



NEW FRAME

Lovedale, a national treasure of a press, faces closure

Friday, 31 January 2020



By: [Bonile Bam](#)

The 200-year-old Lovedale Press is kept alive by the dedication of its owners, who work without pay. But if funding is not found, it could close, leaving South Africa the poorer.



25 October 2019: Lovedale Press in Alice in the Eastern Cape has been around for almost 200 years. (Photographs by Bonile Bam)

Lovedale Press in Alice in the Eastern Cape is in a building on a quiet street full of potholes. Outside a plaque on an old wall is inscribed with the following: “The earliest record of anything written by any Bantu-speaking African in his own language in South Africa was made at the small printing press at Old Lovedale.” AC Jordan, a prominent writer of isiXhosa texts published by Lovedale and one of Fort Hare’s most eminent literary alumni, apparently wrote these words.



25 October 2019: The main entrance to the Lovedale Press building has a plaque with words by AC Jordan, whose work in isiXhosa was published by the press.

Inside, there is a broken wooden counter, a crumbling chair and a bookshelf filled with plastic bags with what looks like food inside them. No one is sitting at the reception. I shout for attention. No response. I repeat, louder this time.

Suddenly, from behind a dark window, someone comes out. A tired old man greets me with a smile and invites me to follow him for a tour of what was once an important press.



25 October 2019: An empty office used at Lovedale Press in Alice.

A brief history

Lovedale Press is almost 200, having started in 1823, and has had an erratic history. Around 1834, the press was abolished. It started up again but was gutted by fire once more during the War of The Axe in 1846 and 1847. At one point, the original building caught fire and a section with a number of books, manuscripts and other valuable records could not be saved. It was torn down again in the late 1940s, from which it never fully recovered.

The press was originally founded at Tyume valley in Alice. The beginning of written and published isiXhosa dates back to the early 1820s, when two former members of the Glasgow Mission Society, John Ross and John Bennie, began the work of recording isiXhosa in the area. The press was part of Lovedale College, and it primarily concentrated on empowering young black people with skills such as book binding and printing. The press promoted African literature not only in South Africa but also elsewhere on the continent.



25 October 2019: Some of the machines at Lovedale Press are over one hundred years old.

In 1936, an isiXhosa-language newspaper, *Izimvo zabantsundu* (Views of the black people), was published by Lovedale. The press also published prominent works by great isiXhosa novelists, poets and historians such as *Zemk' linkomo Magwalandini* by WB Rubusana, *Inggumbo Yeminyanya* by AC Jordan and *Intlalo kaXhosa / South Eastern Bantu* by Tiyo Soga.

Professor Wandile Kuse, 86, notes: "One of [Lovedale Press's] major projects ... was the translation of the isiXhosa Bible, hymn books, dictionaries, grammars and Christian literature." But even after the arrival of freedom in 1994, the press continued to suffer.

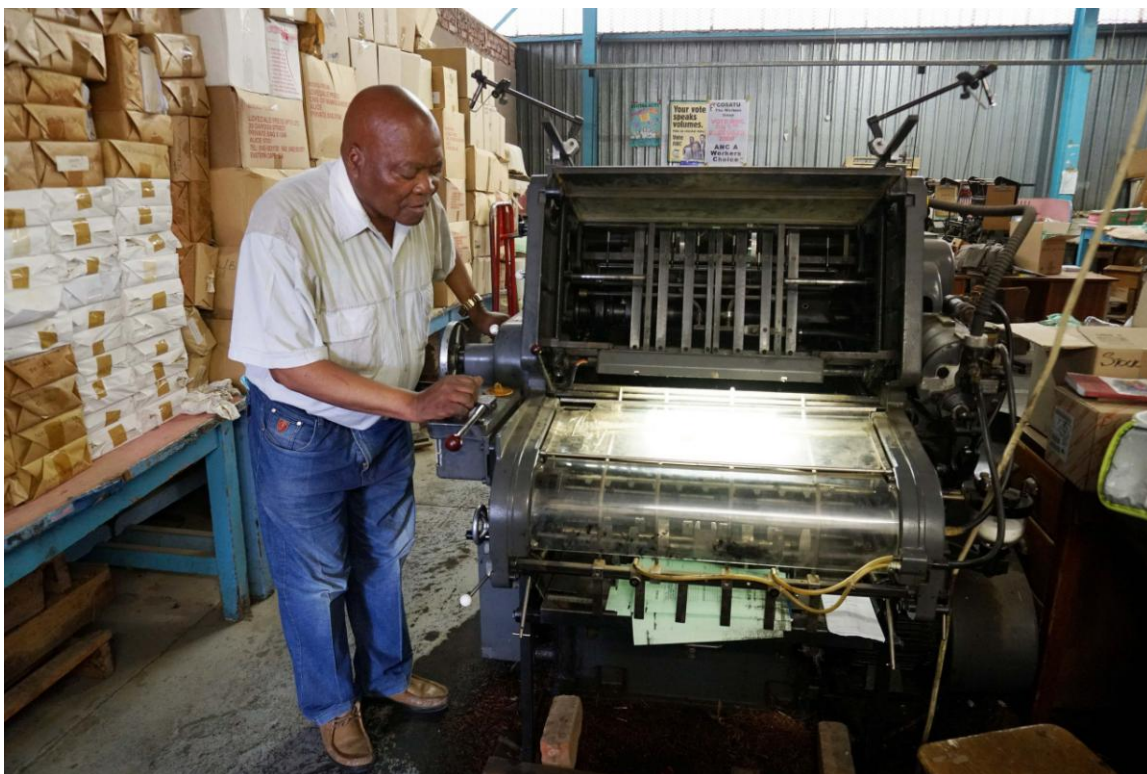


31 October 2019: Professor Wandile Kuse credits the press with publishing Christian texts in isiXhosa, as well as dictionaries and books of grammar.

Lovedale now

Inside the building everything is dusty and the lights don't work. There are paper bags containing books, functioning printing and folding presses that are over a hundred years old, containers full of ink, a lot of paper scattered on tables, stacks of Bibles, letters, broken pieces of equipment and more. All this is of historical significance. If it is not preserved, it can all abruptly vanish.

Only three people work at the press. Each is committed to keeping the legacy of the institution alive. The trio understands what the press could mean for future generations and feel they need to work to save it. As a non-profit organisation, Lovedale Press is in dire need of funds. They are unable to pay rent and owe their landlord huge amounts.



25 October 2019: Bishop Nqumevu, 76, operates a Heidelberg Sord Offset printing machine used at Lovedale Press.

Eighteen former employees took it upon themselves to buy and save Lovedale Press when its owners auctioned it off in 2001. They used their pensions. But their investment did not bear any fruit. Instead, the press continued to struggle. When they bought the company, they hoped the government, the corporate sector and the public would support their efforts to keep the heritage of the region alive.

But for years, Lovedale's dedicated employees have had to work without pay, including the remaining trio, the last of the 18 whose money bought the press. Seven have died and eight are no longer active in matters of business.



25 October 2019: Books in brown paper at the Lovedale Press in Alice.

Cebo Ntaka, 49, is the youngest of the three. He hails from Ngcobo, hundreds of kilometres from Alice. With only a matric certificate, he could not find work anywhere else. Over the years, he has worked hard to become one of the go-to people when it comes to operating the gigantic lithography machines. But life for him and his colleagues is often a struggle.

Bulelwa Mbatyothi, 59, from Ntselamanzi, the only woman in the company, joined the press 19 years ago. She says she is not happy to still be working for no pay.



25 October 2019: *Ityala Lamawele*, an isiXhosa booklet produced at Lovedale Press.

Bishop Nqumevu, 76, comes from Gaga village. He has been with Lovedale for over 47 years printing historic books. “We are here ... to preserve the heritage of Lovedale,” he says. He adds that the Department of Arts and Culture is aware of their problems, as is the National Heritage Council, but neither have helped.

Books are still being created at Lovedale Press, though, at a slow pace. As it is not going to migrate from traditional to digital formats, the press is unlikely to get much day-to-day work. Nevertheless, this national treasure deserves to be protected – either as a business or a heritage site.



25 October 2019: *Iincwadi Zesixhosa Zakwasomgxada*, another isiXhosa booklet produced at the heritage press.

Reference:

Bam, B. (2020). [Lovedale, a national treasure of a press, faces closure](https://www.newframe.com), from *New Frame*, 31 January 2020, online. Available at <https://www.newframe.com> . Accessed on 31 January 2020

This article was first published by [New Frame](https://www.newframe.com).