

The Origins of the Natal Society

CHAPTER 1

EARLY PIETERMARITZBURG

THE NATAL SOCIETY was founded on 9 May 1851. Its intention was to make the Colony of Natal better known and understood, so that suitable emigrants would be attracted. It was not its intention to form a public library of general literature; this did not occur to the founders and anyway the town already had a public library. Yet today, 120 years later, it is as a library that the Natal Society is known.

Later, in 1851, the Natal Society took over the existing public library. This had been founded six years before, so the Society's library may be said to have had a continuous history from 1845, making it the fourth oldest library in continuous existence in South Africa. The South African Public Library was founded in 1818; Swellendam Library was probably founded between 1834 and 1838; George Library started in 1840. Other libraries were started in the Cape but all seem to have failed at some stage, notably Albany Library at Grahams-town which foundered in 1863, only to start again later on.

Pietermaritzburg in 1845 was a small town of Britons and Boers trying to come to terms. The Trekkers had arrived in Natal in October 1837. The slaughter of Retief and his band followed on 6 February 1838. The Volksraad named the small laager at Bushmansrand 'Pietermaritzburg' on 23 October 1838, commemorating the two deceased leaders, Gert Maritz and Pieter Retief. The victory over the Zulus followed at the battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838, and the Republic of Natalia came into being with the arrival of the main Trekker party at Pietermaritzburg in January 1839.

Pietermaritzburg remained the headquarters of the Trekker government until Napier, following the defeat of the emigrant farmers at Congella in 1842, proclaimed the annexation of Natal by the British on 12 May 1843. However, the Raad continued in being, as the British were slow to set up a government, although they sent troops to Fort Napier in August 1843. So Pietermaritzburg remained a garrison town until the arrival of Lieutenant-Governor Martin West in December 1845. This was a time of stagnation and depression, although Henry Cloete, sent as a special commissioner, did his best to treat with the Raad, to explain the intentions of the Crown, and to clear up land claims.

With the arrival of West, Natal became in fact, as well as in name, a British colony. And now the Boers began to emigrate to the north. There were 400 Boer families in Natal when West took office, and only sixty when he died in 1849.¹ But those who did remain lived amicably enough with the administration and the few British settlers. They and their language were respected.² The



Pietermaritzburg Market Square, 1876

Trekkers were not unmindful of cultural activities. Writing to the editor of the *Zuid Afrikaan*, a Cape newspaper, on 5 January 1841, P. H. Zietsman said:³

We intend to build a large edifice for public amusements, that will serve at the same time for a commercial room, library etc.

Stagnation was not the only picture before West arrived. Writing lyrically about Pietermaritzburg in the *Graham's Town Journal* of 23 January 1845, James Michiel Howell said:

It is in contemplation to form a public library of standard works, the property of Major Smith.

(Major T. C. Smith was the British Commandant at Fort Napier garrison.) Unlike Archbell and others, Howell thought Pietermaritzburg was a splendid place. In the same article he says:

The town of Pietermaritzburg must awaken surprise in the mind of any stranger viewing it and unacquainted with the infancy of its establishment. No one, unacquainted with the fact, would believe that it had existed but seven years. They would rather date its age at least fifty years back. It has nine long streets, besides a handsome square, and back streets and lanes. It has a handsome stone-built church, public offices, prison, market place, printing office, horse races, subscription balls and a theatre. And there is far greater sociality among the English and the Dutch inhabitants than I could have imagined. In conclusion, no one can visit Pietermaritzburg and Natal without feeling regret at parting.

Writing in 1841, the Reverend James Archbell had been less complimentary. He says:

The country at Pietermaritzburg and about this spot is flat, and on account of the abundant supply of water from Bushman's River, well suited to agricultural purposes: but its denuded appearance not merely detracts from its beauty, but actually stamps deformity upon its appearance, whilst its entire lack of fuel, which is not to be found within fifteen or twenty miles of its site, must for ever prevent it attaining superiority as a place of residence or becoming of commercial importance. The town consists of about eighty houses, none of which, with the exception of four or five, are of permanent character.⁴

But as Cloete pointed out in 1843, its bareness added to its security against any sudden attack from the Zulus, and the copious stream of water from the Umsindusi River made every street plentifully supplied with water during every part of the day.⁵

Charles Barter writing in 1850-1851 was also unflattering but he arrived at different conclusions from Archbell:

Our first view of Pietermaritzburg scarcely tended to raise our spirits, or appeared to justify the enthusiasm with which it was regarded by our driver, whose father, Maritz, had been one of its founders. It is situated on a *bult*, or hump of land, rising out of a natural basin, and surrounded by hills, which, to the west and north-west, stand in high ridges, and whose bare, black sides, unrelieved to our eyes by a single tree, formed a dreary boundary to the scene.

The 'Little Bushman's River', a third-rate stream, almost encircles the town, and is spanned at the entrance on the D'Urban road by a wooden bridge. Crossing this, and passing alongside the turf wall that fences the thinly-tenanted cemetery, in which an obelisk now marks the grave of the Lieutenant-Governor, Martin West, we found ourselves at the outskirts of the town . . . After dinner, we strolled about the town, which, on closer inspection, revealed an interior far different from that which its distant view had led us to anticipate . . . The abundance of water, which, flowing on either side of the streets, not only supplies the ordinary wants of the inhabitants, but enables them to irrigate their gardens with the fertilizing stream, — the large market square which the hopeful eye might easily picture thronged with a busy and industrious population, and teeming with the produce of well-cultivated farms. The happy slope of the ground, by which drainage is facilitated and health secured — the commanding position of the camp which overlooks the whole extent of the plain, form a combination of advantages not always to be found in large and populous cities, and we could not but confess that should the colony increase in prosperity and importance even so as to equal the expectations of its most ardent admirers, Pieter Maritzburg was in no respect unworthy to be its capital. ⁶

It is interesting to note that these three people who expressed their views on early Pietermaritzburg — Howell, Archbell and Barter — all returned to make their homes there. Both Howell and Archbell were to play vital parts in founding the Natal Society, while Barter became a member and served on the Council from 1853-1854.

Barter goes on to say that efforts of taste and refinement were not wanting in Pietermaritzburg. He noted the green hedges of quince or pomegranate enclosing some of the gardens and the luxuriant creepers which relieved the white walls. He found that roses abounded. He admired the weeping-willows planted along the water courses and the seringa and lilac trees in the streets. He mentions that blue-gum trees were beginning to grow already; it was lack of trees that had worried Archbell in 1841. Barter liked the air of tranquil repose over the town which he attributed to Dutch influence and he hoped that the brisker influence of English trade would be long subdued. He complains, however, about the state of the roads in wet weather, finding them as impassable as the country roads. Bishop Colenso, too, spoke strongly about the streets in summertime being 'thick with cloggy mud' into which one sank ankle deep. ⁷ In the winter, during the dry season, the dust was a problem complained about by numerous writers as being particularly disagreeable.

Colenso heard 'wolves' thirteen miles from the town and John Bird tells of a lion which came in broad daylight to the town property of Walter Harding. It seems that the lion had a leisurely look round and then casually left. Mr. Bird and others followed the tracks that day to Table Mountain before having to give up the hunt when night fell. ⁸ There were countless antelopes in the district and shooting and riding were the major pleasures of the townspeople. Mail days were red-letter days; business stopped and meetings were adjourned. There were no telegrams and two months could elapse without any mail.

Bird describes the Boers as poor but neat and very hospitable. They did not like the government but were friendly enough to individuals. They had been granted farms of 8,000 acres per man whereas British immigrants had only a

very inadequate twenty acres each (sufficient in Britain but useless in Natal). The British were a very mixed lot — civil servants, traders, farmers, lawyers, merchants, hunters, labourers — some came from good families but many of the 2,000 settlers who flooded in were probably illiterate. Yet one cannot help feeling that many of those earlier Natalians were keener for culture and uplift than the present day population. Lectures on difficult subjects only had to be advertised by the Natal Society to bring a good crowd, to indifferent accommodation, too. One must of course bear in mind the limited facilities for the use of leisure, which probably made any gathering an 'outing'.

Finally a word about the Africans, or Kafirs as they were called in those days. For many generations before Shaka's time, the tribes had kept separate but had occupied Natal. All that changed with Shaka, who killed thousands of tribesmen and left Natal deserted. After Dingane was defeated by the Dutch, the Kafirs began to drift back in great numbers but in these early days most kept to the broken tracts, fastnesses in deserted areas. A few came into Pietermaritzburg as servants and labourers to the whites. Theo. Shepstone was the Diplomatic Agent, responsible for the control and welfare of the natives.

U. E. M. JUDD, *Natal Society Library*.

Notes

1. Brookes E. H., and Webb, C. de B. *A History of Natal*, p. 61.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
3. Bird, J. *The Annals of Natal*, Vol. 1, p. 623.
4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 656.
5. MacKeurtan, G. *The Cradle days of Natal*, p. 261.
6. Barter, C. *The Dorp and the veld, or six months in Natal*, pp. 21-23.
7. Colenso, *Bishop. Ten weeks in Natal*, p. 75.
8. Bird, John. *Natal, 1846-1851*.