the fastest pace part of the performance, culminating in a crescendo ... and the finale comprised two light classical compositions.

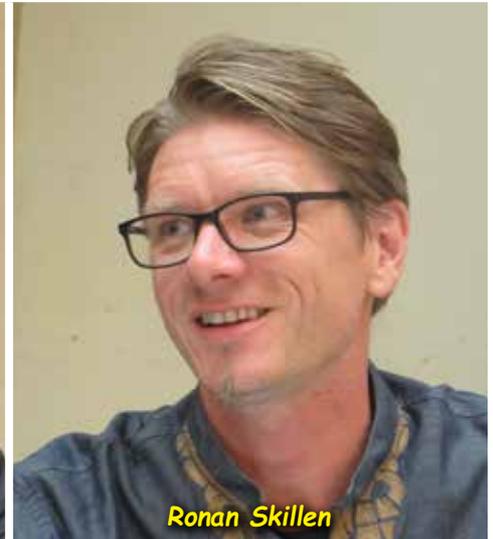
South Africa born **Akash Srikewal** has been playing the Sitar, an 18 to 21 stringed exotic and ancient Indo-Persian instrument, for over 25 years. He has established a style of performing classical, semi-classical and modern music that is soothing and soulful, and immerses listeners with the *Raga* or theme of the composition. Akash was formally trained (in India) by his Guru, Jayeraz Santokhee from the *Mahatma Gandhi Institute* and completed his master level training with Ustad Shujaat Khan, who is the son of highly acclaimed Ustad Vilayat Khan.

Ronan Skillen was born in Northern Ireland in 1980 and grew up in Germany. His musical journey started at the age of 10, with seven years of classical French horn training. Ronan travelled to India in 2003 and began playing tabla under the tutelage of Ustad Akram Khan, a master of a rich and intricately technical North Indian style known as *Ajrara Gharana*. Ronan has performed in France, Germany, Ghana, Holland, India, Italy, Kenya, Lithuania, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Swaziland, Switzerland and the United Kingdom ... and has featured on many recordings and film scores.

It is apt, at this point, to provide some



Akash Srikewal



Ronan Skillen

Information about the instruments:

The **sitar** is a plucked stringed instrument, originating from the Indian subcontinent and is used in Hindustani classical music. The instrument was invented in medieval India at the end of the Moghul period and flourished in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The sitar, in its present form, was developed, in India, in the 18th century.

The **tabla** is a pair of twin hand drums from the Indian subcontinent. Since the 18th century, tabla has been the principal percussion instrument in Hindustani classical music, where it may be played solo, as accompaniment with other instruments and vocals, and as a part of larger ensembles.

Owls were treated to master-class performance on both the sitar and the tabla.



The sitar and tabla in harmony

WPB: Owl Sheila Camerer Facing the Russian bear



Most South Africans know very little about Bulgaria. The first thing that springs to mind is yoghurt! Why would South Africa have an ambassador in Bulgaria? The initial reason was that it provided a home and study opportunities to many ANC members in exile. When the exiles returned home, the embassy was opened in 1992 at the ANC's request. I managed to track down some 70 ANC luminaries who had studied and lived in Bulgaria.

It all started with a phone call one afternoon from the *Director General* of the Department of Foreign Affairs (as it was then called), now the Department of International Relations & Cooperation (DIRCO). **Dr Ayanda Ntsaluba** announced without any preliminaries, "*The President has appointed you as Ambassador to Bulgaria*". The *President* at the time was **Thabo Mbeki** and it was in August 2008. I didn't like to ask him exactly where Bulgaria was, so I enquired, "*Please just remind me, the capital of Bulgaria is?*" "*Sofia*", came the prompt reply. "*You'll love Bulgaria*", he added.

I arranged to visit the *DG* in his office in Pretoria the following week to get further details and give him the final 'Yes' or 'No'. As soon as the call ended, I went to look at an atlas and discovered that Bulgaria is immediately north of Greece – a positive sign – and west of Turkey and has common borders with these countries as well as with



Owl Sheila Camerer

Serbia, Macedonia and Romania. I decided that, although this was unknown territory to me, if it has a common border with Greece ... Bulgaria couldn't be that bad!

Dr Ntsaluba gave me all the details of my posting with lots of encouraging noises. "*You'll love Bulgaria, as I said*", he repeated. Knowing too little to query any aspect of the assignment but feeling that it was an honour to be appointed, I signed up for the job, with Alex's support. It was clear that, as a member of the opposition, I was not going to be given a choice of postings.

Dr Ntsaluba was right, I did love Bulgaria. It was so unexpected! Although it was so severely damaged by nearly 50 years of communist rule and its aftermath ... and I include its economy, its politics and even

its psyche which gave it a 'poor relation' complex ... nevertheless, contrary to what we had been told about the rough and unrelenting Bulgarian border guards during the communist era, we found its people to be very friendly.

I always think of Bulgarians as the Italians of Eastern Europe. They enjoy music, food and particularly wine. The whole of Bulgaria, which is about the size of the Western Cape but with a somewhat bigger population of about 7.3 million, is a wine-producing area. One of the things that South Africa and Bulgaria therefore have in common is a wine culture, although they have been making wine for over 3 000 years and South Africa for just 300. The wine and vineyards in Bulgaria are everywhere and the vintages are mostly good and still quite reasonably priced. This is because huge investments have been made in state-of-the-art wineries since Bulgaria became an EU member in 2007.

Previously, Bulgaria's reputation was for making cheap, high-alcohol-content red wine chiefly for the vast Russian market. They also make a wine spirit called *rakia* and, traditionally, a Bulgarian meal starts with their *shopska salad* (made of chopped tomato, peppers and cucumber topped with sprinkled feta cheese) accompanied by a small glass of *rakia*. Culturally, Bulgarians love festivals and when pruning starts in the vineyards there are ceremonies involving the local

priests who bless and spray the wines with holy water, accompanied by processions, music and dancing.

The same happens at harvest time, and we were often invited to such occasions.

Our resident cook, Ivo, made sure that he regularly served up the traditional *shopska salad*. He also served *banitsas* (pastries made with goat's cheese and spinach if savoury ... honey and chopped walnuts if sweet), stuffed peppers and pork kebabs. We also managed to teach a rather nervous Ivo how to make *bobotie*, tomato *bredie* and a few other traditional South African dishes for our parties (with the aid of **Pieter-Dirk Uys**' wonderful cookery book).

Bulgarians are also mad about music ... there are four symphony orchestras and two music conservatories in Sofia, the capital, a city of two million people. There is also an excellent opera house which showcases singers from all the Balkan countries and beyond. Their talented director, **Dr Plamen Kartaloff**, has even managed to produce a full cycle of **Wagner's 'Ring'** operas.



Rila Monastery, Bulgaria

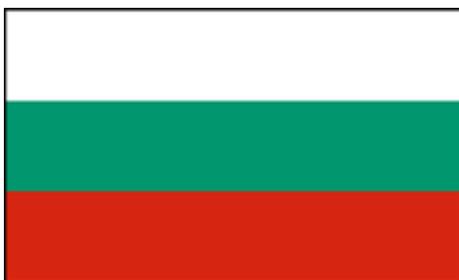
But the richest artistic heritage of Bulgaria is its nearly 200 beautiful painted churches and monasteries, the most famous being the *Rila Monastery* and the most beautiful the church in the village of *Abernassi*. They also have beautiful collections of icons, with the best-known being in the crypt of the *Alexander Nevsky Cathedral* in the centre of Sofia.



Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Sofia

Bulgaria is also an important holiday destination and, every year, over seven million tourists visit it, mainly the Black Sea coast.

Like the Italians, Bulgarians will cut corners to help you out. I remember trying to get into a symphony concert on our first Sunday night in downtown Sofia. We had walked from the Radisson Hotel, where we were being put up pending our move into the new residence, to the concert hall. The ticket office appeared to be closed and obtaining a ticket seemed to be impossible. We clearly looked and sounded like mystified foreigners



when suddenly a tall, authoritative woman emerged from the crowd. She enquired in heavily accented English who we were and what we wanted and then ushered us into the hall to some very nice seats. She returned some minutes later with some 'fake' tickets totally unrelated to our seat numbers.

When we arrived in Bulgaria on 1st April 2009 (which we hoped was not a portent) the country was beginning to emerge from the economic wreckage left behind by the years of communist rule. Bulgaria is still the poorest EU country. At first a lot of this money was stolen ... Bulgaria features even lower than South Africa on the Transparency International's Corruption Index ... but its fortunes have improved exponentially since 2007 when it became a member of NATO, as vast amounts of Euros have flowed into the country mainly for infrastructure upgrades and improvements to the country's institutional framework of the legal and administrative systems.

After a centre-right government took over in mid-2009 things changed for the better. The EU introduced a monitoring mechanism for Bulgaria consisting of six-monthly report cards, and there were even sanctions for non-performance. For instance, the EU has still not allowed Bulgaria to join the Schengen visa zone on the basis that, although the country has fulfilled the technical requirements relating to border control, not enough has been done, in Bulgaria, about judicial and political corruption.

Bulgaria's historical heyday, when it was the most powerful country in the region, was the 9th century under Czar Basil. He founded the Cyrillic alphabet with the assistance of two Greek monks, Cyril and Methodius, whom he summoned from Constantinople.



Czar Simeon 1 - 864/927

(now Istanbul). He then imposed the alphabet on the whole region. Bulgaria was inhabited pre-700 BC by the Thracians, then the Greeks, and then the Romans. A relic of 500 years of Turkish rule, which the Russians ended in 1878, is that 10% of Bulgarians today are of Turkish origin and are Muslims.



King (Czar Simeon II) - 1937-

The last *Bulgarian Czar* was **Simeon Borisov von Saxe-Coburg-Gotha**, the exiled **King (Czar Simeon II)** of Bulgaria, who curiously served later as the country's prime minister from 2001 to 2006 – and thereby hangs a strange Bulgarian tale.

Simeon was just six years old when, in 1943, his father, **Czar Boris III**, the popular ruler of Bulgaria which was then a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, was murdered. He was poisoned either by Hitler's agents in Sofia (as, after much hesitation, Bulgaria had eventually joined the Axis powers) or by Russian agents ... one of Bulgaria's many mysteries which is still much debated.

Simeon ascended the throne where he ruled (through his mother as Regent) until 1946. When the Russians, as expected, 'conquered' Bulgaria at the end of the Second World War he was sent, with his mother and sister, into exile, with the family eventually settling in Spain. Simeon then became a very successful businessman and married a Spanish noblewoman. He visited Bulgaria for the first time 50 years later (in 1996). At that time the Bulgarian economic situation was so dire that he was persuaded, as a Bulgarian patriot, to enter politics. He formally gave up his rights to the throne and formed a political party which eventually took power, in coalition with other smaller parties, in 2001.

Simeon and his government engineered Bulgaria's entry into *NATO* and laid the groundwork for it to become a member of the *EU*, but he lost power in 2006. He is a charming man, now 84 years old, and a great diplomatic asset to Bulgaria. He is always addressed as '*Your Majesty*'. Whenever there is a royal wedding, christening or funeral

among the crowned heads of Europe, **Simeon** is there representing Bulgaria. As a close relative of **Queen Elizabeth II** (through Queen Victoria's consort, Albert, who was also a Saxe-Coburg Gotha), he had the honour of sitting next to her for the official photographs of the Queen's diamond jubilee, much to the delight of the Bulgarians.



Elizabeth II & Simeon II

We go to know *His Majesty King Simeon II* fairly well and were invited to lunch at his hunting lodge, which had been given back to him together with some other royal properties when he returned to the country. His lodge is in the mountains near the resort of Borovetz about an hour's drive from Sofia

We eventually took courage to return the hospitality and held a dinner for him a couple of months later. The signal to do so was a large bag of potatoes delivered to my office residence with a card stating simply, \ "Simeon". During the lunch at his lodge he had told me all about his potato farm and indeed potatoes from the farm were served at the lunch. He was always easily accessible on his cell phone and attended one of my farewell parties.

One cannot divorce Bulgaria from its region – the Balkans and the south-eastern border of the European Union. This regional approach was emphasized by the former *Polish ambassador* to Bulgaria, my good friend **Lezek Hensel**, in 2014 in his farewell address on leaving the country. He commented as follows on the ongoing crisis in Crimea/Ukraine, "*Eastern Europe feels most threatened by the conflict that has been unfolding in the eastern part of Ukraine. All countries participating in NATO and its collective defence mechanisms believe it should help stabilize the region*". NATO members in eastern Europe and the Balkans include Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania (curiously), Greece, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary.

I became friendly with the charming Russian ambassador to Bulgaria, **Yuri Issakov**, partly due to the BRICS connection. He is a big bear of a man and, at every cocktail reception (and there were several every week) he would gather around him all the ambassadors of countries that were formerly members of the Soviet Union ... Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, even Georgia, none of which, needless to say, were members of the EU

or NATO. When I remarked on this, he said that he had to make sure that "*the brothers*" stuck together. They all deferred to **Yuri** in the sense that they would never have refused to join him. I suppose he was merely carrying out **Putin's** policies.

Bulgaria has a love/hate relationship with Russia. On the one hand, they are grateful that Russia under **Czar Alexander II**, also known as the '*Czar liberator*' (and there are statues of him all over Bulgaria, including one in Parliament Square) liberated them from 500 years of Turkish rule in 1878. On the other hand, there is deep resentment in most of the population about the nearly 50 years of communist/Soviet domination after World War II which left a poor and deeply wounded country.



Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin

The United States has been most determined to act as a counterweight to Russian influence in Bulgaria and the US government helped to found and sponsor many of the liberal institutions in the country from 1990/91 onwards, like the American University, the School of Politics, and so on.

In Sofia one gets a very real sense that the cold war is alive and well. Our embassy had a staff of twelve (four South Africans and eight Bulgarians), which was about average for the 70 embassies, with one or two EU embassies having around 20 staff.

Both the Russian and US embassies are huge; the Russians have just under 200 staff while the Americans had 250 staff.

In conclusion, what were the highlights of my four-year term in Bulgaria? These days, an important role of an ambassador is to promote trade and investment, and we had a couple of successes. Because most Bulgarians are highly educated (they are good at maths and often win mathematics olympiads) and poorly paid, and Bulgaria has a flat 10% tax rate, it is attractive for outsourced manufacturing. During my term **Mondi** bought a big paper mill near Plovdiv – the second largest city – and another company started a plant which makes leather seats for BMWs. As a result, we

received awards and accolades from the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, and I suspect it was they who arranged for me to receive an honorary doctorate from Bulgaria's biggest business school.

South Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2010, during my term of office, which attracted a lot of attention as Bulgarians are soccer mad. Their soccer hero, a friend of the then *Prime Minister*, who captained Bulgaria in 1994 when they came fourth in the World Cup, was coaching *Mamelodi Sundowns* at the time. I was invited everywhere to hand out prizes, nominate winners, etc. The host of the sports channel on national TV wore our signature scarf and had our mascot in his studio for the duration.

In 2011 our *Foreign Affairs Minister* accepted an invitation to visit Bulgaria. She was flying from Norway and notoriously refused to let her handbag go through the scanner at Oslo airport (you may remember the incident), so she flew to Sofia in a private jet. As a result, I had to arrange a VIP arrival complete with red carpet and other African ambassadors in attendance, directly into the VIP lounge. She missed her afternoon speaking engagement, which was handled by her *Chief of Staff* who had come on the scheduled flight. She made it to the dinner that evening, at my residence, all dolled-up in scarlet satin and *charmeuse* and knocked the socks off the dozen or so guests until nearly midnight! The next day we had meetings with Bulgaria's *Foreign Minister*. Basically, I had achieved my goal!! If your Foreign Minister pays you a visit, you have made it. After that you can sit back and relax.

In 2012 we celebrated the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Bulgaria with all sorts of exhibitions and events around Sofia. I located some Zulu dancers who flew in from KwaZulu-Natal and were put up at one of the music conservatories. They performed at many of the events to great acclaim. Previously I had even arranged for **Pretty Yende** to perform in Sofia, which was also much appreciated.

All in all, I had a fascinating four years in a lovely country in a pivotal region.



Bulgarian wines

Members' News



Owl Robin MacKellar (& friend) noted on a visit to Spier wine estate

.oOo.

Owl Club meetings: Perch bookings:

While it is probable that Owls who read this far in the Notice are not themselves culpable, the *Secretary Bird* implores Owls wishing to reserve a perch for dinner (or a

post prandial perch for the meeting) to do so in good time. It was a measure of good luck and the willingness of the *Secretary Bird* to make last minute adjustments that allowed him to find perches for Owls who gave late notice of their intention to dine at noon, at 2.30pm, and one at 4.00pm (!) on the day of the meeting. **Perch bookings by 6.00pm on the Saturday preceding the meeting ... PLEASE.**

.oOo.

Special meals:

Several Owls (and some guests) have special needs (e.g., vegan, vegetarian, lactose and/or gluten-intolerance). These will be catered for if the Owl who requires a special meal gives due notice to the *Secretary Bird*; due notice to be received by no later than the Sunday preceding the meeting.

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Three Owl inductions and a new Owl: Owls David Bridgman (Science), Sean King (Music) and Bjorn Salsone (Literature),

were inducted at the April meeting.

A burglary – on the 3rd Tuesday afternoon ... at the home of another new Owl prevented her, and another new Owl, and their sponsor from being present and these inductions will take place in the near future.

Also, the Committee is delighted to announce the election of **Norton Tennille** as an Owl. **Owl Norton** practised environmental law for many years in Washington D.C. before moving to Cape Town in 1994. He founded and since then has volunteered for the non profit *South Africa Education and Environment Project (SAEP)*. *SAEP* provides opportunities for education and personal development for township learners and students (primarily from Philippi) from early childhood through tertiary study. His lifelong passions are languages and literature, especially fiction and poetry, beginning with the ancient Greeks and Romans.

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Seen & noted @ the April meeting



Owl Chris Rodseth



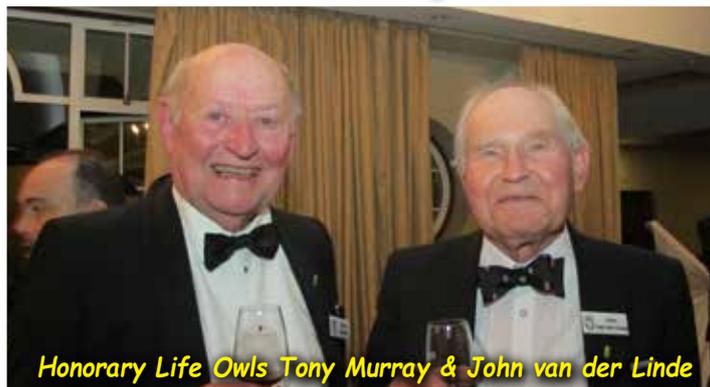
Owl Mike Bruton



The induction of 3 new Owls (l/r): David Bridgman, Bjorn Salsone & Sean King (with sponsors behind)



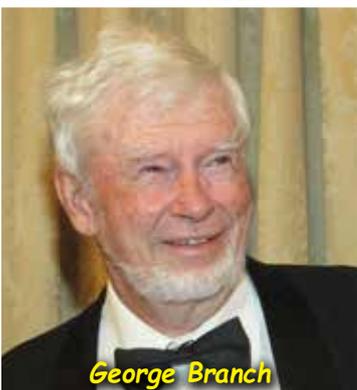
Mariette Bernstein



Honorary Life Owls Tony Murray & John van der Linde



Owl David Muller



George Branch



Owl Sheila Camerer



The Parliament in session