

## *The Origins of the Natal Society*

### CHAPTER 3

1847 - 1849

THE COMMITTEE was to run into depressing setbacks. To begin with, the periodicals were difficult to order and very slow to arrive. There was no paid librarian, and the subscribers, as will always happen when there is little control, took works without having them properly entered and then kept them long overdue. The Reading Room leaked. All these disasters were building up for the future.

1847 opened cheerfully enough, with a ray of hope for working men's classes. The *Natal Witness* reported that the Committee of the Library had lent the Reading Room for a class of English youths.<sup>1</sup> The boys, ten in number, were meeting for scripture classes conducted by the Rev. Mr. Richards. The editorial went on hopefully:

When this class is well attended and in full operation, it will be time for proposing the establishment of a miniature Mechanics Institution for the Tradesmen, who are at present destitute of every kind of rational recreation or improvement. Many of them would no doubt prefer attending a series of useful lectures, or historical readings, to monotonous solitude, or the injurious sociality of the canteen.

At the general meeting held on 16th July 1847<sup>2</sup> the troubles referred to began to emerge. The meeting was held at the Court house, and Henry Cloete took the chair. The acting Secretary, David Dale Buchanan, read the report. The periodicals approved at the June 1846 General Meeting had been ordered, but only the issues for January and February had been received. Buchanan spoke of the 'tedious delay', and referred gratefully to the books lent by Henry Cloete and E. Landsberg, without which it would have been impossible to keep up interest in the library. He goes on to say glumly:

Your Committee recommends, however, that these books be now returned; as the dampness of the room during the rainy season, and the circulation they have already had, together with the possibility of loss — the librarian not being always in attendance — renders this course advisable.

More cheerfully he reports that although some subscribers had departed from the colony, newcomers had joined, so the list had not been very considerably

diminished; also that funds were adequate to keep up the periodicals subscriptions. However, no books had been bought with the exception of Mrs. Fry's '*Listener*' in two volumes (moral essays that had appeared in 1830<sup>3</sup>). This was in accordance with current policy, that available funds should be used to purchase periodicals and towards rental of the library room, rather than put to the purchase of books or for the salary of a librarian. The library room in 1847 was clearly a disaster. Buchanan says:-

The room formerly used as the library having been found so excessively damp as to be unwholesome for readers, and also destructive to the books, an apartment far more centrally situated has been hired from Messrs. Minne and Hansmeyer in their house in Church Street, at the same rate of rent.

Finally, he refers to the lack of a librarian, and the hazards of this arrangement can be seen all too clearly.

As the present state of the Society's funds do not justify any expenditure being incurred for a salaried librarian, the Committee has adopted the economical plan of making the Library accessible to subscribers at all times. Mr. Jackson, however, still continues to attend regularly two evenings in the week, gratuitously, to exchange books that may be sent by subscribers.

Affairs generally had clearly led to a falling off of enthusiasm, and according to an editorial published on the same day as the report,<sup>4</sup> the literati of Pietermaritzburg had failed to attend the meeting. It might be courteous, the editorial says, to ascribe this to the rain that started to fall about the hour fixed for commencing the business; the smallness of the meeting was bitterly deplored, and the hope expressed that new colonists would bring fresh enthusiasm.

1848 (the year of revolutions in Europe) proved a slightly better year for the library. The annual general meeting was held in the Court house on 6 June.<sup>5</sup> Henry Cloete took the chair and the indefatigable Hursthouse reported, as Secretary.<sup>6</sup> The periodicals had been steadily received and there had even been £15 over to spend on new books. But, he said, the prospects for the following year were discouraging; assuming the same number of subscribers, which was doubtful, revenue would be insufficient, so either the subscription rates had to be increased, or the list of periodicals reduced. The Committee recommended the latter course which would also allow for the appointment of a librarian at £9 per year — 'a very necessary appointment'. The meeting approved these suggestions, and then elected the following to the new Committee; the Rev. J. Richards, Theo Shepstone, L. Cloete, Arthur Walker, William Hursthouse, and J. D. Marquard. ('L. Cloete' was Pieter Lourens G. Cloete, the eldest son of Henry Cloete.<sup>7</sup>) In conclusion, Richards and Henry Cloete tried to whip up some enthusiasm.

The Rev. Richards observed that as this was the only institution possessed by our small community, calculated to give and invigorate intellectual life, he would urge on the meeting, and the subscribers generally the absolute necessity for giving it their utmost support. The Chairman concurred in the Reverend gentleman's observations and

followed them up by some of the same tenor; remarking also, that upon the Treasurer's statement being read, he was pleased to find that the affairs of the Society were not in so discouraging a state as might be inferred from the tone of the Secretary's report. He trusted also that Mr. Richards' suggestion would be acted upon, as the mere laying a foundation of such an institution would be worth accomplishing, even though its ultimate prosperity might have to become the work of posterity.<sup>8</sup>

The Librarian was evidently appointed quickly. A notice dated 14 June 1848 by William Hursthouse announced that the Reading Room would henceforth be open daily (excepting Sundays and holidays) from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., at which time the Librarian would attend to issue and receive books.<sup>9</sup> The notice added that the periodicals for January had been received, and as it was now mid June, this reveals one of the worst problems that the Committee was up against — the slowness of the post in those days.

Hursthouse died in 1849 and the next two notices that have been traced were signed by J. D. Marquard as Secretary *pro tem*. The first dated 13 August 1849, gave notice that the Government had granted the use of the east wing of the Public School building as a Reading Room, and that the books and periodicals had already been removed there.<sup>10</sup> Marquard had now taken up his post as government schoolmaster, and this move was evidently through his influence. The second notice called members to the annual general meeting on 14 September 1849, and added:

It is hoped that Friends of Reading will not fail to attend, as Improvements will be suggested should the attendance and subscriptions warrant them.<sup>11</sup>

The 1849 annual general meeting was as usual fully reported in the *Natal Witness*.<sup>12</sup> This meeting should have been held in June, but was delayed to 14 September because of several setbacks; during the year, the Society had lost several of its most influential and active members. Henry Cloete's son, P. L. G. Cloete, had left the district, as had the Chairman, the Rev. J. Richards. To add to this loss, as already mentioned, William Hursthouse, the Secretary, had died. Hursthouse was severely mourned.

The strong interest felt by this gentleman in the success of the Society rendered him one of its most diligent and active supporters. He was unwearied in his exertions for its welfare, and but for his zealous advocacy, it is probable your Committee would have been induced, from the insignificant funds at their disposal, to resign their responsibilities and propose to you the dissolution of the Society. Mr. Hursthouse, however, always pointed to the cheering side; and the institution, of which he was one of the founders, still exists to lament the loss of one of its warmest and most efficient supporters.

Marquard, the acting Secretary went on to report yet another loss by death: that of His Honor Martin West, the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal and patron of the Society. West died in August 1849 and was to be succeeded eventually by Benjamin C. Pine. It had been a distressing year for the Committee.

The business of the past year was now outlined by Marquard. In accordance with the resolution taken at the previous annual general meeting, some of the periodicals had been discontinued. The remaining ones still formed a good list They were:-

<i>The Edinburgh Review</i>	<i>Tait's Magazine</i>
<i>The Quarterly Review</i>	<i>Douglas Jerrold's Magazine</i>
<i>The Westminster Review</i>	<i>Chambers's Journal</i>
<i>The North British Review</i>	<i>Punch</i>
<i>The British Review</i>	<i>Literary Gazette</i>
<i>Blackwood's Magazine</i>	<i>Athenaeum</i>
<i>Fraser's Magazine</i>	<i>Mechanics' Magazine</i>
<i>Colburn's Magazine</i>	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
<i>Dublin Magazine</i>	<i>Spectator</i>
<i>Colburn's United Service Magazine</i>	<i>The Foreign Quarterly Review</i>

Finding that these were not received regularly from overseas, Hursthouse had made enquiries and ascertained that a more regular supply might be obtained from Mr. Robertson of Cape Town. Application had been made to him and a more punctual supply could now be expected. Reference was made to the removal of the Library to the present more suitable and comfortable reading room at the Government school. The £15 which was to have been spent on books as approved at the previous annual general meeting had been refunded by the former agent, and disappointed as the Committee were, they were also thankful as the sum enabled them to remain solvent. Desired support had been lacking during the year, and a regretful reference was made to irregularities beyond the Committee's power to check. (These no doubt occurred through irregular oversight of the library.) The Committee apparently felt that the number of periodicals should again be reduced, to allow for the purchase of some books. Marquard went on to say that as the Librarian was now only being paid £4 per year, a saving of £5 would accrue, and also there would be a complete saving on rental, of £9 per year. This would justify the spending of some money on books. The Committee admitted its failure to enforce fines fixed for detention of periodicals and wished to ask the meeting about the way it should be done.

In conclusion, Gentlemen, your Committee regret that they have not met you with a more encouraging report; but they trust that due allowance will be made for the disadvantages under which they had to labour resulting from the casualties that have occurred, and other equally unavoidable causes. However, they hope that the public of Natal will show that literature is not above their wants, by efficiently interesting themselves in the advancement of our yet infant although important institution.<sup>13</sup>

In the business which followed, two resolutions were taken. The first was proposed by Captain Gordon and seconded by Marquard. Captain S. B. Gordon was attached to the 45th Regiment, and was later to become acting Secretary to the government when Pine suspended Moodie in 1851. Captain Gordon now proposed:—

That the books purchased are not to be sold on any account, but are to form the basis of a permanent library; and further that it is distinctly to be understood that no subscriber has any title to any of the works procured, except merely as far as regards the perusal of them. And further, in the event of the dissolution of this Reading Society, it should be distinctly understood that the books, whether purchased or given as donations by individuals, shall notwithstanding be considered as public property, and shall be handed over to the Government for the public use.

The other proposal was moved by David Dale Buchanan and seconded by Donald Moodie:—

That this institution be henceforth styled - 'the Pietermaritzburg Public Library'.

In these two proposals, both carried unanimously, a change of emphasis is seen. In the past, the members had been content with periodicals and a few donated books. Now there is a growing feeling that books are to be collected by purchase and formed into a permanent library. Also the 'Reading Society' has now become the Public Library, again suggesting an emphasis on books rather than on periodical literature. We can clearly see the way in which the subscribers were groping.

The 1849 annual general meeting concluded with the election of the Committee for the coming year. The following were elected: the Rev. James Green, Marquard, Shepstone, Moodie, Buchanan and Stanger. The Rev. Mr. Green, one of the protagonists in the great Colenso controversy, had arrived in Natal in February 1849 as colonial chaplain.

A *Natal Witness* editorial<sup>14</sup> tells a little bit more about the meeting just outlined, and says, not unkindly,

Upon the whole, this institution has sustained its usefulness tolerably well, considering the difficulties it has had to contend with . . .

It mentions that the Rev. James Green was in the chair, and he threw out the suggestion that as hunting expeditions were frequent,

it might not be amiss to obtain specimens of natural history that might form the nucleus of a museum. This idea might be carried further. As duplicate specimens would be constantly accumulating, the Committee would have a capital for enriching their collection by interchange with kindred institutions in distant lands. In addition to books, specimens in Natural History, and Geology, opportunities might offer for procuring philosophical instruments, so that facilities for lecturing would be so available as to contribute to the diffusion of the taste for literary and scientific pursuits in the colony.<sup>15</sup>

So here is the first mention of a museum, a project which was to become the aim of the Natal Society and which proved so extraordinarily difficult to realize. In carrying the idea further than Green, the editor (David Dale Buchanan) was striving as he had also done in 1846, to bring dignity, worth and development to

the little Society, which he no doubt felt was paddling along quietly while it could be achieving so much more.

Letters of complaint about the library written to the *Natal Witness* are nothing new. A letter appeared just after the 1849 annual general meeting, signed by 'a well-wisher of the library'.<sup>16</sup> The writer complains that more periodicals are to be discontinued and says people will not subscribe if more and more are stopped. He adds;

The practice of some one or other of the subscribers of last year taking periodicals out of the room, and keeping them for an unlimited period, was so much complained of, that it will not be an easy task to get many, who formerly subscribed, to do so again.

The Committee had amply shown that it was well aware of these problems, but in every age there is a library member who is dissatisfied with majority opinion and who takes the opportunity to complain about the service.

U. E. M. JUDD,

**Notes:**

1. *Natal Witness*, 22.1.1847.
2. *Natal Witness*, 23.7.1847.
3. Hattersley, A. F. *Portrait of a city*, p. 28.
4. *Natal Witness*, *loc. cit.*
5. *Natal Witness*, 19.5.1848.
6. *Natal Witness*, 16.6.1848.
7. *Natal Witness*, 28.9.1849.
8. *Natal Witness*, 16.6.1848.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Natal Witness*, 17.8.1849.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Natal Witness*, 28.9.1849.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Natal Witness*, 28.9.1849.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*