Lady McMillan, the Library

The past, present and future of Nairobi's McMillan Memorial Library

by Wanjiru Koinange / 11th September 2015

Once upon a time, Sir William Northrup McMillan journeyed through Africa and settled in Kenya with his wife, Lady Lucie McMillan, their housekeeper, and dog. He never really left. Instead, he spent his days hunting game and hosting dignitaries such as Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt who travelled to Kenya on hunting expeditions. Rumour has it that Roosevelt and his son Kermit had a penchant for Nairobi's famous nightlife. In one story, the pair were driving to McMillan's Chiromo home, after a night of whisky and merriment at the Norfolk Hotel, when something caught their eye. The Ismaili mosque on what was then known as Government Road (now Moi Avenue) had two exquisite stone lions crouching on pedestals at the entrance to the mosque. They pulled over and, in an impulse fuelled by dark liquor and adrenaline, they stole the lions as a gift for their gracious host.

It’s not entirely clear what then happened to the lions. The most consistent story is that the statues were eventually moved to McMillan’s farm in Donyo Sabuk where he spent most of his time, so as to avoid a diplomatic nightmare. Over time, McMillan is said to have developed a mystic obsession with the statues. Lady McMillan, on the other hand, couldn’t stand them. When McMillan was out of the town, she secretly arranged for the lions to be buried on their expansive farm near Thika town.

McMillan was gutted by the disappearance of his beloved lions. He searched everywhere for his precious loot with no luck. By the time they were dug up almost three decades later, McMillan had passed away while on a trip to France and his remains brought back to Donyo Sabuk, where he had asked to be buried. By this time, no one would make the connection between McMillan, the lions and the Roosevelts.

After Sir William’s death, Lady McMillan submitted a proposal to the City Council of Nairobi to have a library built in memory of her late husband. After three and a half years of negotiation, the McMillan Memorial library opened its doors in 1931, to Europeans only. The library was located on Banda Street, less than a kilometre away from the Ismaili Mosque (now called Khoja Mosque) and right beside another mosque. The library’s most striking feature is a pair of exquisite stone lions crouched on pedestals at the entrance.

The library was managed by the McMillan Trust with the support of the Carnegie Corporation and became a popular feature of the growing city. It was the best in the region. It housed books that were published as far back as the 1800s, including Roosevelt’s titles. Its facilities were unparalleled. But things began to change when Lady McMillan died. Whispers of an independent Kenya made investors nervous and the library’s funds began to dwindle. The board of trustees decided that the library needed to be run by an institution that had the capacity to manage it. They approached Nairobi City Council to take on the task and the NCC agreed on the condition that library membership be made available to all Nairobi residents regardless of race. On New Years Day 1962, Nairobi City Council became fiscally responsible for the McMillan Memorial library.

Mrs. Violet Wanyama can still recall the white woman who served as the Chief Librarian when she first visited the library now affectionately known as McMillan. Violet's father, a public servant, would often drop her off at McMillan so she could spend her school holidays lost in Enid Blyton's fiction. Raphael Opondo, who is now in his late 80s and living in Kisumu, took over as Chief Librarian a few months after the management of the library changed. He is in fact the only man in McMillan's history to have ever served as Chief Librarian. Anne Esilaba, succeeded Opondo, followed by Lorna Maruti.

In 1978, Violet had just graduated from secondary school and was looking for work. She was already a regular at McMillan. She knew the place well, and between books, spent time chatting with the staff at the library. When she stumbled upon a notice in the newspaper advertising a position at the library, it was only natural that she apply. She got the job and started as a library assistant. Eventually, after training for the job, she became Chief Librarian. She has held that position for over thirty-five years.

Everyone you ask about Violet has wonderful things to say about her. They refer to her as *Mama McMillan*. She doesn't seem surprised at all when I mention her glowing reputation.

'It's just because I talk so much,' she says. 'People usually pop into my office for a few minutes and end up spending hours with me.'

This is true. Violet and I chat for hours on end about the McMillan Library. She holds details of the library's history and speaks fondly about the early days. The floors were so clean and polished that children would take of their shoes and slide in between shelves, searching for the books they needed. People were happy to sit on the floor or on the steps when all the desks were filled. During school holidays, there would be queues of people waiting to be let in to the library, all the way down the street to the mosque. She remembers one particular teenage boy who would spend hours tucked away in the Agriculture section.

'He looked so misplaced sitting here reading books about farming when all his peers were busy in the fiction sections,' Violet laughs. 'He's a grown man now and has done well for himself. He is exporting horticultural produce to Europe! Imagine that!'

John Wasike, who has worked at McMillan for thirty-six years, also remembers a time when the library received up to five hundred visitors a day.

‘We would loan out about fifty books a day in the 1980s; these days we don’t even reach five.’

It is not difficult to imagine the space that Violet and Wasike describe. Everything about the building speaks to the fact that it that was brought into existence with serious intent. It stands silent and solid amidst the bedlam of one of Africa’s busiest cities.

As a lover of libraries, I intend to build as many as I can over the course of my life. So, over the past few months, I have visited several libraries in a bid to pin down the exact moment in time when these precious spaces stopped being a priority for my country.

On one occasion I spend a long time on the McMillan steps as I wait to meet with Violet’s deputy, Jacob Ananda. He’s running late and I arrived early but I am grateful for the windfall of time to take in the city from this vantage point. Behind me, to the left of the library doors, city council parking officials have set up a temporary workstation. This is where parking attendants come to hand in the money they have collected from motorists brave enough drive in to town. The attendants come and go regularly, dressed in their bright yellow coats, swapping cash and used ticket books for a pat on the back and a new book. In a corner are about a dozen yellow tyre clamps. Every so often an excited attendant will dash up to collect a clamp. When this happens, everyone around me stops what he or she is doing to see which unfortunate person is getting their car punished for parking illegally. Moments later a young girl comes up the stairs hawking ripe yellow bananas and there’s more commotion as the council workers choose the largest ones. She waits a few minutes, then gathers the banana peels and tosses them in to a large yellow trashcan on the way out of the library gates.

‘This has got to be the worst possible location for a library,’ I think to myself. Then I realise that in 1929, it was a prime spot: close enough to the University, City Hall and the law courts. The thing is, Nairobi has changed. The city has adjusted itself in the dynamic way

that urban centres all do. Unfortunately, the city moved on and forgot to take McMillan with it.

‘Nothing has changed. The library is just the same,’ Joseph Ayalo says when I ask him what the library was like fifteen years ago when he started working there. The staff is the same. There has only been one additional hire (in June this year) since Joseph started in 1999 The library still has the same single-phase electrical wiring, which means that there isn’t enough power to provide reading light to the users. They now have to rely on natural light. As he explains this to me, Joseph is using the light from his cell-phone to show me the impressive collection of newspapers that are housed in the library basement.

The main reading space and an old but notable collection of dusty reference books are on the ground floor. Upstairs, in the most magnificent room I have ever seen, is McMillan Memorial’s pride and joy. This Africana collection, according to Violet, is the best in sub-saharan Africa (as is their newspaper collection).

Despite it’s leaking ceilings, peeling walls and inadequate furniture, McMillan Memorial remains the richest library south of the Sahara. Violet, Jacob, Wasike and Joseph all unanimously agree that the reason the library is in its current state is because past governments did not value reading.

‘We are not a reading nation,’ Jacob says, repeating the phrase that I have heard often and struggled to accept. Did we really go from queuing down the street to enter McMillan, to being described as a nation that doesn’t read? And if we are such non-readers, who did prolific writers such as Grace Ogot and Ngugi wa Thiongo write for? I remember the library of the government primary school in which my fellow students and I were expected to spend an hour everyday. The library was the only building that was open after school and on the weekend. Everyday for eight years, we were taught that reading was a basic need.

I went back to my primary school a year ago and asked to see the library. My beloved library was now a dilapidated storeroom for old, poorly catalogued books. The only attempt at updating the space was the addition of a plywood partition that allowed half

the space to be allocated to living quarters for the school matron. When free primary school education was implemented in 2002, building more classrooms naturally became more important that maintaining libraries. But one wonders if libraries will ever become a priority again for a country still struggling to pay its teachers and seeming more eager to secure its position as ‘Africa’s Silicon Savannah’ by providing free laptops to Standard One pupils.

Old image of the McMillan, courtesy Mpasho

Chan Bahal is the owner of Bookstop, one of the oldest bookshops in Nairobi. He often has groups of children from private schools coming into his store and filling baskets with books to donate to government schools.

He disagrees that we don’t read. He hasn’t had a day off in twenty-six years because he’s constantly trying to meet the demands of his customers.

‘Those who don’t read are the ones who claim that Kenya isn’t a reading nation,’ he says as he offers me a stool behind the counter so that we can chat as he works. Business has only got better over the years, especially with the revival of African writing. This is Bookstop’s most popular section. Chan reminds me that Kenyans have always found a way to thrive in spite of governments. Yes, the government did stop pumping money into libraries along the way because there was no tangible return on its investment, but this doesn’t mean that Kenyans stopped reading.

There are people who refuse to accept a society that doesn’t value books. Violet and her team at McMillan are among them, as are the second-hand book vendors you will find on each and every street in the central business district. So too are those unlicensed vendors who set up at bus stations peddling books to Nairobians for their matatu ride home.

Then there are folks like Raphael Kariuki and Sharon Omangi who set up the World’s Loudest Library (WLL), a book-sharing event. WLL encourages people to come out once a

month to a book party. The only requirement is that you bring a book to the party and leave with a different one. Once you are finished reading the book, you are required to leave the book somewhere in public for another person to pick up. At any given time there are hundreds of books with WLL stickers on them sitting out in Nairobi, waiting for readers.

‘We still have people coming to McMillan even though we haven’t had new books to offer them in years,’ Violet says. ‘People still pay their annual subscription even if the fee went up last year from Ksh100 to Ksh 1000. The numbers are not as impressive as they should be, but that is to be expected. As long as we keep McMillan open, people will keep coming.’

Keeping McMillan Memorial open has been Violet’s ambitious priority for the last 35 years. It has been a challenge because McMillan doesn’t receive as much funding as the network of libraries that are managed by the Kenya National Library Services. They are barely consulted on how much they need, and for what, so she and Jacob continuously lobby the private sector to donate books or funds to maintain the space. For Jacob, the highlight of his twenty-seven years at McMillan was finally being able to give the library a minor facelift two years ago and to launch a programme that allows children to use the library for free, if they can demonstrate financial need.

‘The county government is working,’ Jacob says when I ask him where the library’s future lies. He shares the widespread optimism about Kenya’s devolved government and its ability to revitalise institutions that have fallen through the cracks of previous constitutions.

Violet Wanyama has spent her life at the McMillan Memorial Library. At the end of this year, she will be going on leave pending retirement. She is also hopeful that change is coming to McMillan; she just wished it had happened during her tenure. Jacob will take over from her. He began working at the library as a cleaner and has served in several posts since, leading up to this responsibility.

I ask Violet what her plans are post-retirement, expecting to hear that she is looking forward to spending some time with her son in Japan or that she is keen to test out her green thumb.

‘I can never leave McMillan,’ she says as we conclude a conversation that has gone on for hours. ‘Whatever I do, I will always remember McMillan.’

The staff of the McMillan

All photos, unless otherwise noted, by Paul Munene.

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Wanjiru Koinange is a Kenyan writer. She recently completed a Masters in Creative Writing the outcome of which was her debut novel that is based on the events around Kenya’s post election violence in 2007. She currently lives in Nairobi where she is working to re-install libraries into primary schools and public spaces.

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