

Book Reviews and Notices

THE PAINTINGS OF THE BAY OF NATAL: A SELECTION OF WORKS DATING FROM 1845 TO 1982

by Nigel Hughes. Foreword by Gillian Scott-Berning. Privately Published 2001. 196pp. Available from Mertrade (Pty) Limited, P.O. Box 412487, Craighall 2024. mertrade@iafrica.com. Standard cloth edition R595,00. Half leather with slip case de luxe edition R1 595,00.

This is a very appealing book that satisfies in many ways. With its format and weight, the cloth-bound review copy sits comfortably in the lap as the pages are turned (something which is not true of all books of this kind) and the typeface, set in two columns, is clear and easily read. In hue and tone, the colour plates appear to be accurate reproductions of the original works – this was certainly the case in those instances where this reviewer was able to compare prints with the original paintings.

The period spanned by the paintings – from 1845 to 1982 – is that during which the bay was changed from a shallow stretch of open water set about with sandy beaches and mangrove swamps to a fully-functioning modern harbour. Although the book is not intended as a history of the bay, in a prelude to the plates the author briefly traces the development of the harbour, using details obtained from the British Admiralty Chart 643 showing corrections made between August 1856 (when the first chart was made after white settlement) and March 1974. The seventeen charts, together with the explanatory text that accompanies them, give a concise but clear overview of the impact of development on the once pristine lagoon. The figures all show detail of sections of the chart, however, and this reviewer felt the lack of a broader view – a single map of the whole bay and its environs, or perhaps a pair of maps showing the original topography in comparison with the contemporary port. The author also rather takes it for granted that his readers will know the location of the places and features referred to in the text, and this is not necessarily true of people who are not familiar with Durban.

Hughes acknowledges that his selection of paintings is entirely personal, but then why not? Together with the frontispiece, there are 73 large plates which is a generous and representative enough offering. Just as he does not intend this to be a history of the port, so Hughes disavows any intention to write a dissertation on the artists and their works. Such major painters as Maud Sumner, Gwelo Goodman and Clément Sèneque are represented, but there is indeed minimal comment on the merit or significance of the paintings as art works. The text that accompanies each plate tends to point to features of interest in the subject matter rather than comment on artistic style or technique, and the set of notes on the artists that follows the plates provides brief biographical information rather than critical appraisals.

This is perhaps a disappointing omission. Hughes disclaims sufficient expertise to make such comment, but a short chapter on the place of the paintings in South African art history would have enriched the book. As it stands, however, it could still be a resource of considerable interest to the art historian. Many of the early paintings were done to provide, in the absence of photographs, painstakingly accurate views of the topography and vegetation. Several paintings by Cathcart William Methven, Harbour Engineer from 1888 to 1895 and a very competent painter, are faithful depictions of the changing harbour and its environs. Some works record particular events or notable scenes: Perla Siedle Gibson's watercolour of Sunderland flying boats, for example, or Nils Andersen's view of HMS *Repulse* at the Point, while the same artist's 1941 painting of troops boarding the *Ile de France* has even a propagandist thrust. One W. Langmead painted the harbour entrance for a publicity poster, and Methven in 1903 sketched a proposal for the development of the Victoria Embankment. Sénéque and others are less concerned with accurate representations and more fascinated by the painterly potential of the forms, the light and the colours of the bay and its shipping, while Maud Sumner appears to have had an hour or two of fun dabbling with her watercolours as she looked out of her Marine Hotel window.

With each picture Hughes is able to identify a notable feature, place the scene in the context of the developing harbour or changing shipping patterns, or provide a snippet of interest. Perla Siedle Gibson's 1942 painting of the hospital ship *Amra* at Maydon Wharf, for example, is accompanied by a pertinent extract from the autobiography of the 'Lady in White', a brief account of the previous and subsequent history of the ship, and even a comment on the Swedish flag glimpsed at the stern of the next ship along.

The whole book is visually pleasing and a diverting read. The provenance of each painting – date, medium, size and present location – is given; comparable views are cross-referenced; there is an index; and for those seeking further information there is a select (but quite extensive) bibliography. Old Durbanites will appreciate this book with a pleasure tinged with nostalgia, and the early paintings of the pristine landscape may well evoke a deeper sadness for what has been lost.

MORAY COMRIE

MAKE A SKYF, MAN!

by Harold Strachan, Johannesburg, Jacana, 2004. 260pp. R148,00

In reviewing Harold Strachan's first book *Way up, way out* in *Natalia* 28 (1998), I said I hoped he was working on a sequel. He was, and this is it. Though much of this book deals with events and experiences in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, it comes easily into *Natalia's* purview by virtue of the author's Pietermaritzburg roots, his second trial in that city on charges under the Explosives Act, and his long residence in Durban, a city about which he writes entertainingly and affectionately. Since the publication of *Way up, way out* Strachan has become known to an even wider public through his regular columns in *The Witness*, *Weekend Witness* and the journal *noseweek*.

Make a Skyf, Man! covers the period of Strachan's life in the nineteen-sixties when he became involved in active opposition to the South African apartheid regime; spent three years in prison for acts of sabotage; just before his release faced another similar charge on which he was acquitted; and picked up the threads of his life in Durban once more.

In the lead-up to his brief career as a saboteur, we learn something about the chain of command in the resistance organisations, and Strachan does not conceal his poor opinion of the dogmatic Marxism of the leadership that was often received with amused contempt by the front-line activists. Someone he calls Jack Hodgson, with his constant boring dialectical materialist interpretations, comes in for scathing treatment, as does Joe Slovo, whom he refers to as Yoshke.

‘...but within a year or two Yoshke has blown too, against specific Central Committee decision and directive, leaving the modest David Kitson ... to carry the ramshackle responsibilities of the Communist Party into the unpredictable chaotic unMarxist future, and get bust doing it and push twenty years while Yoshke, a right piteous victim of the system, goes off to Marxist majesty at Hampstead Heath, there to be-moan the loss of his rightful real estate at Sea Point ... and to flood the world with righteous revolutionary claptrap, finance provided by Cold War slush funds.’

By far the greater part of the book covers Strachan’s time in prison. As sentences go, three years is almost ‘short-term’, but as a political prisoner in the old South Africa he spent a long period in solitary confinement, with no privileges whatever, and on one horrendous occasion unexpectedly heard the voice of his friend and comrade Max among those singing and shouting in the death cells in the days leading up to their execution. As I read Strachan’s graphic descriptions of life as a convict in Pretoria Central, the questions uppermost in my mind were how he managed to survive mentally, and how I would have fared in that situation.

‘So, how do you describe eleven months of solitary, then? ... If I were to describe the repetitious trifling details of each day’s worth of trifling routine over such a stretch of time, it would make but boring reading, whereas if I were to sustain a lively interest in this narrative from you, dear reader, you might just get the idea that this almost-year of nothing happening was lively and interesting. ... Well it wasn’t. It was madness of the animal brain. ...’

Yet he survived, and as he looks back on the horrors, his wry humour is never far below the surface, and that probably helped him through those three years. That and his imagination. With hardly any human contact and no reading matter, one of the devices he employed to make temporary exits from hell was to work through elaborate practical projects in his mind, sometimes taking weeks or even months to do so. So, for instance, his lifelong fascination with flight leads him in imagination to acquire an old Tiger Moth, obtain all the materials and tools needed, and after painstaking inspection begin the task of repair and restoration. A little bit every day. Remember where you got to yesterday, and carry on from there. Such tough-mindedness, ingenuity and determination compel one’s admiration.

The crudities and cruelties of prison life are laid bare, and not every reader will have the stomach for them, but it is fare that South Africans need. Indeed it was partly due to Strachan’s revelations when he was released that the regime’s hideous prison practices and its total disregard for human rights were exposed to general condemnation. He provided the *Rand Daily Mail* journalist Benjamin Poground with material for a series of articles on prison conditions, and for that was convicted under the Prisons Act and served another jail sentence – but that is beyond the scope of this book.

Strachan has a good ear for the mixed English and Afrikaans speech of ordinary South Africans, and uses it freely and realistically. (A non-South African reader may possibly wish there were a glossary to help them appreciate the full flavour of some of

the unfamiliar words and phrases.) Where he wishes to conceal real names, his invention is Dickensian: there are people like Mr Justice Zelftevrede, the Special Branch officer Van de Gruweldaad, Warrant Officer Van Vuurwapen, Chief Warder Stephanus van Rijswater and the prison psychologist Lt Van den Beestekraal.

As an example of the quality of Strachan's writing, one must mention the episode in Chapter 9 when he is being taken by police car from Port Elizabeth to Durban, and they stop for evening refreshments at the home of the hospitable police station commander at Kokstad. The description of the interaction among the security policemen, the ordinary policeman and his wife, their small children and the prisoner in transit is a masterpiece, and some time before *Make a Skyf, Man!* appeared, Strachan deservedly won a literary competition when he entered it as a short non-fictional piece. Who can forget the scene when the prisoner, after months of harsh police detention, sits at a tea-table, and draws pictures in an autograph book for two little children, in their dressing gowns and slippers. ('Pappie thê oom ith 'n kunstenaar.' 'Ja, dis waar.' 'Thal oom vir my 'n kwagga teken?') And he does.)

I found *Make a Skyf, Man!* compelling reading. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to put it down after a few chapters and come back to it a week later. Strachan has been a flier, an artist and art teacher, a political activist, a picture restorer and (he would probably insist on this inclusion) a keen fisherman. We can be thankful that he is also a writer.

JOHN DEANE

FROM CANE FIELDS TO FREEDOM: A CHRONICLE OF INDIAN SOUTH AFRICAN LIFE

Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (Editor). Cape Town, Kwela Books, 2000. 276pp. illus. R254.00

This is a well produced and impressive coffee-table book containing a large collection of photographs which show all aspects of Indian life. A brief foreword by Professor Kader Asmal and a page of acknowledgements are followed by a scholarly overview of the history of the Indian people in South Africa from the arrival of the first indentured Indian migrants in 1860 to the present time.

It also discusses one of the current debates as to whether Indians are more attached to India than South Africa – are they Indian South Africans, South African Indians, Indian people who merely live in South Africa or are they South Africans first and foremost?

The treatment of Indians in this country in the 20th century – the discriminatory laws forcing people to carry passes, to pay unjust taxes or be re-indentured, efforts to persuade them to return to India in the 1920s and the 1930s, the Pegging Act and other land tenure regulations introduced to limit the amount of property owned by Indians in the Natal cities – all are mentioned here.

The Introduction continues with an account of the effects of the Group Areas Act of 1950, the effect of various other apartheid laws and the strong opposition of some of the Indian population to these.

It concludes with a section on the post-1994 period and the concerns of less affluent people in the Indian community at the present time. The author provides endnotes to all her 190 references to books, journals and newspaper articles.

The photographs contained in this book were found in libraries and museums, documentation centres and private collections, and provide views of everyday life over the 140 years since the first Indian immigrants began to arrive. The oldest photographs, taken in the 1870s and 1880s when the subject had to remain still while the photographer covered himself with a black cloth and adjusted his half-plate camera, are of extraordinarily good quality. In fact they are clearer than the overly dark modern pictures when the subject was often on the move and the lighting less perfect.

This is not just a collection of action photographs of groups and people on the move, of houses and shops. There are also interesting photographic studies of individuals revealing their personalities, their clothing and their occupations. An excellent example is that of Amod Bayat, a Pietermaritzburg trader in the 19th century, with his strong face, distinctive beard and wearing the type of loose clothing that caused the locals to refer to them as 'Arabs'. The study of the rope-maker at Salisbury Island is quite outstanding and the printers are to be congratulated on the high standard of reproduction of these old photos. Other studies reveal the life and work of hawkers carrying their panniers, filled with fruit and vegetables, over their shoulders.

Something of the poverty of the rural Indian, struggling to make a living, can be seen in the pictures of market gardeners against a backdrop of shacks along the KwaZulu-Natal south coast. There are also excellent photos of Indian families outside their dwellings and dressed up for the occasion. More recent inclusions show the interior of Indian shops, details of temple decorations, dancing and religious celebrations and political protests. There is a host of other interesting and unusual photographs and, if most depict Indian life in Natal, this is not surprising in view of the longer history and larger populations of Indian people in this province.

The book includes sections entitled 'Indentured workers'; 'Free Indians and traders'; 'Private and Public Lives'; 'Gandhi and After' and 'From the Family Album' and would have been improved had a table of contents been included directing the reader to these sections. Nevertheless, this is an excellent publication and both Professor Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Kwela books are to be congratulated.

JOY BRAIN

GIANT'S CASTLE – A PERSONAL HISTORY

By Bill Barnes. Edited by David Johnson. Privately published 2003. 290pp. illus. approx. R170,00

It is a great pity that Bill Barnes did not live to see the publication of his book on the history of the Giant's Castle Game Reserve in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg – he died shortly before it appeared. He had completed the bulk of the text at the time of his death and David Johnson, ornithologist to the erstwhile Natal Parks Board with whom Bill had been closely associated, took on the task of final editing. With the assistance of ex-colleagues and friends of Bill, photographs were selected and the final preparation of the manuscript for publication was undertaken. Had Bill lived to see the finished result, he would not have been disappointed.

The creation of the Giant's Castle Game Reserve and the appointment of its first ranger, Sydney Barnes, made the reserve the first in Natal to have resident staff. Barnes took up his appointment in October 1903 and his first task was to build living quarters for himself at Witteberg where a track of sorts from the outside world terminated. Barnes lived and worked from his meagre quarters for three years before his acrimonious dismissal towards the end of 1906. He was followed by Roden Symons who was appointed to the position of forester-in-charge of Giant's Castle Game Reserve at a salary of £10 per month.

Bill Barnes had a rugged introduction to Giant's Castle. Symons had offered his father Phil Barnes the post of assistant conservator there in 1913. He accepted the post and five years later, he met and married Rose, one of Nell Symons' four sisters. In August of 1927 Rose Barnes packed her bags and set off by ox wagon for Pietermaritzburg for the birth of her third child, Bill, on 9 September 1927. Six weeks later the infant Barnes and his mother completed the last 20 km of the journey back to Giant's Castle in a sledge drawn by eight oxen. Bill Barnes had arrived in Giant's Castle!

Through his long association with the reserve during his youthful years, until his retirement from the Natal Parks Board, Bill Barnes was intimately connected with the history of Giant's Castle and he was the ideal person to document it. To a large extent, the story of Giant's Castle is very much the story of Bill Barnes.

In accordance with the conservation ethos in vogue at the time of the reserve's proclamation, emphasis was immediately placed on the destruction of 'vermin' in order to encourage an increase in the antelope, partridge and fish populations. In 1910 a devastating slaughter of lanner falcons resulted in 21 of these birds being shot in one year, and giant kingfishers too were exterminated whenever they were encountered. The early records in diaries of 1912, such as the one that reads, 'I went out this afternoon after eagle. Shot one on its nest which had two eggs' make the mind boggle today.

Following military service in the Second World War, Bill returned to South Africa and was sent to Royal Natal National Park to establish a trout hatchery. In April 1956, following the resignation of Edward Thrash who had taken over from Phil Barnes, Bill, who by then had married Leila, applied for and got the post of ranger-in-charge of Giant's Castle. Much of his book deals with the conservation of antelope such as the eland and red hartebeest, and also the reintroduction of black wildebeest and blesbok. It also covers the introduction of alien species such as impala, Indian black buck and Java rusa deer, all of which eventually disappeared due to the harsh nature of the terrain.

Other chapters in the book deal with the control of the jackal population in the area, the establishment of the mountain huts, the Langalibalele rebellion and the rock art of the reserve.

For me, the most absorbing chapter is the one dealing with the lammergeyer and the efforts of Bill and his friends to abseil down the sheer cliff face at Mokhotlong in Lesotho to obtain photographs of this rare bird on its nest. It was a mission of epic proportions. The nail-biting description of that first descent to the eyrie and their first view of the 'piercing red eyes, golden plumage of the breast and the black beard of the bird' that the nest contained, make riveting reading. The success of their efforts led to the establishment of the first lammergeyer hide in the reserve, from which visitors could view and photograph these rare birds for the first time.

Those of us who knew Bill knew that he could be irascible and difficult at times and

Leila, his wife for 49 years, perhaps knew better than anyone else how Bill could behave and had come to terms with it. The final chapter of the book contains reminiscences by friends and colleagues of Bill's occasional erratic behaviour. Rusty Barnes, Bill's son, tells the story of how, in a fit of pique his father hurled a solid silver platter of freshly baked scones out of the lounge window whilst entertaining staff from head office, because they did not contain the fresh cream and jam that he had ordered!

But Bill was a compassionate man as well. David Johnson tells the story of a fishing trip that he went on with Bill when Bill caught a small trout in the river. As he yanked the fish out of the water, it flew over his head to land on the road a good 30 metres away. Scrambling through the barbed wire fence, Bill picked up the dust-covered trout that was flapping in the road and carefully removed the hook. Taking it back to the river he washed off the dust and grit before gently placing it back into the water and sending it on its way with the words 'Sorry chap, didn't mean to do that. I'll be more careful next time'.

Apart from the wealth of information contained in the text, the historical photographs in the book add greatly to its appeal, and here again we have Bill's interest in photography to thank for the documentation and preservation of all the old photographs he could get hold of. Much of the history of wildlife conservation in KwaZulu-Natal has been lost to posterity and we are fortunate that this important addition to the conservation record of the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg has made its appearance. It will certainly appeal to everyone who has an interest in the natural history of our province.

REG GUSH

Giant's Castle – A personal history is obtainable from David Johnson, 156 Golf Road, 3201 Pietermaritzburg. Tel 033-3867661, email davejohn@sai.co.za or from the ABC Book Shop or Cascades Book Shop, Pietermaritzburg.