

# *The Origins of the Natal Society*

## CHAPTER 2

1845 - 1846

WE TURN now to the story of the public library which preceded the foundation of the Natal Society. No records of the Committee have been traced, so the account of its meetings is taken entirely from current newspapers. The library was initially called the Reading Room, but the name was to change over the six years. The first meeting took place on 1 April 1845. This date precedes the arrival of Lieutenant-Governor West (with the British administration) by more than six months, and fell during that period of stagnation already referred to. On 28 March 1845 the following notice appeared in *De Natalier*:

Reading Room. By sanction of the Landdrost, a public meeting will take place at the public office on Tuesday morning next at 10 o'clock, for the purpose of ascertaining if funds can be procured by subscription towards the establishment of a Reading Room in the town. The officers of the garrison and the Dutch and English civilians are kindly requested to attend to promote this desirable object.

There were three landdrosts appointed by the Volksraad—one in Pietermaritzburg, one in Port Natal, and one in the Weenen area. Their job was the local administration of justice, and a hard task it proved to be. The landdrost of Pietermaritzburg remained in office until the British administration arrived. In the above notice, the Dutch were mentioned before the English as they were still far more numerous. The flood of British emigrants, which reached a peak at the end of the decade, had not yet begun.

A week later, it was briefly reported that the meeting had taken place.<sup>1</sup> A meeting had been 'holden' to frame regulations for the establishment of a Reading Room, but it had been decided to leave this to the committee that had been elected. The following gentlemen formed the committee: J. P. Zietsman, J. M. Howell, J. P. Muller senior, P. Ferreira, H. G. Muntingh, P. H. Zietsman and A. de Waal. The committee duly carried out its task, and a notice appeared in English and Dutch calling the public to attend a second meeting in May.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the fact that a library room was hired, this is all we know about library activities in 1845.

The initiative for the founding of the Reading Room clearly rested with Dutchmen. J. P. Zietsman was the hard-working, long-suffering Landdrost of Pietermaritzburg, who had recently played a large part in persuading the Dutch to accept British rule. Zietsman Road in Pietermaritzburg is named after him.

J. M. Howell played many parts in his adventurous life, but at this stage he was a lawyer, in partnership with Johan Petrus Muller.<sup>3</sup> Muller became insolvent in 1846 which was no great disgrace and a frequent occurrence at this period. Philip Ferreira had come to Natal in 1839. A well-known auctioneer,<sup>4</sup> he had premises on the site of the present Standard Bank of South Africa in Church Street. He became town treasurer,<sup>5</sup> and a member of the first Board of municipal commissioners for Pietermaritzburg.

Paul Hermanus Zietsman was the son of the Landdrost, Johan Philip Zietsman. He had fought under Pretorius against Dingane, and played a big part in the affairs of the Volksraad. Although long a bitter enemy of the British government<sup>6</sup>, he was won round by Cloete during his difficult term as special commissioner and was much praised by him as a true friend to the welfare of Natal.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the fact that we owe the foundation of the library so largely to the Dutch, it is ironical to read a comment by Sir Peregrine Maitland, Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, who was giving his views on suggestions for securing the allegiance of the Boers to the British government. Writing in April 1845 he says:

I do not deem that the time is yet ripe for the foundation of a library for the use of the Boers in Natal at the public expense; they are not yet in a condition to profit by such an institution.<sup>8</sup>

At this stage, Natal was a mere district of the Cape, and such a pronouncement from the Cape Governor to Lord Stanley in Britain was final. However, at the date of this despatch, a library had already been formed, though not, as we have seen, 'at the public expense' and only in Pietermaritzburg. D'Urban still had no library.

So far as can be judged, this early reading room was no better and no worse than similar libraries that were springing up in the Cape and in Britain. However, it had the supreme virtue that it survived.

A very encouraging meeting was held in February 1846 at the Court house, with Henry Cloete in the chair. At this date, Lieutenant-Governor Martin West had just arrived, and Henry Cloete was installed at the Court house as Recorder to administer the law of the Cape Colony. Cloete was very sympathetic to library development and countless library meetings were to take place in the Court house which was the old Volksraad building, standing on the site of the present City Hall. The meeting was duly reported in the first issue of the *Natal Witness*.<sup>9</sup> By this time, the Rev. Daniel Lindley had become secretary and treasurer. He was none other than the famous American missionary who had become predikant to the Voortrekkers in January 1841.<sup>10</sup> Lindley reported that although only half the subscribers had paid their annual contributions, the institution was still solvent.

One of the Zietsmans (probably Paul Hermanus) informed the meeting that the room rented for the library was required by the proprietor for other purposes. Several members then mentioned the cost and inconvenience of frequent removals, and it was suggested that the Committee would do well to apply to the government for a piece of ground for the purpose of erecting a public library. How frequently, over 120 years, such a suggestion was to be made! And always it was to be fruitless — the government never did provide either land or a building. But in the 1960s, the municipality began to speak about providing a mag-



Henry Cloete, Recorder of Natal



Dr. William Stanger, first Surveyor General of Natal (1845-1854). A family oil-painting which shows him as a young man brimming over with health and energy.  
(Courtesy of Mrs. D. Strutt, Curator, Local History Museum, Durban)

nificent library building on the market square if the Natal Society would hand over its building and site at 201 Longmarket Street. The meeting continued with the untiring James Howell, seconded by John D. Marquard, moving a resolution that the Committee should try to collect the unpaid subscriptions. Marquard, who gave faithful service over the years to the public library, was to become the first government schoolmaster in 1849. So important was this meeting that the Lieutenant-Governor had been expected to attend, but at this point, Walter Harding (Crown Prosecutor) referred to West's unavoidable absence (indeed, he 'had just left His Honour busily engaged') and said he was at liberty to disclose that the government was disposed to render every assistance in promoting such objects as that contemplated by the meeting. To round off a very satisfactory meeting, Cloete offered to lend the library 200 volumes from his own collection, an exceedingly generous gesture. The *Natal Witness* summed up the meeting:-

With encouragement on so liberal a scale, the Committee will, doubtless, be able to carry out plans of usefulness to an almost indefinite extent. It is scarcely necessary to remind them that their work need not be confined solely to the purchase and circulation of books. Nor should the neat and commodious edifice which is soon, we trust, to embellish this Capital of our new Colony, be designed as a mere bookcase. Provision should be made for its being used, as soon as required, as a lecture room, museum, depository for philosophical apparatus, with a laboratory. Literature, Science and the arts are the Faith, Hope and Charity of the intellectual world, and must not be separated; and where can a more fit asylum be found for them than in a public library?<sup>11</sup>

The Recorder kept his word. A few weeks later a notice appeared in the newspaper stating that a handsome addition of about 200 volumes, kindly lent by the Hon. H. Cloete, had been received, and that one of the committee would be in attendance to issue books from six till eight every evening.<sup>12</sup>

The next meeting of which we have any report was held on 28 May 1846.<sup>13</sup> Donald Moodie (Secretary to the government) was called to the chair. Among others present were Henry Cloete, Dr. William Stanger (Surveyor General in the new administration), Mr. T. Shepstone (Diplomatic agent to the natives) and the Rev. Daniel Lindley. A donation of £5 towards the funds of the library was received from the Lieutenant-Governor through Donald Moodie. John D. Marquard had apparently taken over the secretaryship from Daniel Lindley, and he read a statement about volumes in the library; there were 192 books in English, 79 in French, 4 in Latin, 144 in Dutch and 155 in German. He added that the number of subscribers exceeded fifty. It was then decided to hold a ballot for the new committee and the following were elected: the Rev. John Richards (Wesleyan missionary), Dr. Benjamin Blaine, William Hursthouse (Chief clerk at the Colonial Office), James Howell, John D. Marquard and David Dale Buchanan (fiery editor and founder of the *Natal Witness*). So Howell was the only 'survivor' on the committee, and all the Dutch names had vanished already. The committee was asked to revise the present regulations, and to submit them at a meeting of subscribers to be held fourteen days hence.

At this same meeting, talk now turned on the reading matter to be provided from funds. Writing in *De Natalier*, Arthur Walker gives a lively picture of this part of the meeting.<sup>14</sup> Like Howell, Walker was a flamboyant character. Popularly known as 'Hookey' Walker for his aquiline nose, he was a well-known

attorney, a steward of the Pietermaritzburg Turf Club and for a time editor of *De Natalier*. Walker says that the Rev. Mr. Richards felt that orders to England should be confined to periodicals, in view of the limited funds. This was apparently the approved policy both of this meeting and of later meetings over the years. Walker was critical of the two lists of periodicals submitted by the Rev. John Richards and he stressed the need for *general* literature as he feared that subscriptions would drop if general taste were not catered for. There should not be more than one specialized periodical in each field:

Divinity can have one, Law one, Physic one, Sport one, and general literature for the rest.

Judge Cloete entirely agreed about the need to purchase periodical literature rather than books:

With the scanty means at the disposal of the Committee, it is in vain to expect that any addition can be made to the standard works of the library, and the funds which are collected, should be directed to give the community the general information which is so readily furnished through the periodical literature of the day.

Cloete went on to support Walker; a broad distinction should be made by the committee between periodicals which embrace general literature, and those which relate to a particular profession, and every effort made to meet the wishes of the great mass of readers. He has a gentle dig at Walker:

But the question is very different when the scanty funds of the Committee are to supply the desires of every profession; Law, Divinity, Physic, and from what fell from Mr. Walker, who just spoke, I should say a fourth estate has sprung up in society (that of the Sporting gentlemen) who wish to have periodicals exclusively belonging to their professions. But it is clear that our funds are not sufficient for this . . . and the periodicals thus obtained would only gratify three or four readers, and afterwards be unread . . . *One* periodical for each of those professions appears to be quite sufficient in the present scanty state of our funds.

The meeting then adjourned until the Committee had had time to revise the rules.

The adjourned meeting took place promptly on 12 June 1846.<sup>15</sup> The venue was the Court house again, and Donald Moodie took the chair. Moodie was then Secretary to the Government. The Committee presented a new set of fifteen rules which were discussed and adopted after a few alterations. The society was henceforth to be called the 'Natal Reading Society', having for its object the procuring and circulation of useful periodical literature. The Society was to be composed of individuals subscribing £1 annually to its funds. Donations and loans of books were to be accepted. There would be a committee of six chosen annually by ballot, and the committee would elect from its members, a Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. Provision was made for general meetings, and the Reading Room was to be open two evenings in the week. The periodicals were to remain in the Reading Room one week after their arrival, during which time all subscribers would have access to them, and they would then be circulated. Any surplus funds were to be used for the purchase of books. Fines were allowed for.

The meeting also approved the following list of periodicals for purchase:—

*The Quarterly Review*  
*The Edinburgh Review*  
*The Westminster Review*  
*The Foreign Quarterly Review*  
*The New Quarterly Review*  
*The North British Review*  
*The British Quarterly Review*  
*Silliman's Journal*  
*Blackwood's Magazine*  
*Fraser's Magazine*  
*Dublin University Magazine*  
*Tait's Magazine*  
*Colburn's New Monthly Magazine*  
*Penny Magazine*  
*Mechanic's Magazine*

*Douglas Jerrold's Magazine*  
*United Service Magazine*  
*The Athenaeum*  
*Literary Gazette*  
*Chambers' Miscellany*  
*New Sporting Magazine*  
*Ainsworth's Magazine*  
*The Monthly Times*  
*Illustrated London News*  
*Punch*  
*The Temperance Advocate*  
*Honigbij*  
*The Spectator*  
*Commercial Advertiser*  
*Graham's Town Journal*

The *Natal Witness* went on to comment:-

In the *Natal Reading Society*, we have the first symptom of a desire among the Natal Colonists to keep pace with the civilized world in the establishment of public institutions. This desire has led in the present instance to the adoption of prompt, vigorous and successful measures for its gratification. The whole aspect of the Society's affairs is encouraging; and the prosperity of one such association will not fail to prepare the way for others of a similar character.<sup>16</sup>

The rules approved at this last meeting had mentioned that the Reading Room would be open two evenings a week. A notice duly appeared dated 18 September 1846.<sup>17</sup> This informed subscribers that the Librarian would attend on Tuesday and Saturday evenings from 7 to 9 at the Reading Room. Also the keys of the room could be obtained from Mr. Landsberg from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily (Sundays excepted). No books or papers were to be taken in the absence of the Librarian. The notice was signed by Benjamin Blaine, as Secretary.

All in all, the first two years of the library seemed to show an encouraging start, and optimism for the future ran high. Affairs, however, were to take a discouraging turn as the years went by.

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

**Notes:**

1. *De Natalier*, 4.4.1845.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.5.1845.
3. *Ibid.*, 4.7.1845.
4. Hattersley, A. F. *The British settlement of Natal*, p. 83.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Bird, J. *The Annals of Natal*, Vol. 2, p. 233.
7. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 348.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 461.
9. *Natal Witness*, 27.2.1846.
10. Brookes, E. H., and Webb, C. de B. *A History of Natal*, p. 27.
11. *Natal Witness*, 27.2.1846.
12. *Natal Witness*, 10.4.1846.
13. *Natal Witness*, 29.5.1846.
14. *De Natalier*, 2.6.1846.
15. *Natal Witness*, 19.6.1846.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *De Natalier*, 22.9.1846. *Natal Witness*, 26.9.1846.