

# *The Natal Society*

## *1851–1951*

The record of the Natal Society, this month celebrating its centenary, shows what can be accomplished by unremitting patience and sturdy enterprise. The Society began its career in the year of the Great Exhibition with singularly few advantages. Pietermaritzburg, not yet a colonial capital, since Natal was to remain for another five years a mere district of the Cape Colony, had begun to grow but at no sensational rate, and its white population only just topped the 1,000 mark. Much of it was still green; and the general aspect was that of a north-country English village, rather than a town. It had possessed a library and reading room, and even the nucleus of a museum, since 1846; but the volumes that weighted its shelves had been loaned, or, in some cases, donated, by members. In this

*The Natal Society Library, 201 Longmarket Street, 1878–1975.*



enterprise, the youthful David Dale Buchanan, protégé and partner of the great George Greig, must be credited with the initial steps. He transformed 'The Book Society of Pietermaritzburg', formed in February 1846 with a committee of four (the American missionary, Daniel Lindley, ex-landdrost Zietsman, J.D. Marquard, soon to become teacher at the government school, and J.M. Howell, whom Cloete had struck off the roll of advocates for contumacy) into a 'Public Library' (1849), serving a term as secretary and using the infant *Witness* to urge the youth of Pietermaritzburg to 'prefer attending a series of useful lectures or historical readings to monotonous solitude or the injurious sociality of the canteen'.<sup>1</sup>

In those days there could be little of the ceaseless experimenting to please the public, for subscriptions were exhausted in the hire of a room; and during the second year of the library's existence only one book was actually purchased. This was Caroline Fry's *The Listener*, two volumes of dreary essays and moralising tales extracted from her monthly periodical *Assistant of Education*. Until Edward London's arrival in 1850, there was nothing resembling a bookshop in the small town; and, had it not been for the generosity of Henry Cloete, who loaned over 100 volumes from his own library, there could not, even in so small a community, have been enough literature to go round.

Interest seems to have died away in 1850, no doubt because of the insufficiency of books to which the ordinary uncultured reader could turn for pleasure or solace. When, in May 1851, the Natal Society was launched, books were not the major concern. During the preceding two years nearly 5,000 new settlers had reached Natal from the United Kingdom. They had been induced to emigrate by the highly coloured descriptions of the new colony written by J.C. Byrne and other promoters of oversea settlement. On their arrival, they had found only too good reason for distrusting information afforded by persons interested in the disposal of colonial land or the freighting of ships. The object which brought new settler and old colonist together, on a bitterly cold night when snow lay thick on the hills above Fort Napier was the collection and publication of 'full and accurate information as to its (Natal's) physical resources, its social condition and the practical advantages it offers to the European settler...under the auspices of an organisation which, by its freedom from political objects on the one hand and from all connection with emigration schemes and mercantile enterprise on the other, shall command and secure universal respect and confidence.'

The 'Natal and East African Society' thus auspiciously launched (9 May 1851) was intended to be a representative colonial institution, the local counterpart of such association in the United Kingdom as the Royal Colonial Institute, established in 1864 to make actual conditions in British territories oversea widely known. The Society regarded itself as a publishing agency, relying on the public lecture and the newspaper article rather than on the published volume. It concerned itself with the opening up of facilities for production and trade; and when, in 1854, reports appeared in the colonial press alleging the discovery of gold in the vicinity of Table Mountain, its Council published a warning that 'although willing to believe in the possibility of such discoveries, (they) have not yet been able to obtain any tangible evidence of the truth of these auriferous rumours.' A new set of rules adopted in 1865 reaffirmed the objects of the Society, laying stress on the 'acquisition and preservation of information of local value and interest, and the general encouragement of habits of study, investigation and research within the Colony'.

Little is known of the first librarian, George Challoner. He may perhaps be identified with a fellow-passenger of Charles Barter on the barque *Globe*. He was soon replaced by John Meek, who had been born within a year of the Declaration of American Independence. A Londoner, Meek listened spellbound to debates in the Commons, recalling the eloquence of Charles James Fox and the younger Pitt. He died in Pietermaritzburg at the age of 91.

Alexander Beale was appointed to succeed Meek in August 1865, and his reign was to last for a period of nearly 36 years. He was a short, sturdily built man with a wooden leg and a most genial manner. Much as he loved the books over which he presided, he was not a learned man, and he once defined ‘autobiography’ to a perplexed subscriber as ‘a book by an author unknown’.

The Society petitioned again and again for a grant of land on which to erect suitable premises; but, prompted by the Secretary of State, the colonial authorities invariably refused these requests. Benjamin Pine, however, agreed to a grant of £50, raised subsequently to £100, on condition that the public should be freely admitted to the rooms. Meantime its books and museum specimens were accommodated in a wing of the government schoolroom, not yet converted into a colonial legislative chamber. Premises were soon found at the lower end of erf 29 Church Street, adjoining Otto Street, and here Meek performed his not very arduous duties. In January 1861 the Society moved to ‘a new and commodious room.’ The room was over the Commercial and Agricultural Bank in Central Church Street (erf 22). The building adjoined Henry Pepworth’s ‘Manchester House’, and outside staircase giving access to the library on the first floor. A lecture room at the back was occasionally used for ‘mechanics’ classes’, the most popular subject being elementary science. By good fortune, the first superintendent of education, Dr. R.J. Mann, ‘a talkative gentleman with a slight lisp, a soft manner and an enormous range of knowledge’,<sup>2</sup> was at this time (1864–67) President. Under his superintendence, progress was made with classification of the museum specimens.

Mann realised that development of the Colony’s resources would be facilitated by collection of every sort of scientific data. The middle sixties witnessed the first serious enquiry into the possibility of opening up the coal beds of Natal. To the bewildering assortment that already festooned the walls and crowded the meager shelves of the tiny museum, Mann added mineralogical specimens. But a salaried curator was beyond the means of the Society. Occasional requests for specimens of the flora and fauna of the district reached the government. In 1855, Dr. Sutherland, himself a scientist of no mean repute, forwarded to the British Museum, as a contribution from the Natal Society, ‘some shells and preserved fish’. Eight years later, the colonial secretary, David Erskine, was at a loss to comply with an invitation from the Acclimatization Society of Melbourne to send ‘characteristic animals and game birds’. After consultation with John Bird, then presiding over the Society’s Council, he collected and dispatched ‘a stuffed bastard-eland and one large python’. The museum was never strong on the zoological side, and in 1876 Robert Russell frankly admitted that ‘a small glass case contains a very meager collection of objects, the beginnings of a museum’.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis on research was not altogether to the taste of those who regarded the institution as primarily a circulating library. There were recurrent complaints of neglect and even parsimony in the purchase of books and periodicals. Though formal schooling was uncertain and capricious and there was no legal compulsion to send children to

school, the standard of literacy in Natal in mid-Victorian times was probably higher than in many parts of the United Kingdom. The demand for books was growing, and popular literature was never sufficiently plentiful to satisfy subscribers. Newspapers were too dear to be bought by all readers, though the *Witness* was sometimes distributed gratuitously, whilst the *Courier*, in the early sixties, made no charge for the second (Friday) issue. Tardy and infrequent communications kept newspapers and periodicals from the Cape and oversea on the Society's tables long after their covers had become dusty and hopelessly outdated. As regards books, a report, published in July 1856, admitted that means were 'so wholly inadequate that there is no probability of any addition of standard works to those already in the library'. Straited circumstances forced the Council to continue to depend largely on donations of books. In 1861, a few months after his brief visit to Pietermaritzburg, the youthful Prince Alfred presented to the Society *The Pictorial History of England*, in six volumes. *The Principal Speeches and Addresses of H.R.H the Prince Consort*, with Queen Victoria's autograph, was a much-valued gift from his mother.

Hard times were experienced in the late sixties when, owing to the severe slump, the government grant had to be withdrawn. Since, however, access to the reading-room seemed to the Council to be 'the only regular means of recreation and instruction in the city', non-subscribers continued to be admitted gratuitously to the library, which was now situated in what Beale later described as 'a dingy little building' at the corner of Chapel and Church Streets. Illumination was by candle. Gas was never available, but improvement came with the installation of oil lamps with circular wicks and glass chimneys.

A period of prosperity set in in 1875 when the Rev. J.E. Carlyle was elected President. The Society had moved from Church Street to Timber Street (no. 18), paying three pounds a month rent for a single room. In the lean years, land and building had been offered to the Society for £300, but subscriptions were in arrear and the sum could not be raised. Now, in 1876, the Society could appeal to the public with better prospects of success. Sir Garnet Wolseley's visit had been followed by the decision to build a colonial railroad, and a brighter future for the Colony seemed assured. Like the Dutch Reformed Church in recent years, the Council made application to the Town Council for a site on the market square on which to erect a worthy building. Less successful, since it could plead no official promises dating back to the original layout of the town, the Society resolved to raise sufficient money to acquire a suitable site.<sup>4</sup> Its 'grand bazaar and colonial exhibition', with 'contributions from London and Paris, from Italy and Vienna, from India and Australia; to say nothing of Kaffir weapons and wooden utensils, livestock, vegetables and flowers'<sup>5</sup> brought in the splendid amount of 2,000 guineas. It was a social event, perhaps the most brilliant in the history of the small colonial capital. The bazaar itself was opened on May 23 by the Governor, Sir Henry Bulwer, and the celebrations closed with a promenade concert in the evening.

The Natal Society had been incorporated two years earlier; and, with the proceeds of the bazaar, it secured land on erf 20 Longmarket Street and erected a building which was opened to the public in February 1878. There were to be no further removals and when, in the 20th century, the rooms became quite inadequate to house the overflowing books, a handsome double-storeyed addition brought the front right up to the street.

Meanwhile, in 1902, the new Government Museum had acquired the Society's scientific specimens. Seldom visited and a little forlorn, the collection had been augmented

by gifts from other parts of Southern Africa. In 1884, according to Henry Bale,<sup>6</sup> it numbered over 3,000 specimens. Among the undoubted treasures transferred to the new museum was the Treasury Chest of the Batavian Government at the Cape, sent to Natal in 1846 and used by Theophilus Shepstone for the first collection of hut tax.<sup>7</sup>

Its stock of books in 1878 was, by modern standards, inconsiderable; nevertheless, it was 'by far the best public library in the Colony'.<sup>8</sup> References to the contents of the library in earlier years and to the relative popularity of books are disappointingly casual. With no surviving catalogue of the Victorian period, it is difficult to discover how much was accessible to subscribers, and consequently to know on what the thought of the reading public was based. In the days before the opening of bookshops, colonial newspaper offices might hold in stock some volumes of general interest and utility. Buchanan's *Witness Office* advertised in 1846, *Alicia and her Aunt, or Think Before You Speak*, *The Juvenile Naturalist*, and *Peter Wilkins's Travels*. In later years, Beale occasionally referred to the taste of the Society's subscribers. In the early 'nineties, the most popular authors were Marie Corelli and Mrs Henry Wood; and the books in greatest demand *Marcella*, *Silver Domino*, and *An American Girl in London*.

From its foundation, the Society sought to widen popular knowledge by means of the public lecture. During his initial year as President, Henry Cloete delivered a series of addresses 'on the emigration of the Dutch farmers from the Cape Colony', which were first published in 1852 by James Archbell from the *Natal Independent Office*, the original manuscript remaining in the Society's possession. Most of the early public lectures had reference to the local circumstances of Natal, the opening year's speakers including Dr. Charles Johnston, a former editor of the *Pictorial Times*, who was to write the first scientific treatise on the pathology of the Natal region.

In fact the Society functioned as a publishing agency, though it was never able to accumulate the capital to undertake publishing risks on its own account. It was the Society's Council that requested Sir Henry Bulwer on 8 June 1883 to 'make such arrangements as will enable Mr. Bird to enter upon the work' of compiling the annals of Natal, suggesting that he should be allowed access to the public records.

The *Annals of Natal* were mainly compiled from official sources; but Bird had access, in the rooms of the Natal Society, to rare printed and manuscript material, some of which has, alas, disappeared with the passing of the years. Enough remains to justify a description of the library as the most valuable collection of Nataliana in the Union. Of the great treasures, the W.J. Irons letterbook and the detailed narratives of early settlers assembled in 1896 by Christopher Bird were originally deposited in the strongroom of T. Carlyle Mitchell, for many years treasurer of the Society, but ultimately transferred for greater safety on loan to the Natal archives. Custody was retained of a precious annotated copy of W.M. Dick's *Prophet Ignoramus* (1876), various letters, pamphlets and schoolbooks of Bishop Colenso, printed at Ekukanyeni, an early copy of Döhne's Zulu-Kafir dictionary, Donald Moodie's published work, including rare pamphlets printed in Pietermaritzburg in the 'fifties, and files of early Natal newspapers, including the first three years of the *Natal Witness*. The more important public lectures delivered under the auspices of the Society were usually printed, one which broke new ground being an address on *The Curiosities of South African Literature* read by W.R. Morrison on 25 October 1907.

The coming of Union brought recognition of the special standing of the Society as a colonial institution and not merely a local circulating library, and it became one of the four great collections to which, under copyright law, a copy of every work published in the Union must be sent for deposit. At the same time, the Society endeavoured to maintain those cultural activities that have always been associated with its name. The period of presidential office of Ian Fraser (1937–46), the longest in the history of the Society, was noteworthy for the activity of the drama group; and, when the time came in May 1949 to celebrate the centenary of the early Natal settlers, it was appropriate that the Society's contribution should have been the revival of dramatic pieces played before colonial audiences in mid-Victorian times.

On the eve of its own centenary, the Society, financially reinforced by the generous recognition of the Natal provincial authorities, seems well situated to combine the functions of a central circulating library with continued patronage of the arts and guardianship of what has survived of the precious scraps of early printed literature, without which knowledge of the pioneering days of Natal must fast vanish into the limbo of lost memories.

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**REFERENCES**

1. *The Natal Witness*, 22 Jan. 1847.
2. "Life in Natal", *Cape Monthly Magazine*, iv. (1872).
3. *Report*, 3 Aug. 1876, on Literary Institutions receiving grants, N.P.P. vol. 115 (Natal archives).
4. A private bill was promoted in the Legislative Council to authorise the City Council to make a grant of land on the market square to the Natal Society. It was thrown out, Sept. 1876.
5. Lady Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in S. Africa* (1879), p. 225.
6. Letter to the *Natal Witness*, 27 Nov. 1884
7. *Africana Notes & News*, iii (1945-6), pp. 45-7.
8. *Report*, 3 Aug. 1876, N.P.P. vol. 115 (Natal archives).