

Notes and Queries

A REASON FOR A NAME

John Deane writes:

AS generations follow one another, personal memories of ancestors who fought in the first World War give way to stories handed down in families. Sometimes what a soldier wrote at the time has survived – perhaps as a published memoir, a diary, or letters written home. But sometimes the connection between the fateful second decade of the 20th century and a person in 2014 is more tenuous and more unusual.

In 1915 the Transvaal Scottish Regiment had a young female springbok named Nancy as a mascot. Although treated very well, the poor animal must have led a rather unnatural life. Accompanying the regiment to Egypt and later to France, she became a casualty in the Battle of the Somme when the German bombardment so terrified her that she bolted and broke her left horn against a wall. When it regrew, it pointed downward. Then in

the severe winter of 1918 she contracted pneumonia and died shortly after the Armistice. Her death was announced in General Orders, possibly something unique in British military history. All parades were cancelled, and a firing party attended the interment of all the remains except the skin, head and horns, which were preserved for later stuffing. Thus for many years Nancy graced the officers' mess of the Transvaal Scottish. She has now been promoted to the War Museum.

A soldier in the regiment returned to South Africa, and married quite a long time after the end of the war. When he and his wife had a daughter, he named her Nancy, after the regimental mascot which had obviously meant so much to him amid the horrors of the Flanders trenches.

That daughter, Nancy Aucock, now lives in Hilton.

A YOUNG APARTHEID EXILE'S DEATH REMEMBERED

Elwyn Jenkins writes

NAT NAKASA, Durban-born journalist, was buried in Ferncliff Cemetery, Westchester, New York, in 1965. His remains were reburied in Heroes' Acre in Chesterville, Durban, on 13th September 2014, following a memorial service in the Durban City Hall that was attended by the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Senzo Mchunu. To coincide with his return, the Old Court House Museum in Durban mounted an exhibition on his life and work. A plaque remains in the USA to mark his original grave.

Nathaniel Ndazana Nakasa was born in Chesterville in 1937 and educated in Durban. He started writing for *Ilanga lase Natal* in the 1950s before moving to Johannesburg, where he first wrote for *Golden City Post*. He soon became a regular columnist with a byline in the *Rand Daily Mail*, being its first black journalist. He went on to become a stalwart of *Drum* magazine in the company of writers such as Henry Nxumalo, Lewis Nkosi, Casey Motsisi, Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Es'kia Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane, who are remembered now as the extraordinary *Drum* generation.

In 1963, Nakasa was awarded a Nieman Fellowship to study at Harvard University for a year. The South African government declined to issue him a passport to travel abroad, and finally granted him an exit permit, which allowed him to leave the country – but by accepting it he had forfeited the right to return and became stateless.

After leaving Harvard he wrote articles for several newspapers, appeared in the television film *The Fruit of Fear* and was planning to write

a biography of Miriam Makeba. Two days before his death, he told a friend, "I can't laugh any more, and when I can't laugh, I can't write."¹ On 14th July 1965, he fell to his death from the window of a seventh-floor apartment in Manhattan. His death, apparently by suicide, was an apartheid tragedy and a tragedy of exile. He was buried close to where Malcolm X, whom he had met in Tanzania, had been buried five months earlier.

Of Nakasa's increasing emotional turmoil, Nakasa's biographer, Ryan Brown, has written:

Now he was caught in a precarious limbo, unable to return to South Africa but lacking citizenship in the United States, a place that he was beginning to feel offered little respite from the brutal racism of his own country. He was, he had written, a "native of nowhere... a stateless man [and] a permanent wanderer", and he was running out of hope. Standing in that New York City apartment building, he faced the alien city. The next thing anyone knew, he was lying on the pavement below. He was 28 years old.²

The journalist Mathatha Tsedu, who sat on the committee that negotiated the return of Nakasa's remains, describes him:

Nat, to use the common parlance, was a die-hard liberal who believed that dialogue across the colour lines would dissipate the racism that he saw as propped up by ignorance. He wrote that way, and in those days, even just writing that way was seen as revolutionary. He was a young man with a lot of growing up to do, which unfortunately did not happen. While the politics of the time demanded

revolutionary fervour, he was into dialogue and finding the good people on the other side. His naiveté around race issues came to the fore when he reached America and found the bastion of freedom being nothing more than a seriously racist state that oppressed black people.³

Nadine Gordimer wrote of him:

The truth is that he was a new kind of man in South Africa. He accepted without question and with easy dignity and natural pride his Africanness, and he took equally for granted that his identity as a man among men, a human among fellow humans, could not be legislated out of existence, even by all the apartheid laws in the statute book, or all the racial prejudice in this country. He did not calculate the population as sixteen millions or four millions, but as twenty. He belonged not between two worlds, but to both. And in him one could see the hope of one world. He has left that hope behind; there will be others to take it up.⁴

Nakasa's literary legacy is summed up by J. Brooks Spector:

Despite that untimely and early death, Nakasa still left a wide-ranging body of essays and reportage that have come to be regarded as a unique vantage point, looking at a Johannesburg that was ostensibly two entirely separate universes – but also with a small, “below-the-radar” cosmopolitan world – the space described by writers like Nadine Gordimer in her novel *A World of Strangers*. Nakasa's

wanderings allowed him to sample the demi-monde of the city's largely black world that without Nakasa's writing remained mostly unknown to his ordinary white readers. Some of Nakasa's most enduring pieces are his acutely observed cameo profiles of figures like the legendary boxer King Kong, the famous penny whistler Spokes Mashiane and a young, vivacious Winnie Mandela – as well as Aunt Sally in her eponymous shebeen.⁵

In honour of his memory, the South African National Editors Forum instituted the Nat Nakasa Award for Courageous Journalism in 1988.

NOTES

1. “Nat Nakasa to be reburied in South Africa”, 23 June 2014, www.brandsouthafrica.com.
2. Quoted in J. Brooks Spector, “Fifty years later, time for Nat Nakasa to return home,” *The Daily Maverick*, 27 May 2014, www.dailymaverick.co.za/article.
3. Quoted in “Nat Nakasa: Writing to the beat of a different drum,” *The Mail & Guardian*, 27 June 2014.
4. Quoted in J. Brooks Spector, *op. cit.*
5. J. Brooks Spector, *op. cit.*

Books and dissertation

Heather Acutt, “Tactics of the habitat: the elusive identity of Nat Nakasa,” MA dissertation, Pretoria, University of South Africa, 2009.

Ryan Brown, *A Native of Nowhere: The Life of Nat Nakasa*, Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013.

Essop Patel, ed., *The World of Nat Nakasa: Selected Writings*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press and Bateleur Press, 1975.

COMMEMORATION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN HOWICK

by *Elwyn Jenkins*

HOWICK in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, like so many cities and towns around the world, has its public reminders of the First World War. One of its main thoroughfares is called Somme Street, and a cenotaph to the fallen stands outside the old Agricultural Hall.

In August 2014, the centenary of the outbreak of the war was marked in Howick in several ways. The large Amber Valley retirement community devoted its monthly pub quiz to the war, and its drama group presented an evening of readings and music as a tribute to the members of the armed forces in the trench war.

The evening of the quiz began with a concert of old-time songs by the Grade Threes of the Dinky Choir from Howick Preparatory School. The innocence of the children's voices set against the horrors of the Great War and the wars that it set in train was heartbreaking.

The quiz, which had 180 contestants, ranged widely across facets of the war. Various nations were remembered: the British Tommies (by their trench newspaper, *The Wipers Times*); how an embarrassed royal family changed its name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor; New Zealanders and Australians (at Gallipoli); Canadians (at Vimy Ridge), American Doughboys; Hemingway as an ambulance driver in Italy; South Africans (victorious in South West Africa and ignominiously defeated at Salaita Hill in East Africa); the African servicemen who perished on the SS *Mendi*; the Russians and the Bolshevik revolution; Serbia; ill-fated Bulgaria; T.E. Lawrence and his quixotic Arab Revolt. Different

armed forces featured: the British navy at Jutland and the German navy at Scapa Flow; Baron von Richthofen; Biggles in his Sopwith Camel; and the Zeppelins. Women were represented by the courageous Edith Cavell and the notorious Mata Hari. Of course, the war poets were there, as well as Benjamin Britten's War Requiem, which is set partly to the words of Wilfrid Owen.

What struck those present was that they were still of a generation whose family traditions remembered the war and how it had touched them. Stories were told of families who survived Zeppelin raids or grandfathers who were gassed, and treasured memorabilia were displayed. By contrast, when I told a young woman what our theme would be, she asked in a puzzled way whether "the old forts at Colenso" dated from the war.

The programme of readings and music began on a lively satirical note and ended solemnly. The first half consisted of a shortened version of the musical *Oh, What a Lovely War!* by Joan Littlewood. Dialogue conveyed aspects of the war such as war profiteers, the established church and the generals, the young women in the munitions factories, pacifists such as Emily Pankhurst, and the "Christmas truce". Interspersed among these episodes were sound effects and songs that are mainly unfamiliar today, some of them with scurrilous words to hymn tunes.

The candlelit second half consisted of readings both familiar and unfamiliar, accompanied by the screening of photographs and ending with a video clip of the playing of the Last Post in

the nightly ceremony at the Menin Gate. Prose extracts came from the classic war memoirs of Robert Graves (*Goodbye to All That*) and Edmund Blunden (*Undertones of War*). Two early poems, Rupert Brooke's "The soldier" and "In Flanders fields" by the Canadian John McCrae, were followed by frank, bitter and disillusioned verse by writers such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and a German Jewish soldier known only as Goldfeld; the women poets May Wedderburn Cannan and Vera Brittain; and, on the lighter side, an anonymous parody of *The Rubaiyat* from *The Wipers Times*. Catharsis came at the end with Sassoon's "Everyone sang" ("My heart was shaken with tears; and horror/ Drifted away") and a less familiar poem by the American Carl Sandburg:

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and
Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –
I am the grass; I cover all.
And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and
Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and the
passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?
I am the grass.
Let me work.

The third event in Howick on the centenary of the war took place on 2nd August, when by arrangement with the MOTHS the artist Owen Llewellyn-Davies removed from the cenotaph four metal plaques listing the names of the fallen in the First and Second World Wars and entrusted them to the custody of the Howick MOTHS Lions Shellhole. This was a regrettable proactive measure to protect the plaques from being stolen. (The bell of St Luke's Church, one block away, was stolen from the churchyard a couple of years ago.) The names recorded on the plaques are those of 25 men from the district who died in the First World War, including one who perished on the SS *Mendi*, and eight from the Second World War.¹

NOTE

1. *The Midlands Herald*, 8 August 2014, "Protecting our heritage from copper theft", pp. 1, 3.

AN ADDENDUM

by Peter Alcock

Reference was made in footnote 59 of the paper “Snow in, or on the outskirts of, Pietermaritzburg (1851–2013)”, *Natalia* 43, 2013, pp. 73–83 to an addendum, in the event of further data relevant to the study area being discovered. The following information is provided in the same format applicable to the original paper (see *Natalia* 43, p. 75).

25–28 August 1911

Rain and then snow fell in many parts of the Natal Midlands and in Northern Natal.¹ It was said that snow was “general in the north of Natal”. The inland hills overlooking Pietermaritzburg were covered in snow. Trains arriving in the city from the interior of Natal had snow-laden roofs. Snow (in some cases heavy falls) was reported in Kokstad, Ixopo, on the hills above Richmond, in Nottingham Road, Mooi River

and Ladysmith, at Acton Homes and Dewdrop as well as in the neighbouring districts, on the Umkolombe Mountain near Weenen, in Greytown, Umsinga, Nkandhla, Babanango and Piet Retief. Snow likewise fell in Waschbank, Dundee, Newcastle, Vryheid, Utrecht, Charlestown, Van Reenen, Harrismith, between Swinburne and Brackwell, and in Wakkerstroom and Ermelo. Snow fell further afield at Dordrecht in the Eastern Cape. Subsequent snowfalls occurred in Northern Natal and the Southern Transvaal on 29 August 1911.² The August 1911 snow episode was clearly a major event which took place over some days.³

NOTES

1 *Natal Witness*, 28 and 29 August 1911.

2 *Natal Witness*, 30 August 1911.

3 Some of the place names mentioned use an earlier spelling.