

## *Book Reviews and Notices*

### **NUMBERING THE DEAD. THE COURSE AND PATTERN OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE NATAL MIDLANDS, 1987-1989**

by JOHN AITCHISON

Pietermaritzburg, Occasional Publications of the Natal Society Foundation, 2015.

274 pages, maps and graphs, bibliography, index

ISBN 9-780992-176631

**F**OR those who resided in the Natal Midlands during the last years of apartheid, reading John Aitchison's book is like a leap into the past. New forms of violence have come, but the old ones, arbitrary detentions, politically motivated deaths and collusion between security forces and perpetrators, are a thing of the past, or at least so it seems.

The book the Natal Society Foundation Trust offers to the public is the revised version of an academic dissertation which earned the author a University of Natal Master's degree in 1993. Only minor changes have been made, the biggest being the transfer of the methodological section to the end of the volume. It covers the period from September 1987, when the Midlands war is said to have begun, to

February 1990, when the major anti-apartheid movements were unbanned, but frequent references are made to the subsequent three years.

The main source of information is a computerised database developed by John Aitchison, Vaughn John and Wendy Leeb as part of the Unrest Monitoring Project (UMP), a project of the then University of Natal's Centre for Adult Education. For the years 1987-1989 alone this database contained 4 000 records. Using newspaper articles, accounts from witnesses and victims of political violence, police unrest reports and reports from various organisations, Aitchison and his colleagues accumulated and processed information on a staggering 3 268 "events", the attack of a house for example, and 3 458 "incidents", such as the throwing of a

petrol bomb on the house, the murder of the household head and the wounding of the occupants as they fled the place.

This documentation constitutes the core of the book. It was used not only to “number the dead” but also to estimate the damage done to property, the number of people who fled their houses, temporarily or permanently, because of political violence and the instances of collusion between security forces and perpetrators. The biggest methodological problem was to determine the political affiliation of aggressors and victims in the events and incidents recorded. Likewise it was not always easy to distinguish criminal and family murder from unrest violence. Aitchison and his team were fully aware of these difficulties. By using corroborating evidence wherever possible and constantly checking the validity and reliability of their sources, the Unrest Monitoring Project tried to reduce the risk of errors and provide a reasonably accurate picture of political violence in the Natal Midlands.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of this type of work in situations of violent conflict. All episodes of mass murder, including the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide, give rise to wars of figures. The same happens with xenophobia in South Africa today. For opportunistic reasons or simply to deal with guilt and shame, the parties involved in mass murder tend to minimise or even deny the horrible events in which they participated. Aitchison and his collaborators pursued a political agenda, which was to counteract the propaganda of a regime desperately fighting for its survival, but to do so they made the effort of following sound and rigorous methodological principles. It was a case of social science at the

service of advocacy as with Alison Des Forges’ superb Human Rights Watch report on the Rwandan Genocide, *Leave None to Tell the Story*.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s National Party officials, police representatives and researchers associated with or close to Inkatha, Gavin Wood and Anthea Jeffery in particular, tried to trivialise the conflict by defining it as “black on black violence” or explain it primarily as a socio-economic problem. In all his publications, including the book under review, Aitchison firmly rebutted this line of argument. First, he showed that the number of politically-motivated deaths was much higher than commonly thought: according to his calculation, in the Natal Midlands 64 people died from political violence in the years 1980 to 1986, 1 810 in the next three years and a further 1 635 if not more between 1990 and 1992. The jump in the number of deaths from 1986 to 1987 can only be explained by a surge of political violence: there is no way ordinary crime could have increased so much in only one year (pp. 83-85). Secondly he revealed that the number of United Democratic Front (UDF) casualties far exceeded those of Inkatha. From 1987 to 1989 the ratio of UDF deaths to Inkatha’s was about 7 to 3 (p. 103). This demonstrated the political nature of the conflict, a reality that the apartheid government and its allies constantly tried to hide.

Given the importance of this subject, we must be grateful to John Aitchison, now retired after a successful academic career, for having agreed to revise his Master’s thesis and to the Natal Society Foundation Trust for having published it. At the same time we must recognise that *Numbering the Dead* belongs, historiographically, to a different era.

For obvious reasons, we do not see the Natal conflict in 2015 as we saw it 25 years ago. It was a time of stark polarisation with clearly demarcated heroes and villains. Recent oral history interviews, as those conducted by the author of this review and his research team in Nxamalala and Mpophomeni, throw light on dimensions of political violence which did not appear clearly before. In retrospect, the community members, UDF- or Inkatha-affiliated alike, who took part in acts of violence, sometimes against neighbours and family members, in response to calls from leaders or simply to rumours, wonder why they acted that way. Some of them feel betrayed today. In the heated atmosphere of the “struggle”, the murders of innocents wrongly suspected of being *amagundane* and the acts of sexual abuse committed by self-declared com-

rades tended to fall under the radar. Aitchison did not completely ignore these realities, but because of what was perceived as the main need at the time, he essentially dealt with the political dimension of the Natal conflict.

PHILIPPE DENIS

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## STANDING ON STREET CORNERS: A HISTORY OF THE NATAL MIDLANDS REGION OF THE BLACK SASH

by MARY KLEINENBERG and CHRISTOPHER MERRETT

Pietermaritzburg, Occasional Publications of the Natal Society Foundation, 2015.

300 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index

ISBN 978-0-99217-664-8

**T**HIS is a most impressive book. It traces the origins of the Black Sash and its establishment and growth in Pietermaritzburg and its surrounding towns and villages and tells how a relatively small group of women took a stand against the apartheid government’s serious encroachment on the rights and freedoms of the people of this country. By skilfully combining rigorous scholarship with extensive written, oral and photographic evidence, the authors have produced a gripping and very personal narrative which is a pleasure to read, despite the fact that it is at the same time opening up one of the darkest

periods of South African history.

The Black Sash movement emerged from events in 1955 when white, middle-class women protested against the government’s intention to tamper with the 1910 Constitution by giving itself extra powers through the Senate Bill. Pietermaritzburg, with a nucleus of committed, well-educated white women, many of whom were members of the Liberal Party, became the centre of the Natal Midlands Black Sash (NMBS). Their general strategy was one of non-aggressive protest through steady, relentless pressure. Women, with a black sash across the right

shoulder, would stand in prominent places silently holding their placards. In Pietermaritzburg, the Memorial Arch and Gardens, opposite the city hall, the Colonial Buildings and the post office, were usual venues. Passers-by would read challenging messages such as “Ban apartheid not democracy”, “End state of emergency”, “What is the SADF doing in Namibia?” as offensive legislation appeared. Were these stands effective? Evidence suggests that public reaction ranged from respect all the way to cynicism. For the women it was enough if consciences were stirred. They stood their ground for 40 years despite experiencing incidents of severe police harassment and public abuse.

Less visible but more concrete was a second strategy: the establishment of an Advice Office in Pietermaritzburg where members and associates assisted black people with difficulties arising from government policy related mainly to labour relations and payment of pensions and social grants. Thousands of people benefited from this service which was extended to outlying areas such as Vulindlela. The toll that this work took on helpers cannot be underestimated. Listening to distressing stories, managing language differences, keeping up with legislation and investigating cases required exceptional dedication and belief.

Backing up their activity was a great deal of dialogue. Members attended national conferences where research was shared and policies debated. Letters to the press, case studies and public addresses, many of which are quoted in the book, kept the issues of concern before the public. Differences of opinion on ideological and political matters did occur, sometimes leading to resignations. One stalwart member found she

could no longer adhere to the policy of a purely white membership. Yet it was this very aspect which caused Nelson Mandela to commend the Sash as the “conscience of white South Africa”. Other members withdrew when, in later years, a new element was pushing a feminist emphasis. Others moved away believing that the study of vast amounts of academic material was diverting attention from the Sash’s central purpose of peaceful protest. Yet it is also clear from the interviews and photographs, so liberally spread through the book, that core members enjoyed a strong sense of camaraderie and deep friendship.

Much of the book’s appeal lies in its use of modern approaches to history. It is women’s history, often hidden from the mainstream of history. The Black Sash movement gave many women the opportunity of proving themselves in independent action for the first time. It is also local history, with all the fascination that goes with knowing many of the people and places intimately. It is heavily supported by oral history; evidence gained from interviews is intensely personal, not always objective, but of value in providing interest and authenticity. For the same reason memory work, much in evidence here, is being increasingly used in historical studies. Furthermore, the prose is refreshingly accessible and free of academic jargon.

Mary Kleinenberg and Christopher Merrett have done a service to South Africa by preserving the record of the Natal Midlands Black Sash and re-awakening us to the importance of maintaining the moral compass of our society. Would that the same Black Sash still existed!

SYLVIA VIETZEN

**THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL, ACADEMIC FREEDOM, CORPORATISATION AND TRANSFORMATION**

by NITHAYA CHETTY AND CHRISTOPHER MERRETT

Pietermaritzburg, Published privately, 2014.

Soft cover, 231 pages, illustrations, index.

ISBN 978-0-620-58600-9

NITHAYA Chetty and Christopher Merrett are both alumni of the University of Natal and served on the staff of that university and its successor, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Their book covers a turbulent period in the history of these institutions, consequent upon South Africa's transition to nominally democratic, majority rule in 1994 and the appointment of the first black vice-chancellor, Malegapuru William Makgoba. It provides an insightful record and analysis of the events of those times and describes how the race-obsessed hubris of the vice-chancellor stripped the academic staff of all influence and reduced a once-proud university to "a mere gulag, occupied by academic serfs".

The University of Natal was founded in Pietermaritzburg in 1910 on the "Oxbridge" model of English universities, which, in turn, had originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century from church-based institutions of learning. This model became the norm for universities in Anglophone countries and, over the centuries, evolved into the form we knew at the University of Natal.

Evolution was towards a governance system found to work best for an academic institution and its staff, i.e. a self-governing body of scholars. This system put scholarship at the core of the institution and created institutions in which scholars could best flourish

and where they were rated on the quality of their scholarship.

I was a student at the University of Natal and later a member of its academic staff and I can attest to the benefits of this system of governance, largely a sense of collegiality, encompassing both students and staff, and emanating from their common involvement in the pursuit of knowledge for the universal good, a worthy and often selfless endeavour.

Collegiality had many benefits. Although competition was commonplace, there was a general climate of mutual assistance between staff members and an absence of adversarial relationships between them and between staff and students. The pervasive sentiment was that "we are all privileged to be together in this great adventure and socially important occupation". It was fun to come to work and do one's best for the students and to enhance the institution's reputation.

Another benefit springing from collegiality was institutional memory. There were, of course, rules to ensure consistent governance, and some venerable academics endeared themselves to their colleagues for their deep knowledge of the rules, their origins and their implications, which was especially valuable in discussions in Faculty Boards and in the Senate. They were skilled, responsible adults who knew what was expected of them

and who identified with the aims of the institution. In a word, they were trusted colleagues.

For academic purposes, the University of Natal was divided into discipline-specific Departments. This reflected the reality that academics operate in dual networks and have a divided loyalty. On the one hand, they function within their institution, in concert with their colleagues in different disciplines. On the other hand, they function in a world-wide network – spreading over all institutions involved in their discipline. It is in this latter network that the academic can establish their own reputation and build the reputation of their home institution. Not surprisingly, therefore, academics identify quite strongly with their disciplines.

In the 1990s a worldwide shift towards corporatisation of universities gained traction. In this model, perhaps initiated by the Thatcher/Reagan doctrines<sup>1</sup> then prevalent in the UK and US, universities were seen as business enterprises, rather than as autonomous, though public, enterprises, performing an invaluable social service. This change ignored a vital distinction between business enterprises and classical universities – the time horizon of their operations. Business often has a time horizon as short as the next balance sheet whereas scholarly endeavours only bear fruit after decades. It also ignored the fact that the “products” of universities – new knowledge and thinking people – cannot easily be reduced to monetary terms. In South Africa, the corporatisation fashion coincided, somewhat unfortunately, with a change in government.

The University of Natal was swept up in the corporatisation fashion and

restructured itself by conflating academic departments into so-called “schools”. This had a negative outcome as academics identified with their disciplines and not with the schools. Peculiarly, it also led to atomisation – whereas previously academics in a department would interact and socialise, at tea times, for instance, they now remained in their offices and had minimal interaction with one another. This was the opposite to what had been touted as a benefit of schools.

In 1994, a new ANC-led government was voted into power, an event that the ANC saw as a revolution. Many of the ANC cadres had been in exile in communist countries and had acquired the notion of quickly getting their hands on all the levers of power, to thwart any possible counter-revolution.

In 1997 the new government introduced the Higher Education Act (1997), which effectively changed universities to government departments. Vice-chancellors were to become “medium-term Managing Directors”, in a cynical distortion of the intentions of Thatcherite corporatisation. The power of Councils was increased from that of financial oversight to becoming both managerial and interventionist, and the power of Senate, i.e. of academics, was proportionately reduced, effectively to zero, as the book shows. By the appointment of suitable cadres to the positions of Vice-Chancellor and Councillors, the ANC government attained its aim of getting its hands on the levers of power in the universities. A consequence was that, overnight, scholarship was replaced by race as a key criterion in the governance of the university.

Anthea Jeffery’s book, *People’s War*, provides useful insights into the

strategy employed by the ANC, under Vietnamese and Russian tutelage, to ascend to power in South Africa. The strategy involves a combination of intimidating and de-legitimising potential critics or rivals and ruthless pursuit of a self-serving agenda, with no consideration of ethical or legal considerations. It was a strategy that enabled the Vietnamese to defeat the US in the Vietnamese war. It was also spectacularly successful for the ANC in its struggle for political power and has been carried forward into its role as a governing party (or “ruling” party, in their terminology). It is also a strategy that has been employed by Professor Makgoba, as vice-chancellor of UKZN, and latterly by President Jacob Zuma.

As a professor focused on teaching, research and administration, I was unaware of the implications of the Higher Education Act in emasculating the professoriate, until its effects came to bear. The new vice-chancellor prohibited voting in the Senate. When pressed about this, he explained, “If we allowed voting, we would get the wrong answers.” Evidently there were “right answers” in mind but the Senate was considered unlikely to come up with them. It was disconcerting to discover that one had been demoted from a valued member of the university community to a mere serf, ruthlessly obliged to do as one was told, with no questions.

Chetty and Merrett meticulously record the history of the formation of the UKZN by the merger of the University of Natal, the University of Durban-Westville and the Edgewood College of Education and analyse the consequences of the merger. A particularly gripping part of their narra-

tive concerns the disgraceful episode involving disciplinary action against Professors van den Berg and Chetty (the latter being one of the authors of the book under review). Chetty and Merrett have recorded the incident in some detail and it leaves me only to outline the events and contrast them with what would have happened in similar circumstances in the University of Natal.

Senate had charged the Faculties in the university each to prepare a document on Academic Freedom within the university, in the light of the emasculation of the professoriate that had occurred. The Faculty of Science and Agriculture duly did this and charged Professors van den Berg and Chetty, the Faculty’s representatives on Senate, to table the document for discussion in Senate. They endeavoured to do this but Professor Makgoba refused to table the document, thereby ignoring the university’s rules. When van den Berg and Chetty pressed the matter, Makgoba charged them with insubordination and with “bringing the university into disrepute” and constituted a disciplinary hearing.

In keeping with its ethos of collegiality, at the University of Natal disciplinary hearings were internal affairs conducted by a committee of senior academics. However, Makgoba changed this case into a ruthless, full-blown legal matter by retaining outside senior counsel to represent his case. This obliged van den Berg and Chetty to retain their own legal team for their defence. It was clearly an unequal contest as Makgoba was prepared to spend unlimited amounts of university monies while van den Berg and Chetty were obliged to fund their defence from their own resources. The

outcome, as described in Chetty and Merrett's book, is that both the defendants left the university and Makgoba achieved his aim of intimidating academic staff into recognising that he was now in charge. Infamously, he referred to the largely white staff as baboons, who would have to learn to defer to a new alpha male.

Not surprisingly Makgoba's actions drew widespread condemnation from the national and international academic world and UKZN suffered great damage to its reputation.

I recall a debate in the Senate of the University of Natal concerning the issue of whether or not the university should demand a cut from the proceeds of books written by staff members. Professor Natrass made what I considered to be an astute observation that carried the day, in saying, "A university's greatest asset is its reputation ... (and books published by staff members can only enhance that reputation, so the university should not discourage this by taxing it)."

The story that Chetty and Merrett have related is enlightening but it is not

uplifting. I can recommend their book to everyone interested in the wellbeing of South Africa, but especially to academics at other South African universities, so that they may be informed about what may lie ahead for them and their institutions. I would enjoin them to resist too-rapid "transformation" of their universities to a crude race-based agenda. Mamphela Ramphele wisely stated that she was opposed to too-rapid racial transformation as "it takes 30 years or more to make a proper professor". To which I would add, "and such a professor will not function properly in an authoritarian environment".

CLIVE DENNISON

#### NOTES

- 1 The Thatcher/Reagan doctrine was, at least partly, motivated by the idea of privatising services previously run by the state, to increase efficiency and reduce the burden on the state fiscus. Margaret Thatcher explained her philosophy thus: "We want a society where people are free to make choices, to make mistakes, to be generous and compassionate. This is what we mean by a moral society; not a society where the state is responsible for everything, and nobody is responsible for the state."

### **OLD WALLS, NEW ECHOES: MARITZBURG COLLEGE 1986-2015**

by SIMON HAW

Pietermaritzburg: Maritzburg College, 2015

330 pages, illustrations, notes, records, index.

ISBN 978-0-620-66010-5. R350

**S**OME school histories suffer from an attention-numbing blandness. Others are romanticised. *Old Walls, New Echoes* suffers from neither of these weaknesses. Writing with an educated command of English and a delightful sense of humour, Haw is entirely faithful to his dictum that "a view of the school in its triumphs

and successes without reference to its failures and adversities is neither accurate nor interesting". There is much to celebrate in College's recent history, but Haw does not shy away from looking at the times of difficulty and he does so in an open and balanced way. Interspersed with matters of high seriousness are some of the anecdotes

which are so much a part of any school's history, particularly perhaps that of a boarding school. These Haw recounts with characteristically humorous irony.

The book's title, "Old Walls, New Echoes", encapsulates the recurring theme of the ongoing struggle between tradition and change; the desire to hold onto what is valuable and unique and the need to respond to changing times and altered perspectives. It is Haw's view that the significant changes that occurred in the world in these years (1986-2015) could not but have had an impact on any but the most insular and moribund of institutions.

Aside from a comprehensive record of achievements and lists of office bearers at the end, the book is divided into five sections, each of which deals with a particular headmaster's era, beginning with a succinct and helpful account of the historical movements and changes of the age in the wider world, including South Africa. For example, the background to the Forde era (1986-1992) includes the birth of consumerism, the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe, the strengthening of capitalism and liberal democracy, wars in Angola and South West Africa (Namibia), states of emergency in South Africa and the moves towards multi-party negotiations. Haw moves on to talk about the particular headmaster and his work and provides pen portraits of long-serving teachers leaving the school during the era (with a pungent appreciation of their frailties and idiosyncrasies). Finally he gives an account of sporting and other activities, in the process indicating College's celebrated prowess as one of the country's top sporting schools. The growth or relative decline of particular sports is noted and key players are mentioned.

The first headmaster of this historical record, Dudley Forde, a significant figure in South African education, brought "an almost monastic sense of purpose" to his work. His exceptional energy and fervour did not meet with universal support, particularly with the less assiduous, and gave rise to the quip that Maritzburg College was "driven by a Forde". Two of Forde's major concerns were to make the school a more humane place and to develop leaders. The former aim involved treading on the sacred ground of questionable "traditions" and practices. Predictably, this led to resistance in reactionary circles, and a period of ill-feeling was defused only by a landmark meeting of the Maritzburg College Old Boys Association in 1990, at which many of the criticisms of the Headmaster were shown to be invalid and the Headmaster's supporters carried the day. The need to end caning, the need to opt to become a Model B (later Model C) School (thus allowing racial integration), the need to establish a degree of financial independence were all foreseen by Forde. An educationist of vision and integrity, he left the school a more up-to-date, humane and balanced place than he found it.

In referring to Forde's successor, Ken Elliott, as "the radical traditionalist", Haw is fascinated by the paradox of a headmaster widely perceived as conservative presiding over a period of almost continual change: he had to oversee the start of racial integration, changes in the way the school was governed, and the introduction of marketing and strategic planning, as well as changes in the curriculum, in technology and in public examinations. Various sub-committees became more involved in the school's affairs as did the Maritzburg Old Boys' Association and the governing body.

A new disciplinary code ensured the maintenance of discipline despite the absence of the cane, though, happily, boyish pranks were not entirely eliminated. In public, Elliott was a commanding, even intimidating presence, but Haw shows how in private he was a warm and entertaining raconteur. Sport saw the start of encounters with school powerhouses in other provinces and the steady rise to prominence of the once minor sport of hockey.

Intriguingly titled “Triskaidekaphobia”, Section 3 covers the short, unhappy reign of Clive Pearson. Haw makes every effort to be fair to both Pearson and his opponents, concluding that College and Pearson were not well matched. A thoroughly decent and accommodating human being, Pearson, one deduces, was not suited to the cut and thrust of College leadership with its aggressively competing interest groups and pockets of hostility. A rift quickly opened up between the Headmaster and his senior management team. The staff were sharply divided. The governing body became embroiled in the controversy, highlighting the problem of the degree to which a governing body should intervene. The impasse became very public when it found its way into the press and the MEC for Education ordered an investigation. Haw sees in the ugly leadership crisis a headmaster who was steadfastly professional and dignified in his time of adversity and he notes Pearson’s subsequent success as headmaster at Port Alfred High.

“Steady-as-she-goes” refers to the calm after the storm, the Ron Jury years, 2005-2012. Self-deprecating, unpretentious, low-key, Jury was not seen, and did not see himself, as a visionary or a creative thinker; but, a down-to-earth mathematics teacher, he

seems to have been the man to steady a listing ship. This was a period of uncertainty in the Education Department as OBE was replaced by Curriculum 2005 and later the National Curriculum Statement. Smartphones and tablets had to be accommodated and, where possible, utilised and there was significant growth in Outreach programmes. A matter which stirred heated controversy was the growth of professionalism in school sport. Glenwood set the trend and was followed by Westville. With sport being used as a marketing tool, this was a trend that was difficult to ignore and College experimented with a professional rugby coach in 2008 and was to do so again in the future. Jury was not interested in victory at any price and became uncomfortable with what seemed to him to constitute meddling by the governing body and other outside parties. The boarding establishment remained in a state of controlled stasis. Haw gives an account of life for a junior pupil in the BE which, in his words, “seemed to bear more than a passing resemblance to the rule-bound existence of a Trappist monk”. Towards the end of Jury’s term of office a problem which had been simmering came to the boil and also found its way into the local press. It concerned the highly successful, high-profile hockey and cricket coach, “stormy petrel” Mike Bèchet, and ended with his suspension and subsequent move to Jeppe High. Under Jury a wide range of activities continued to flourish. Whilst rugby was not quite as dominant as in the halcyon years, music grew in popularity and importance, a boost perhaps not entirely unconnected to the growing number of black pupils.

The book’s final section deals with the first two years of Chris Luman’s

period in office, the first of which coincided with College's 150th Year celebrations. At the start of 2015 the new headmaster, working with others, tackled in earnest the thorny question of traditions, eager to strengthen the worthwhile and eliminate the abusive. His approach has been thoughtful and determined. Haw writes: "And so the process continues ... with each step carefully calculated to preserve those sometimes quirky traditions which give College its specific flavour, while eliminating those pernicious practices which amount to abuse." Luman has also implemented far-reaching changes to the management structures and the sports houses, moving the school from horizontal to vertical stratification – houses rather than forms or year groups being the organising principle. Under the new headmaster College is certainly not standing still.

Haw ended *For Hearth and Home* with an "image of Clark House floodlit for the 125th anniversary *son et lumière*, standing proudly as a symbol of both the school's past and its future". He ends *Old Walls, New Echoes* with the image of the two-kilometre march from the City Hall to College on 1 March 2013: "The march seemed to draw together the school's past, present and future, connecting the city with its oldest high school in a visible and, from the exalted mood of the march, palpable demonstration of pride in the past and confidence in the future."

Haw's valuable and immensely readable history does justice to one of South Africa's leading schools, a school which is proud of its achievements, jealously guards its traditions and reputation, and inspires deep affection and loyalty in all who are associated with it.

ANTONY LOVELL

### **DRAKENSBERG RANGER: FOUR YEARS AT GIANT'S CASTLE**

by GEORGE HUGHES

Pinelands, Cape Town: Platanna Press, 2014. 323 pages, illustrations

ISBN 978-0-98114255-3-5

**T**HIS memoir by the former CEO of the Natal Parks Board describes the four years he spent in his first posting as a ranger before he left for university, where he obtained a PhD for his research on sea turtles. He has written a book about this research and his experiences while conducting it which was reviewed in *Natalia* in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Now he returns to when he was a raw young man thrown into the relatively unspoilt and primitive world of the Giant's Castle Game Reserve in the Drakensberg in the early 1960s.

A gripping raconteur who writes in an engagingly conversational style,

he recounts the rugged life he and his colleagues, the game rangers and African game guards, led – his anecdotes at times lapsing into the over-heated banter of young fellows around the campfire or in the pub, replete with clichés such as "white as a sheet" and "We took to him like a duck to water". At the same time, with the benefit of rigorous academic training and a life in game conservation that culminated in the highest levels of management, he reflects on the policies and practices of the Parks Board and its staff at that time. And with the wisdom of senior years, he

engages in frank introspection into his own callow behaviour and attitudes.

The structure of the book works well. Instead of following a chronological sequence, he has divided it into chapters on different aspects of his and the Reserve's activities. These include fire fighting and burning firebreaks, patrolling for poachers, game capture and translocation, horse riding, and motor vehicles and their use in the reserve. In chapters on the shooting of jackals and baboons and the stocking of rivers with trout, while reliving the excitement, he does not hesitate to analyse the merits of earlier practices of the Parks Board that have since become anathema to conservationists.

The chapter on rock paintings – such an important feature of the reserve – does Hughes little credit. He sets up straw men whom he then proceeds to demolish. Regarding the now standard opinion of academic scholars of rock art concerning the contribution that research into the trance experiences and religious beliefs of the San has to make in interpreting the art, he writes, “Whether every single painting from every site can be so attributed is, however, to me a matter of considerable doubt” (p. 276), and “I find it very hard to attribute this outpouring of artistic genius solely to the shamans and products of the spiritual excesses of their trances” (p. 278). In fact, no serious scholar of rock art says that *all* rock art is the product of trance experience.

To attribute the studies of numerous archaeologists to “fevered speculation” (p. 276) and to say that “there are those people, academics in some cases, who are so convinced of the rightness of their interpretations that they have adopted a fundamental

and intolerant attitude to the opinion of others, including other academics, and belittle and condemn anyone who disagrees with them” (p. 279), Hughes would need to provide chapter and verse. Nothing like that has appeared in the pages of *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*. That he is not familiar with the literature is suggested by his getting the names of Harald Pager and the Rock Art Research Institute of the University of the Witwatersrand wrong. The so-called trance, or religious, explanation is based on nineteenth-century San comments on rock paintings and copies of paintings as well as on detailed accounts of their rituals and myths. This corpus is augmented by anthropological reports on the Kalahari San. The explanation is not just a guess: it is supported by authentic San beliefs, and rigorous analysis has shown that it provides the “best fit” explanation for many of the paintings.

Chapters are devoted to interludes when Hughes was delegated for special duties that took him outside the reserve. After attracting attention for his expert collection and mounting of specimens of small mammals, he was seconded to accompany an African mammal expedition that the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC sent to Zululand for six weeks. His chapters on these subjects are an eye-opener to anyone who thinks of game rangers working only with large mammals, birds, and perhaps reptiles. Antelope do, in fact, play a large part in his story, including his trip to the Northern Cape to capture red hartebeest (when he and a colleague called on the sister-in-charge at the Kimberley Hospital to ask if she could introduce a couple of nurses for a night on the town, which

she did). He also spent a season of the sardine run patrolling the beaches of the South Coast.

His enthusiasm for interludes leads to the inclusion of four chapters – a total of 40 pages – relating a holiday trip he and three friends took in a sedan car to northern Namibia and across the Kalahari to Southern Rhodesia. Although an adventurous itinerary for the time, these pages amount to no more than a holiday story (buying souvenirs at the Victoria Falls etc.) that is out of place in the book.

Much of the narrative features Hughes's colleagues, some of whom became lifelong friends, and he writes with affection of Zulu game guards who mentored and protected him. In one or two cases he suppresses the identity of egregious individuals whose excesses provide well-deserved mirth. In a frank chapter he discusses the race policies and practices within the Parks Board and the general insensitivity and thoughtlessness of the white staff of the time, including himself, towards the people living in tribal areas adjacent to the reserve. He also undertakes painful introspection about his youthful prejudice towards Afrikaners and how those he met changed his attitude.

An attractive feature of the book is the profusion of illustrations. Sketches by Sarah Boulton head every chapter, and almost every second page has an appropriate black-and-white photograph which is captioned. It is amazing how well documented life at Giant's was. In his acknowledgements

Hughes names the variety of people who provided the pictures.

A disappointing aspect of the book is that it has no editorial apparatus. The illustrations are not individually credited, and no list of illustrations is provided. While very few books are named in footnotes, there is no list of references at the end. Since this book is the latest in a long tradition of memoirs by South African game rangers, it would have been of interest to have a select bibliography, especially of books about the Natal Parks Board because Hughes has so much to say about its history and changing ethos. Furthermore, although so many personalities feature in his narrative, there is no index, which is a disappointment to readers who knew some of the people Hughes writes about, often with warmth. And it is a pity that a good editor did not eliminate the occasional errors of language, spelling, punctuation and typography.

However, one must accept that this is not an academic book. It is a personal account and a timely record. We can hope that George Hughes, with his facility as a writer and fearless intellectual acumen, will still find time in his retirement to provide a definitive account of the Natal Parks Board.

ELWYN JENKINS

**NOTE**

- 1 Mike Perrin, Review of *Between the Tides: In Search of Sea Turtles* by George Hughes (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013). *Natalia*, 43, Dec. 2013, pp. 169–170.

**ALAS POOR LITTLE COLONY An illustrated history of Port Natal**

by BRIAN KEARNEY

Durban Heritage Trust, the Durban Local History Museums' Trust and the author  
Three Volumes, 1455 pages

ISBN 978-0-620-58942-0

THE Port of Durban has for many years been one of the world's more important and strategic of harbours, ranking among the top Southern Hemisphere ports. Today it is modern and well equipped with all the navigational and infrastructural aids for handling ships of sizes unheard or undreamed of when ships first began calling at Port Natal.

Yet, in spite of its strategic and economic value it is sad to reflect how Durban Harbour continues to have a general lack of exposure. When this great port is compared with that of Cape Town and the huge amount of exposure that the Western Cape port enjoys, one might be excused for thinking of that port as the more important commercial hub of southern Africa instead of the other way round.

Numerous books and magazine and newspaper articles continue to stamp this impression, while the ports of KwaZulu-Natal and those in the Eastern Cape remain scarcely recorded. Authors such as Lawrence Green, George Young, Brian Ingpen and Jose Berman among others have gone far to add to the magnetism of Cape Town.

Nevertheless, Durban and other ports and harbours around South Africa remain a rich source of stories waiting to be explored and shared – where for example are the seducing tales of the notorious Point of old, of the seamen's haunts that were known across the seven oceans but remained a mystery at home? Who knows the tale of Rosie Dry and other larger-than-life

characters? And what about the moving accounts of the Indian fishing community that lived in stilt houses beyond Salisbury Island, when that free-standing, mangrove-forested sandbank was an island fully surrounded by water whenever the tide was in?

Or, for that matter, what of the family holiday homes to be found on that island before the arrival of war chased all civilians from it? Or stories about the houses and the beaches facing onto the harbour on the Bluff side, much favoured by those who lived on that woody peninsula and separated from the rest of Durban by the bay?

What about the tales of the noisy but graceful flying boats that first used Salisbury Island as a base for international flights and later transferred to the headwaters of Durban Bay, and the later war machines of the same ilk that took their place? These are stories fading into the mists of time.

How about the ships that came calling to this great port? Ships like the majestic Union-Castle liners and others such as the *Empress of Britain*, or later the graceful *Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Mary 2* of Cunard fame. Or an account of the great many warships of both world wars that sought shelter and often repair in the protected Durban Bay, or those that gathered to sail in vast convoys from the anchorage outside?

And then there are the great debates that ensued over issues affecting the harbour, involving well-known local politicians and world-famous engi-

neers who suddenly entered the arena and in some instances disappeared equally fast. Who made the decisions that finally placed Durban so firmly on the world map as a port of prominence?

These and many similar thoughts came to mind with the launching of a three-volume work on the history of Port Natal, written and compiled by Durban author and historian, Professor Brian Kearney. Taking more than 1 400 pages to complete his telling, *Alas Poor Little Colony* is a weighty tome disclosing little of the romance of the port and even less of the apocryphal tales that ordinarily so easily entertain.

But what it lacks in light-hearted or romantic approach the three volumes more than make up for in bringing together a chronological and detailed account of how Port Natal came about, sketching the early history, the natural environment that existed when the first settler-explorers arrived, Durban's military history and the early and subsequent attempts by the engineers to turn the shallow and treacherous waters of Durban Bay into a safe harbour.

Kearney overlooks little in his search for the facts behind how the port evolved and we are able to understand the background behind the advent of the early dredgers, which in Durban played such a pioneering role, and the landing places and wharves. Even detail of the electrical requirements receives his full attention.

Volume 2 focuses heavily on the ships and cargo that came to the port and devotes considerable detail to the shipwrecks of the early period. In Volume 3 Kearney deals with the people that made the port, not only the port captains and marine pilots and tug

masters but the general workers and the conditions of their employment, the use of togt labour which persists in other forms even today, and convict labour.

With his architectural background, the author cannot be expected to ignore the often fascinating architecture of the port, from the early designs of goods sheds to those that followed, and to the houses erected at the Point for senior managers – many of which remain intact today.

This is an important addition to the thin library of books available on our harbour and indeed our early Durban history, for the port and city are so intertwined as to be inseparable. It is essentially a deeply researched reference book such as has been lacking and one to which future historians and general authors will owe a debt of gratitude for such an in-depth source from which to draw the salient facts required.

If there has to be a criticism, it is that *Alas Poor Little Colony* covers only the colonial period. Had it advanced through the years of post-colonialism into the 21st century no doubt it would be embracing six volumes or more. It appears unlikely that the author will undertake further writings beyond his remarkable achievement in these three volumes, which took over 20 years in the doing, so a challenge awaits some future historian.

The book has been published by the author together with the Durban Heritage Trust and the Durban Local History Museums' Trust. It comes in an A-4 format with hard covers, is printed on good paper and is amply illustrated throughout, including numerous photographs and illustrations that have not been previously published.

TERRY HUTSON

## ZULU PLANT NAMES

by ADRIAN KOOPMAN

Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015.

324 pages, soft cover, colour photos and black-and-white illustrations, plant name index and general index

ISBN: 978-1-86914-281-0

**T**HIS very welcome book on Zulu plant names follows the acclaimed book *Zulu Names* (winner of the 2002 UKZN Book Prize) written by well published and distinguished Zulu linguist and onomastician, Professor Adrian Koopman. The work is, by his own admission, not a dictionary of Zulu plant names or a reference book. Instead it is a fascinating record of plants, their intriguing meanings in Zulu, and the underpinning customs and folklore that detail the complex relationship between the plants, the Zulu language and Zulu culture.#

Koopman acknowledges that much of his data is from collections of Zulu plant names that are 50 years old or more. This means that many of the scientific botanical names have been replaced when botanists have discovered new taxonomic groups. Instances where this has occurred are indicated by an asterisk and the new current entry is found in the list of synonyms after the bibliography.

The author's emphasis throughout the book is on the relationship between the underlying meanings of the words that refer to plants such as trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses, the plants themselves and the various ways in which these plants are not only used, but also perceived in Zulu society. To this end, the first part of the book has been written with separate chapters on structure and meaning. In these chapters the linguistic disciplines of morphology and semantics have been introduced which reflect the

“mechanics” not only of the plant names but also the Zulu language in which they are embedded.

In the section on structure, specific aspects of names such as the various types of Zulu noun stems are investigated, amongst other morphological discussions aspects such as plants with simple stems **ugagane** (*Dichrostachys cinerea*) are compared to those with reduplicated stems **intikintiki** (*Cyphia longifolia*) and complex stems **umthongakazane** (*Pyrenacantha scandens*), as well as plants with phrasal names such as **umnduze wotshani obomvu** (*Disa chrysostachya*). Morphological variations are also looked at in this section on structure.

In dealing with the chapter on the semantics of plant names Koopman considers aspects of referential meanings of plant names compared to their connotative, associative and lexical meanings as in the name of the Knobwood tree (*Zanthoxylum capense*), in the descriptive Zulu name **amabelentombi** – maiden's breasts. The exploration of the underlying semantic correlation of this name is accompanied by one of Angela Beaumont's many drawings throughout the book, of the cone-shaped knobs on the trunks of the tree which vividly brings to life the meaning that is under discussion. Koopman, an accomplished artist himself, also contributes some of his own illustrations in the book.

The longest chapter in the book deals with the names of plants that

describe the plant itself and various of its physical characteristics, e.g. the various plants that reflect the Zulu word **amasi** (sour milk) in their stems which metaphorically alludes to trees and plants that have a milky sap; names that describe where the plant can be found e.g. *Croton sylvaticus*, **ugibeleweni** meaning “climbing up the cliff” and plant names that describe the relationship between the plant and the animal world, e.g. the descriptive Zulu name for *Aloe barberae*, **umhlabandlazi** (what stabs the mousebird).

The latter part of this book looks in detail at the various usage of plant names in the realms of medicinal use, names used in the various types of protective and love charms as well as the names of plants used in rites and rituals; names that refer to the practical use of plants such as in construction, craftwork, dyes, insecticides etc and finally the use of names used in chants, incantations and spells. This part of the book provides some onomastic gems that are found in the Zulu names for plants that cure impotence such as *Gloriosa superba* the Flame Lily, **isimiselo** (cause to stand, remain firm) and *Eriosema salignum*, **uphondongozi** (horn of danger) as well as plants used as love charms such as **ubhoqo**, *Ipomoea pellita* derived from the ideophone “bhoqo” which means to subside or give in and **ungingci-wafika-umntakwethu** (how happy I am that you have arrived my sweetheart), the name of the trailing herb *Polygala serpentaria*.

In this book Koopman provides the reader with a real “botonomical”<sup>1</sup> feast. There is plenty to satisfy the linguistic and African language specialist. For the onomastician, there is an invaluable

wealth of knowledge on various aspects of plant names. For the anthropologist there is a mountain of information on the cultural relationship between Zulu people and the plants around them. For the aspiring herbalist there is valuable information on what plants are used to treat specific medical conditions. For the aspiring lover there are useful hints on what plants are used to concoct various love charms. For the botanical enthusiast, although the author expressly mentions that this book is not intended as a reference work for botanists, the many examples quoted from the publications of botanical experts such as Coates Palgrave, Pooley, Boon and Hutchings prove to be of great interest in exploring the use of many plants in Zulu society and the link that many of the names have to traditional Zulu cultural beliefs. For the lay person this book is an intellectual treasure trove in which one may glean so many interesting and stimulating facts about indigenous Zulu botanical nomenclature.

The author’s stated intent – to show the interface that occurs between language, culture and the world of plants – is not only clearly achieved in this book, but he manages at the same time to evidence the Zulu language in his own words as “a language of beauty and poetry, as a language of great ingenuity ... and as a language providing a deep insight into the culture of the people who speak it”.

NOLEEN TURNER

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Term coined by the author meaning “pertaining to a system of names for botanical entities” which he explains as a “portmanteau word consisting of ‘botany’ + ‘onymic’ (pertaining to names)”.