

NATALIA AT 50: AN OVERVIEW AND APPRECIATION

by Christopher Merrett

NOT many journals reach their fiftieth year, especially those managed and produced on a voluntary basis; so this issue of *Natalia* is of considerable significance. Its first volume under the editorship of Colin Webb involved no great fanfare, just a reiteration of the Natal Society's 1865 remit: 'The acquisition and preservation of information of local value and interest, and the general encouragement of habits of study, investigation and research.'¹ Its seeds had been sown in a cyclostyled publication 'Natal notes and news' compiled by Ron Brown, university librarian, in 1969; and this lasted for four quarterly issues.² Volume 1 of *Natalia* elicited just one criticism – from 'a reader who favours a narrower subject focus' and who felt the journal 'is attempting to serve too many diverse interests.'³ That opinion was wisely and firmly binned and it is the title's generalist nature that has been its greatest and most enduring strength. This approach initially owed much to feedback from the staff of the Natal Society Library reference section and evidence of 'an astonishing range of cross-cutting interests'. *Natalia* was intended as a research tool and it is only in very recent years that this characteristic has finally waned, although it is not entirely lost.

It is unclear how much was charged for the first issue, but it contained an apologetic note about a price rise to R1 for the second and by 1975 that amount had doubled. Perhaps surprisingly, *Natalia* was able to attract advertising and the first issue included an advert from City Printing Works, the printer of

this fiftieth number. Advertising ceased in 1983.

Natalia began, and has remained, a forum for 'all those engaged in scholarly and artistic endeavour in Natal.'⁴ For instance, the first five issues embraced topics as diverse as the playwright H.W.D. (Cake) Manson (in effect this was the publication's first obituary), perception of landscape, the proposed Anglican Cathedral, domestic architecture, environmental history, flora and fauna, town and regional planning, the wattle industry, and school history; a great deal on the history of the Natal Society Library; and the inevitable British settlers.

Predictably all the initial editorial committee were white, but at the outset women were well represented. Webb dominated the five years of publication until he departed for the University of Cape Town, and its firm foundation and subsequent longevity owe much to him.⁵ His successor as editor, John Clark, described the publication he inherited as 'academically sound but original, stimulating, and always relevant'.⁶ The format by then established endured for over 45 years: a reprint and/or publication of a previously unpublished document; main articles; notes and queries (which for many years was a collection of short contributions edited by one person usually Margery Moberly, John Deane or Moray Comrie); obituaries (from 1976 onwards);⁷ book reviews;⁸ and various bibliographic listings. Eventually, the last dwindled to a list of Natal publications whose rules of inclusion were somewhat obscure. But in their

heyday they also included a check-list of artists, a register of societies and institutions (from Botanical Gardens to Zululand Historical Museum), research in progress, and the beginnings of a bibliography of Natal maps.⁹ This is another indication of the strong imprint at the journal's inception, and for some years afterwards, of librarians.¹⁰ On one unusual occasion a book index was included.¹¹ An editorial by John Clark emphasised the crucial importance of archival preservation.¹²

Issues of *Natalia* were often framed by anniversaries, the most notable of which involved the centenary of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879–1880. This number (8, 1978) became a collectors' item regarded as *Africana*. In the eleventh issue David Buckley, a key but much under-rated member of staff at Natal Society Library, published an index to the first ten volumes.¹³ He used it to point to omissions in content, singling out the Indian community and religion (although the Anglican Church had not been neglected). The first gap was rectified in 1985 with a collection of contributions to mark the 125th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers on the *Truro*. It included an interview conducted by Moray Comrie with Sam Chetty.

The years of the early 1980s saw some decisive moments under Jack Frost's editorship. First, in 1982 it was decided to refer articles on military history to specialist journals; second, he tried to widen *Natalia*'s provincial reach by involving correspondents from Ladysmith, Dundee, Greytown and Eshowe; and third, what was arguably the journal's first article to recognise a multiracial approach to the life of the province was published.¹⁴ The journal gradually began to reflect wider

society, for example more obituaries of African Natalians starting with ANC founder member Selby Msimang (1982), Daphne Tshabalala (1983) and Alphaeus Zulu (1988); then extending to victims of political conflict such as Victor Africander (1990), Mhlabunzima Maphumulo (1991) and Reggie Hadebe (1992). The severe regional unrest that eventually became a low-key civil war in March 1990 was mentioned, but only in passing and deemed to be 'too close for objective analysis'.¹⁵

In the late 1980s the journal hit a bumpy patch. By 1987 the register of research was already seen as failing in its purpose and then contributions were hit by the onset of academic research bureaucracy. The very strengths of *Natalia*, its general content and appeal and editorial freedom, were antipathetic to the SAPSE system that would from now on govern university research output. It appears that the editorial committee tried to obtain accreditation, but failed. Although the 1989 issue consequently carried just two articles, this apparent failure was fortuitous. *Natalia* continued to flourish in a spirit of voluntarism and free from the dead hand of bureaucracy. Emphasis remained focused on broad content, appeal and readability within a standard format. An unusual element of humour was introduced in 1987 with an obituary for the Natal Training College.¹⁶

By 1995, *Natalia* had reached the halfway mark in its lifetime to date. Editor Graham Dominy, reflecting on the huge challenges faced by the democratic dispensation, wrote about his belief that 'there is a place for a journal of this type to maintain a record [and] stimulate debate ... need[ing] to reflect the changing conditions in the province ... We look forward

to contributions which help to illuminate the history and culture of all our region's inhabitants.¹⁷ He was absolutely correct. His first issue was dedicated to the memory of Colin Webb, marked the involvement of an international editorial consultant, and saw the end of the research register.¹⁸ His second illustrated the perils of thematic issues: the necessary copy for an environmental theme failed to materialise and publication had to be deferred for a double issue in 1994. This was, however, notable for the first appearance of colour illustrations. The next issue featured two articles that might be regarded as *Natalia's* first to address the impact of apartheid.¹⁹ Publication of the Natal Society lecture remained problematic as it did not always reflect provincial content, and was sometimes based around graphic material rather than text.

Paradoxically, at times in the early post-apartheid years there was a sense of regression about *Natalia* with very uniform content and all-white male obituaries under an overwhelmingly male editorial committee.²⁰ The 1999 issue was given over to the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War. However, in 1998 the first article by a Zulu writer had appeared,²¹ obituaries of female and black Natalians re-emerged in 1999, and in 2000 there appeared the first article on the Natal violence.²² The committee also defied the politically correct, but nonsensical, use of the Zulu word *isi-Zulu* in English language texts, and has logically stuck to its decision ever since.

With the new century *Natalia's* editorial committee had to deal with the takeover of Natal Society Library by Msunduzi Municipality, but the journal's future was secured by the Natal Society Foundation Trust (NSFT)

which ring-fenced the Society's assets. The outcome in Comrie's words was the 'familiar mix'.²³ There were, however, significant changes including the (short-lived) appearance of a black member of the editorial committee, Jabulani Sithole. A particularly current and relevant article (in 2005) focused on Pietermaritzburg's street name changes.²⁴ Jack Frost resumed the editorship in 2007 with a second double issue to 'restore numerical tidiness'. The editor also noted that the continued survival of the journal was a tribute to altruism and that much of the content derived from the editorial board.²⁵ This was recognised by the NSFT, which decided that *Natalia* should be 'distributed free of charge to major libraries and historical resource institutions in South Africa ... [and] sold to subscribers ... at a reduced rate.'²⁶ Pat McKenzie, now retired from his administrative position at Natal Society Library, put in an enormous amount of work marketing back issues to booksellers and sales boomed for the last few years before hard copy became passé and Internet usage became pervasive.

This positive picture was not universally shared, however. Reporting to the NSFT in 2002, John Deane 'added that over the past 6 years the Editorial Board had asked itself on a number of occasions whether *Natalia* should continue to exist.' He noted a lack of interest from both the general public and academics because of university research and publication requirements. As publication in *Natalia* had no material reward, it was difficult to keep writers to deadlines. It was suggested that a closer relationship with the University of Natal Press be sought, but nothing came of this.²⁷

Technical innovation now intervened, much of it encouraged by Peter Croeser,

the NSFT representative on the editorial committee. In 2008 a colour cover was used and from 2009 the text was arranged in columns. From the following year, when the editor noted *Natalia* had achieved ‘corpulent middle age’ sustained by an increasing number of unsolicited contributions,²⁸ all issues including the current one appeared on a website. This spelled the end of indexes as the entire journal was now searchable, article by article, online.²⁹ Further change was in the air, but would take longer to effect. The inclusion of obituaries was deemed ‘arbitrary and idiosyncratic’ in 2012 and reform was suggested.³⁰ But it failed to materialise and obituaries were finally phased out only in 2020. Similarly, the unpublished article feature was to fade into oblivion along with the list of publications.

By mid-decade, editorial change had become inevitable with long-standing editors opting to retire. The names of three of the 2015 committee – Frost, Deane and Bill Guest – had first appeared in 1978 and this was their last appearance together. Jack Frost, in what would turn out to be a valedictory editorial, noted that ‘The stamina and broad wisdom of the journal puts many more self-important competitors to shame ... a triumph of public-spirited volunteerism’.³¹ He was particularly complimentary about the willingness of the NSFT to carry on funding the publication. He and Deane gave way after 38 years to the interim editorship of Adrian Koopman and Elwyn Jenkins in 2016 and the following year the first female editor, Debbie Whelan, took over. She stressed greater diversity and envisaged ‘reimagining and repackaging’ the journal, noting a global reach from its website.³² One immediate innovation was a discussion section. This

was a beginning to measured change since the ‘bones of the usual publication remain’.³³ In 2018 the first article to appear in the Zulu language – about the Yellow-billed Hornbill – was published.³⁴

There is no reason why *Natalia* should not flourish for another 50 issues: its purpose and approach are as valid today as they were in 1971 and the spirit and enthusiasm of Webb, Brown and many others live on. In the world of the worthwhile, continuity is imperative. This will inevitably involve technical change. Usage of *Natalia* is now almost entirely online and its editorial committee no longer meets physically: its international spread and the coronavirus mean that it gathers instead with the aid of Zoom.³⁵ But the need to document the history of *Natalia* remains as insistent as ever. The lacunae remain enormous; the Internet beckons.

NOTES

- 1 Colin de B. Webb, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 1 (1971), p. 6. Natal Society had been founded in May 1851.
- 2 Graham Dominy, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 25 (1995), p. 5. Ron Brown’s intention was eclectic: to cover ‘the natural environment, the early inhabitants, European and Indian settlers, buildings and places, artefacts and plans for the future’; and to record current research. The December 1969 issue was the last and led eventually to *Natalia*, although surprisingly Brown was not on the inaugural editorial committee (Shelagh Spencer, ‘Ronald Arden Brown (1914–2002)’ *Natalia* 32 (2002), p. 54).
- 3 Colin de B. Webb, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 2 (1972), p. 7.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Webb returned to the University of Natal, as vice-principal, in 1985 but did not become officially involved in *Natalia* again, dying on 22 March 1992 before he could resume the editorship in retirement as had been anticipated.
- 6 ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 6 (1976), p. 5. This was not signed, but is assumed to have been written

- by John Clark. Subsequent editors were John Sellers (1978–1980), Jack (T.B.) Frost (1981–1991), Graham Dominy (1992–1995), John Deane and Frost (1996–1999), Moray Comrie (2000–2003), Mark Steele (2004), Frost again (2005–2015), Adrian Koopman and Elwyn Jenkins (2016), and Debbie Whelan (2017 to date).
- 7 The first obituary, fittingly, recorded the life of Ursula Judd, Natal Society librarian (Jennifer Whitelaw and June Farrer, ‘Ursula Evelyn Mabel Judd (1917–1976): a tribute’ *Natalia* 6 (1976), pp. 9–11).
 - 8 The first full book review featured Patricia Vinnicombe’s *People of the Eland* (*Natalia* 6 (1976), pp. 53–54).
 - 9 This was the brainchild of Ron Brown, the university librarian. With his encouragement and preliminary work and the support of Tony Hooper, Natal Society chief librarian, the end result was: Christopher Edmond Merrett, *A Selected Bibliography of Natal Maps, 1800–1977* (Boston, G.K. Hall, 1979).
 - 10 Apart from Brown, these included Ursula Judd, June Farrer, Jennifer Verbeek and Margery (Mobbs) Moberly. The other main input came from education: the university, training college and high schools.
 - 11 H.M. Baudert, ‘Index to Prof. A.F. Hattersley’s *Portrait of a City*’ *Natalia* 5 (1975), pp. 53–58.
 - 12 John Clark, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 7 (1977), pp. 5–6.
 - 13 Further indexes appeared in volumes 21 (Margery Moberly) and 31 (David Buckley again). Buckley, who worked at Natal Society Library from 1968 to 2001, was described by Jack Frost as ‘self-effacing’ (‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 40 (2010), p. vi).
 - 14 Colin Gardner, ‘Natal literature: a scrap of history, and a glance at some poetry’ *Natalia* 13 (1983), pp. 43–66.
 - 15 Jack Frost, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 20 (1990), p. 5.
 - 16 George Dale, ‘Natal Training College (1909–1987)’ *Natalia* 17, pp. 85–87.
 - 17 Graham Dominy, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 25 (1995), pp. 5–6.
 - 18 John Laband and Colin Gardner, ‘Colin de Berri Webb (1930–1992)’ *Natalia* 21 (1991), pp. 7–14. Ged Martin of Edinburgh University was the consultant.
 - 19 Mark Coghlan, ‘The Horticulturalists, Freedom Radio and the Erase Erasmus Society: Pietermaritzburg-based protest against the nationalist government in the 1950s and early 1960s’ *Natalia* 25 (1995), pp. 54–64; Christopher Merrett, ‘Comrades of a particular type: an alternative history of the marathon, 1921–1983’ *Natalia* 25 (1995), pp. 65–76.
 - 20 For the first ten issues of *Natalia*, the male editorial component was 52%, but this regressed to 62% over the first 25. From then on, women were increasingly marginalised and issues 26 to 46, when the first female editor took over, showed an alarming male component of 80% long after gender equality had been accepted as a desirable objective.
 - 21 Phyllis J.N. Zungu, ‘Toponymic lapses in Zulu place names’ *Natalia* 28 (1998), pp. 23–33. Zungu was an academic at University of Durban-Westville.
 - 22 Michael Nuttall, ‘Mediation efforts in turbulent times’ *Natalia* 30 (2000), pp. 24–30.
 - 23 Moray Comrie, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 33 (2003), p. iv.
 - 24 Adrian Koopman and John Deane, ‘New names for old: transformation in the streets of Pietermaritzburg’ *Natalia* 35 (2005), pp. 85–90.
 - 25 Jack Frost, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 36–37 (2007), p. iv; Jack Frost, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 38 (2008), p. iv.
 - 26 ‘Minutes of a meeting of the trustees of the NSFT’, 17 May 2000.
 - 27 ‘Minutes of a meeting of the trustees of the NSFT’, 19 December 2002.
 - 28 Jack Frost, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 41 (2011), p. v. The issue of 2012 had seven full articles.
 - 29 John Deane did, however, compile ‘A synopsis of articles published in *Natalia* 1–45’. It is searchable and can be found at Natalia.org.za/Natalia.html.
 - 30 Jack Frost, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 42 (2012), p. v.
 - 31 Jack Frost, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 45 (2015), p. v.
 - 32 Debbie Whelan, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 47 (2017), p. v.
 - 33 Debbie Whelan, ‘Editorial’ *Natalia* 48 (2018), p. v.
 - 34 Adrian Koopman, ‘Isimanje emagameni ezinyoni’ *Natalia* 48 (2018), pp. 61–63.
 - 35 During 2020 the NSFT website attracted an average of over 250 user sessions each month, although it is not known how many of these involved *Natalia*.