

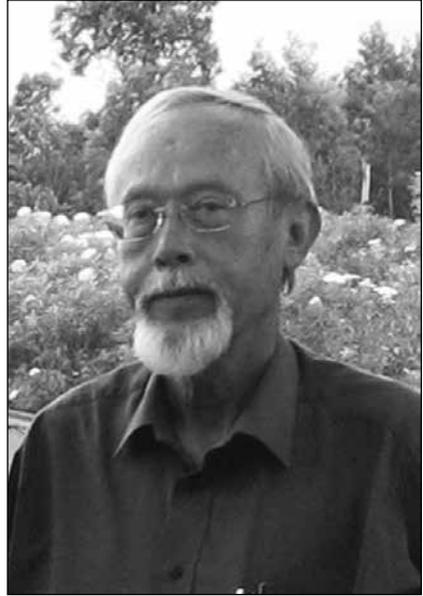
Peter Michael Colvile Croeser (1949–2016)

Peter Michael Colvile Croeser who served on *Natalia*'s editorial committee and as a trustee, administrator, and chairman of the Natal Society Foundation (NSF), died on Saturday 29 October 2016 at his home in Prestbury at the age of 67, after a short illness.

Born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) in 1949, he was the first of two boys born to Shirley and Michael Croeser. His father was a tobacco farmer but became a successful landscape artist in South Africa. The family moved to South Africa when Peter and his brother Lawrence were still young. The boys attended various boarding schools in the Transvaal and elsewhere before the family settled in Knysna.

Peter's life was filled with his work concerning the recording and dissemination of various types of information. His first profession was journalism, which he began while conscripted in the South African Defence Force. He continued working as a journalist in Johannesburg at *The Star* newspaper. During the 1970s he left Hillbrow and his job at *The Star* to pursue a science degree at Rhodes University. Whilst studying, he simultaneously ran the *Grocott's Mail* newspaper together with his wife Fiona, who was also then studying at Rhodes. During this period their two sons Michael and David were born.

After completing his degree at Rhodes University, Peter changed professions. In 1982 the family moved to Pietermaritzburg where Peter took up a post in the arachnology department at the Natal Museum (now the KwaZulu-Natal Museum). Peter became a world expert on the huntsman



spider, completing his MSc on a revision of the genus *Palystes* in 1996. He has a number of species of spider named after him, namely *Caddella croeseri* (1988), *Penestomus croeseri* (1989) and *Afrocto croeseri* (2010). During his career as a scientist, Peter described seven new species of rain spider (in *Palystes* and *Sparassidae*).

Despite the significance of his work in South African arachnology and natural science, Peter was not satisfied that it was meaningful enough to the community in which he lived. This led him to take up the position of chief education officer at the museum in 1991, a position he held until he retired at the end of 2008.

As chief education officer, Peter held weekly biology lessons for high school students at the museum and sometimes offered extra lessons in other final year school subjects. These were focused lessons for children

from township schools who were struggling to cope with the content or wanted to improve their understanding of the subjects taught. These began at a critical time in South Africa when children from township schools began to be admitted to former model C schools and had difficulty adapting to their new environment. The lessons Peter gave helped many children in the Pietermaritzburg community adapt to English-medium schools with a foreign language and custom. Later, Peter would also facilitate weekly poetry sessions at the museum by making the museum's main hall available to different youth groups free of charge. These sessions ended after his retirement in 2008.

Peter's dedication to teaching and skilling learners to extract the most from their school learning took a unique turn in 1992 when he separated from his wife and opened his home in Prestbury to young students in whom he saw potential but who needed a helping hand. These learners lived in his home with his two sons, learning not only the skills they would need to succeed in their new school environments but also general skills from carpentry and plumbing to driving and cooking or jam making. Peter played the role of the 'old wise man', the 'elder of the tribe', who taught and guided the youth under his tutelage through their adolescence into

adulthood. It was as a result of this role played to predominately Zulu children that he became known as *ikhehla* (old man) or *umdala* (old person). He was very practical and imparted his skills to generations of children who passed through his household from the early 1990s to his death.

After Peter retired from the KwaZulu-Natal Museum in 2008, he took up the rotating chairmanship of the Natal Society Foundation Trust (NSFT). Peter was instrumental in turning over the Natal Society Library to the Msunduzi Municipality and the establishment of the NSFT. At the time of his death, he was the administrator of the NSFT.

In his work at the NSFT with his fellow trustees, he helped administer scholarships to needy students, publish books of historical significance to Pietermaritzburg, facilitate the continued publication of the historical journal *Natalia* by serving on its editorial committee, and continued an association with the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The Pietermaritzburg community has lost a man who made the city a better place and who lived a life of service to its people and some of its key institutions. Peter was a rare individual whose legacy will live on far into the future.

PHILA MSIMANG