The Karoo, land of wide open spaces, also shelters a literary gem: The mid-nineteenth century Boekehuis in Calvinia houses a wonderful library of books about and from the Karoo, and also serves as an inspiring refuge for writers and researchers.

By Judy Bryant

The majestic Hantam mountain range midway between Cape Town and Upington borders on no fewer than six climatic regions. There is Ceres-Karoo semi-desert to the south, Bokkeveld with fynbos and proteas to the west, Namaqua-land with its spring flowers and succulents to the north-west, Bushmanland to the north-east, the Great Karoo to the east, and the Roggeveld to the south-east.

“Hantam” is the indigenous word for “the mountain where the red bulbs grow”, but such a plant has not been found there in modern times.

These diverse Karoo landscapes have inspired some of the country’s finest literature, and numerous examples of the work of Karoo-based writers are now suitably housed in Die Boekehuis (“The Book House”), a fine example of a large, spare, traditional Karoo home.

Die Boekehuis was painstakingly restored over two years by the resident medical doctor, Erwin Coetzee, and his wife Alta, who headed up a team of local builders and craftsmen. This inspiring couple, who have restored a number of Calvinia buildings – some national monuments – received the Cape Times Cente-
Die Boekehuis is a pale yellow building, with features picked out in ochre and cream. It is fronted by a stone stoep and sloping corrugated iron roof, supported by pillars decorated with wooden fretwork typical of the town’s architecture. The thickly-walled rooms are filled with heavy old furniture, including a Woods piano from London and an original Falkirk wood stove in the kitchen. Springbok skins are scattered on wide old wooden floorboards. Outside, tall Quiver Trees flank the building and succulents and spring flowers grow in profusion.

Die Boekehuis was officially opened in August 1993 by the late industrialist Dr Anton Rupert, brother-in-law to the prolific children’s book author Rona Rupert (1934–1995) who owned a Calvinia house restored by Dr Coetzee. Dr Rupert also donated a sum of money in his personal capacity, which has assisted the Karoo Books Trust to maintain the house and offer it free of charge to approved writers for inspiration and a quiet refuge. Dr J C Kannemeyer, for example, put the final touches to his biography of CJ Langenhoven in Die Boekehuis “where there are no telephones to bother one”. The visiting authors discuss their works with the members of a local readers’ club, and also spend time with the school children.

It is truly an inspiring place. The hall and library walls are lined with black and white photographs of literary greats such as Etienne Leroux, AAJ van Niekerk, Olive Schreiner, CJ Langenhoven, C Louis Leipoldt, and NP van Wyk Louw. The heart of the home, the huge library, boasts a formidable range of historical and contemporary works, as well as a handy shelf of dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias and other useful writers’ aids memoire.

The extensive book collection is housed in glass-fronted wooden cupboards and spans centuries as well as a wide range of topics: Kimberley-born Dan Jacobson’s The Electronic Elephant, a grimly funny account of travels in Southern Africa, is shelved between seven volumes of Gustav S Preller’s research on the Great Trek, and 16 volumes of CJ Langenhoven’s collected works.

The late Mrs Huberte Rupert, Dr Anton Rupert’s wife, donated valuable book catalogues and reference works at the official opening; many other fascinating old books came from the Calvinia library when it was rehoused. Examples include a first-edition copy of The Lowveld: Its wild

Freshly picked lemons from the Boekehuis garden brighten up a corner of the carefully restored old house

An old water tower has been converted into a giant post box for tourists viewing the flowers

Right: Quiver trees thrive in the garden of Die Boekehuis
life and its people by Lieut-Col. J Stevenson-Hamilton; Selous’s A Hunter’s Wanderings in Africa; a collection of letters from Lady Anne Barnard; and Basutoland Records 1833-1852, a riveting collection of official documents, travellers’ accounts and correspondence, including numerous letters between Sir Harry Smith and chiefs “Moshesh” and Sikonyela on their “violent dispute causing wickedly the shedding of Blood”.

The library also houses a sturdy old typewriter, a box radio, personal letters from authors and the famous white and terracotta china soup set – a tureen and a dozen soup bowls and plates – sold in 1938 to commemorate the laying of the foundation stone of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.

Inspired by these books, memorabilia and keeping in mind that Calvinia was named after the religious reformer John Calvin with his strong work ethic, one can write well into the night before slipping into an old brass bed under a framed homily reminding one that “De Heere is mijn licht en mijn heil” (the Lord is my light and my salvation). Outside, snow sprinkles the Hantam Mountains and temperatures drop to below zero.

In addition to Die Boekehuis, Calvinia has plenty of attractions to help one get over a touch of writer’s block. Visitors travel from throughout the world to view a huge range of about 4 000 floral species – not only the masses of orange, yellow, pink and white spring flowers, but also geophytes, dwarf shrubs and succulents, ranging from tiny specimens to Botterboom (Cotyledon paniculata) and Quiver Trees (Aloe dichotoma), a tree aloe. Flower fans can mail their postcards and letters from an old water tower converted into a giant post box, with post from there carrying a special flower stamp.

Other attractions include the Calvinia museum, housed in a complex of buildings with the former Jewish synagogue at the centre. National monuments include the neo-Gothic Dutch Reformed Church opened in 1900, and two other buildings restored by the Coetzees: Die Hantam Huis complex and Die Dorphuis. Hantam Huis was built in 1853 by Field-Cornet Abraham van Wyk in Cape Dutch style and is the oldest restored building in the town. Hearing of plans to demolish it and create a parking lot in its place, the Coetzees bought the dilapidated old house several years ago. Using sources like an old photograph found in Cradock, and a meticulous painting by a botanical artist, they were able to restore it to its authentic original. It now sports a front gable and a thatched roof, with a straight gable at the back. The complex includes Victorian-style accommodation, a display of period...
Karoo creatives

Some of the writers commemorated in Die Boekehuis include:

**CJ Langenhoven** (1873–1932), born at Hoeko near Ladismith, known for his prose and for penning the former national anthem, *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*.

**Olive Schreiner** (1855–1920), who grew up in the Karoo and worked as a governess on several isolated Karoo farms. She wrote her best-known work, *The Story of an African Farm*, on the farm Gannahoek near Cradock. After a spell in England she returned to South Africa in 1889 and lived in Matjiesfontein and other Karoo villages.

**C Louis Leipoldt** (1880–1947), one of South Africa’s greatest poets, focused attention on the suffering of women and children during the Anglo-Boer War in his first published poetry book *Oom Gert Vertel en ander gedigte*. His ashes were scattered in the nearby Pakhuispas in the Cederberg.

**Poet NP van Wyk Louw** (1906–1979), who was born in Sutherland.

**Boerneef** (Izak Wilhelmus van der Merwe, 1897–1967) was born in the Ceres district. He lectured at the University of Cape Town in the Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands and in his final years devoted himself to poetry.

**Alet Viljoen** (1911–1985) was a farmer’s wife on the farm Jakhalskuile in the Britstown district. Her book *Gister se Môre* was published in 1974 when she was over 60 years old, based on years of research on the folklore and customs of the local Coloured people.

**Pauline Smith** (1882–1959) made her breakthrough as a writer in 1925 with a volume of short stories entitled *The Little Karoo*.

Calvina is rather like stepping into the past, where plenty of time and space let you tap into your creativity and replenish your reserves. Hantam Karoo-born writer Elise Muller (1919–1985), who won the Hertzog Prize for her short stories, reminisced: “Although I no longer live in the Hantam, it lives in me. As I grow older, I see more clearly the influence of the early years when I lived there – and I am increasingly grateful for that mark which I carry. The isolation of that landscape – I speak about the days of corrugated tracks and poor telephone connections – and its silence has always left me with the need for solitary times of reflection.”

For contemporary writers, there can be no better place for that period of retreat and inspiration than the Boekehuis.

Above left: An old wagon, nestling in early spring flowers, brings a touch of history to a Calvinia garden

Left: The former synagogue is now home to the Calvinia Museum

Contacts: Viewing Die Boekehuis, and for Hantam Huis and other accommodation: Alta Coetzee, phone/fax 027 341 1606. Website: www.calvinia.co.za.