

HENRY ADAMS AND THE FIRST NATAL SOCIETY LIBRARY BUILDING

Peter Croeser writes:

A regular early visitor to the first Natal Society Library building, opened to the public in 1878, was the Victorian traveller and newspaper journalist Henry Adams (1851–1892). He recalls:

The comfort of visitors is further increased by a filter. The latter item can only be appreciated by those half baked by a dry heat, such as we feel in camp. Wonderful to relate this room is always cool, and free from flies, hence I spent much time here.

His biographer and descendant, Fiona Adams, wrote to the Natal Society Foundation asking whether we had any information about this early form of air-

cooling. We have searched, but have yet to find, any description of how the first library cooled the air and filtered the dust out.

Fiona Adams is annotating a collection of Victorian travel writings for publication which includes newspaper articles written by Henry Adams, who visited Pietermaritzburg from 26 September to 18 October 1878.

He was *en route* from Durban to Pretoria with Bishop Henry Bousfield, Pretoria's first Anglican Bishop. The Bishop's party of 19 were forced to wait first in Pietermaritzburg and then in Howick for the drought to break as there was no grazing for their oxen, says Fiona.



Henry Adams relieved the tedium of waiting by spending much time in the library and provides, from his newspaper articles, the following notes:

FRIDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 1878

In the evening the first of very many pleasant hours were spent at the Natal Society, another of those African Societies which provide public Reading Rooms on a large scale. I gather from their twenty-seventh report that the present building and fittings cost £2 420, and the land £343. Perhaps you are curious to know how the money was obtained. Well, a single bazaar realised two thousand guineas, and the Corporation voted £200.

The library contains 4 136 volumes. History is represented by 420, Biography 274, Theology 122 and Fiction 1 547. The issue of last year included 9 961 of Fiction, 46 of Theology, and 6 694 of bound Magazines.

Books may be read in the rooms by the general public, but only subscribers can walk off with them. There were 5 life members, 87 who paid a guinea, 163 at half a guinea, 47 half yearly, 79 quarterly, and 68 of the casual type. The income was £357, expenditure £347. Six free lectures were given, and a Dramatic Entertainment that increased the funds by £12.

The reading room is large and lofty, the ceiling boasts of polished boards. Three hundred people are easily seated in this hall, and the average attendance of readers last year was 116 a day. The tables are well supplied with colonial and English papers and magazines, and the comfort of visitors is further increased by a filter. The latter item can only be appreciated by those half-baked by a dry heat, such as we feel in camp. Wonderful to relate this room is always cool, and free from flies, hence I spent much time here. Rooms are provided for subscribers, draughts and chess, and ladies.

The fairer sex, however, more frequently use the large room. The Librarian, Mr Beale, is the right man in the right place, full of zeal and activity, from him I received great attention and information.

Fiona Adams writes of her ancestor that he was most impressed with the various libraries he came across on the trek from Durban to Pretoria, especially as he had been very involved himself in initiating and then running several reading rooms in the UK (first in Andover when he was still in his teens, and then in London). He was a strong believer in the value of intellectual societies, especially in small towns *where wide gulfs divide class from class, where there is a want of unity ... Directly a number of persons band themselves together and form a society, under strict rules, then commences social and agreeable intercourse, intellect is pitted against intellect, mind is brought to bear on mind, and collision of sentiment is beneficial and has great effect.*

He was also a believer in *the great value of journalism as one of the main civilizers of the present age.* Journalism made possible *the free interchange of thought on all subjects, which ever tends to enlarge the understanding, correct the judgment, refine and liberalize the spirit.* So, as a teenager, he began writing feature articles about local places of interest for a parochial English newspaper. The same paper commissioned him a few years later to write about his journey to South Africa with Bishop Bousfield and his experiences on the overland trek to Pretoria from Durban.

After the Bishop's party arrived in Pretoria in early January 1879, Henry wrote about life in Pretoria during

the Anglo-Zulu War, which broke out within a few days of their arrival, the preparations for which they had seen in the Natal towns they passed through on their journey. He also threw himself into various public duties: he joined and then became Captain of No. 2 Company, Transvaal Rifle Volunteers, in the face of rumours of an imminent Zulu attack on Pretoria; formed a cadet corps that mounted a guard of honour for Sir Bartle Frere's visit in April 1879; started a debating society and a choral society, of which he became Honorary Secretary; and also joined the St Alban's choral union.

Combined with the weight of his theological studies under Bishop Bousfield's tutelage, these duties forced an end to his writing. For a few years (1879–1889) Henry Adams enjoyed a minor public profile as a founding member of the English Church in the Transvaal, and as a priest in the small towns of Lydenburg and Barberton during their respective gold rushes. But it faded quickly – he left the church in 1889 and three years later his death, in 1892, was ruled a suicide. That ruling ensured he was, undeservedly, quickly and completely forgotten.

Fiona Adams worked as a production manager and editor in the academic and NGO publishing sectors for 20 years. Subsequent involvement in the digital curation of documentary photography archives at the University of Cape Town then led to work as a researcher for photographer David Goldblatt, and to starting a project to digitise a large collection of photographs, diaries and other documents from her paternal (Adams/Wessels) ancestors. This, in turn, led to the discovery of Fiona's great-grandfather Henry Adams's diary and scrapbook of press clippings.