

## THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE: AN EXHIBITION ON THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY IN THE KWAZULU-NATAL MIDLANDS

by PETER CROESER

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THE *Freedom Guidebook to the Exhibition on the Struggle for Racial Equality in the Kwazulu-Natal Midlands* (its cover title) by Peter Croeser was published posthumously in 2016. It was intended as a pamphlet to accompany the museum exhibition entitled 'Freedom' (written in big red letters at the entrance of the exhibition), which for many local people is poignant as it represents the struggle in resisting the injustice of colonialism and the oppressive nature of the apartheid state. Peter Croeser was the chief education officer at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum until his retirement in 2008, in addition to being a vital member of the *Natalia* team. He actively served the local community in the region and this book is a reflection of his generous, interactive engagement with the people of this province.

The publication is described on the Natal Society Foundation website as primarily a 'peoples' history, with both the exhibition and the book commencing with hunter-gatherer history and ending with the country's new Constitution adopted in 1996 – the book and the exhibition running in tandem. Therefore, both the book and the exhibition, officially opened on 26 September 2013, record the fight for emancipation and how long it took for many people. Given that the book and the exhibition are inextricably linked, this review needs to examine both together.

As a 'peoples' history of the region, the author has consulted with various

people to forge a narrative in order to inform the exhibition that accompanies this book. The volume engages the reader from the start and presents a combination of social and political history, supported by oral evidence, which allows it to make a significant and diverse contribution to the discourse of historical events in KwaZulu-Natal. The written narrative in the book is then presented in an audio form for visitors to the exhibition.

Both the chapters and the exhibition are focused using a linear timeline beginning with the peopling of the interior of KwaZulu-Natal, and then move on to describe the colonial government and the system of segregation in South Africa as a precursor to apartheid. As one enters the gallery the left-hand side exhibits a display of hunter-gatherer people. This is interactive and allows the audience to watch a video on a screen, which is concurrently interpreted in the *Freedom Guidebook*. Thus this early, unwritten history is complemented by a number of other exhibits, all of which focus on the narrative of the struggle against the apartheid state and the negative effects that the apartheid state had on the people of South Africa.

A good example of this is a display about the Bantu Education system, which presents a number of desks, in which each has information and objects inside and tells the audience a story about a real person who was affected by Bantu Education. This allows the

reader to understand and have empathy for the people whose story is being told, in order to inculcate understanding for others who have had their freedom curtailed in order to move forward into the future in this country. Another such exhibition focuses on the 1990s in KwaZulu-Natal, and demonstrates the historical evidence of the violent recent past in a physical way: a glass cabinet with hand-made weapons and guns used in the regional political conflict of the time. Certain parts of the exhibition have had to be taken down due to public contention about this representation of the violence.

Thus the oral history and the memories of the past allow for each group of people to have their own stories and histories to tell; this is what makes the exhibition and the book a good combination of both recording and interpreting history. This dual presen-

tation allows the audience to interpret the exhibition, supplemented, or not, by information contained in the book. I recommend visiting the KwaZulu-Natal Museum and downloading the *Freedom Guidebook* (a free e-book) from the museum or from the Natal Society Foundation website and interpreting this history yourself.

A very important note for readers of the *Freedom Guidebook* is that the text is written in English and Zulu, and thus is capable of reaching out to a larger audience through its publication as an electronic book and also because of the dual language coverage. While innovative in its approach, *Freedom Guidebook* does have a few typographical errors in it and perhaps captions could accompany the photographs, especially when there are many people in a single photograph.

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