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BOOK REVIEW

THE HISTORY OF THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

An overview of 40 years. Edited by SP van Wyk, Pretoria 2002

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A very special delight of the 40th Annual Conference of the Agricultural Economics Association of SA (AEASA) in Bloemfontein was the launch of this excellent book on the history of the first 40 years of the Association. On the initiative of the immediate past-president Prof G Ortmann, the management committee of the association asked the chairman of the 1961 founding committee of AEASA, Mr SP van Wyk to act as editor of the book. Mr Van Wyk fulfilled this duty with distinction. He benefited from handpicked collaborators and received editorial assistance from Neil Whitehead, Proff Johan Kirsten and Nick Vink and secretarial assistance from Ms Jo Coertse.

The result is a delightful publication which awakens nostalgic emotions in those of us who are longstanding members of the association, and will surely serve as a source of inspiration for the younger generation to continue on the solid foundations laid by the founders and their followers. This richly illustrated book (with photos, inserts and documents) starts with an introduction to the evolution and development of agricultural economics as a discipline in South Africa. Thereafter, the motivation for the establishment of AEASA and the history of the first 10 years (1962–1972) compiled by the late Prof Dirk Smith is presented.

In chapter 3 a short history of the academic departments of Agricultural Economics at South African universities is presented. The universities involved are Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Natal, Free State, Fort Hare, North and Venda.

Chapters 4 and 5 document the presidents and vice-presidents and guest speakers, the themes and venue of AEASA conferences from 1962 to 2002.

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Since one of the objectives of the AEASA is to promote excellence with regard to research, scientific reporting and communication, the Association has introduced a number of awards to reward excellence in these different fields. These are:

1. The AEASA prize for the best article published in a professional journal or book (published in the previous calendar year). This award was introduced in 1965, and is sponsored by Standard Bank;
2. The Agrekon/SJJ de Swardt prize for the best article published in Agrekon (published in the preceding year, excluding conference issue). This award was introduced in 1987, and is sponsored by the SJJ de Swardt/Agrekon Trust;
3. The Best Master's dissertation award. This award was introduced in 1965, and is sponsored by Trust Bank, now incorporated in ABSA; and
4. The Best Contributed Paper at the AEASA conference, introduced in 1988, and sponsored by ABSA Agribusiness (previously Volkskas Bank, Agricultural Division).

Chapter 6 of the book lists the awards and recipients in chronological order.

Chapter 7 pays tribute to the wide and enthusiastic support from the many sponsors of AEASA activities. They include the Department of Agriculture, the former Control Boards, Organised Agriculture, the co-operative movement, the private business sector, and commercial banks, especially ABSA, Standard Bank and First National Bank, and the Development Bank of Southern Africa. In recent years the Land Bank has become a major sponsor. Many individual members have also made major and unselfish inputs of time, money and energy into AEASA.

Chapter 8 provides a brief summery of the inter-conference activities of the association, including:

- Regional Economics and Symposia;
- The Newsletter;
- Agricultural Economics Working groups; and
- A Home Page (www.aeasa.org.za).

Chapter 9 is devoted to the activities of the International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE), stating its origins, objectives,

achievements, the history of South African participation at IAAE conferences, and South African representation on IAAE management structures.

In Chapter 10 some key contributions by AEASA to South African Agriculture are presented. It is stated in the foreword that: *"We are proud that AEASA had the foresight to be prepared for the immense challenges of the nineties."* According to the book, two key contributions in this regard by AEASA members were:

- Enabling agricultural economists to contribute to research and development; and
- Forward planning.

In the first area Dr G Backeberg submitted an important report in which he made proposals for the better use of agricultural economists to advise the authorities on the restructuring of the Department of Agriculture into research and development centres and to create an Institute for Agricultural Economic Research and Development. Unfortunately this proposal was not accepted but the Department was subjected and exposed to what agricultural economists have to offer.

In the area of forward planning, Prof Nick Vink (himself an important contributor also in this area), in his Tomlinson Memorial Lecture in 2001 recounted the contributions of AEASA members to small farmer research, the farmer support programme of the DBSA and the land reform debate.

Chapter 11 outlines other activities of the AEASA, namely:

- The establishment of the quarterly journal, AGREKON;
- Agricultural Outlook Conference (1980 - 1997); and
- Commemorative lectures:
 - The FR Tomlinson Commemorative lecture.
 - SS Brand Memorial Address.

In Chapter 12 brief remarks by some distinguished members of AEASA on its history and future is presented. It makes fascinating reading.

Chapter 13 summarises the contributions of agricultural economists outside the academic field to the agricultural and national economy of South Africa. The areas covered here include:

- The Division of Agricultural Economics and Marketing;
- The National Marketing Council;
- Co-operative Societies in Agriculture;
- Marketing Control Boards;
- Government;
- Banks, including the DBSA; and
- The Private Sector.

In the last chapter (14) some concluding thoughts are presented by the current President of AEASA, Prof Johann Kirsten. In his view, a number of important issues and trends will probably shape the history of AEASA over the next couple of decades, namely:

1. Privatisation, globalisation and Governance;
2. Technological change;
3. Health changes; and
4. Population growth and increased urbanization.

He ends with an optimistic notion, stating *"that the work of our profession seems to be even more in demand than ever and implies a bright future for agricultural economics for the next 40 years."*

I regard this sparkling and important publication as a must on the bookshelves of all AEASA members and indeed of everyone interested in the past and the future of this important branch of our economy and its practitioners.