

Origins of the Natal Society

CHAPTER 6

THE PROVISIONAL COMMITTEE

MAY - JUNE, 1851

Two meetings of the provisional committee¹ of the Natal and East African Society took place. Fears about the size of the meeting proved groundless; seventeen of the forty-six nominated members attended the first meeting and twelve attended the second. Members attending the first meeting, held on 26 May at the Court house, were Henry Cloete (in the chair), D. Moodie, the Rev. James Archbell, the Rev. William Campbell, the Rev. R. Dickson, G. Macleroy, A. T. Caldecott, T. Robertson, D. B. Scott, J. Moreland, R. Moffat, J. P. Hoffman, one of the Zietsmans, Dr. Toohey, G. Robinson, Dr. Johnston and Dr. Torry.

The meeting was informed that the Lieutenant-Governor had accepted the office of patron of the Society; also that John Bird had accepted office on the provisional committee but that C. Behrens, D. D. Buchanan and D. Marquard had declined. G. Robinson was requested to act as secretary for the provisional committee. The following constitution was drawn up:

1. The Society shall be called "The Natal Society" and its object shall be the development of the physical, commercial, agricultural, and other resources of Natal and Eastern Africa, including the general and natural history of the Colony.
2. All persons subscribing 10s or upwards annually to the funds of the Society shall be ordinary members thereof; but none shall be eligible for the Council who does not subscribe at least one guinea per annum. Donors of five guineas at one time, or of books or specimens of the value of ten pounds and upwards, shall be life-members of the Society, and shall be eligible for the Council.
3. The Society shall be under the management of a Council which shall consist of a Patron, President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, and seven other members, all of whom, with the exception of the Patron, shall be chosen annually by ballot.
4. Voting papers must be presented personally by the members, except in the case of persons who reside at a distance of at least three hours' ride, or twenty miles, from Pietermaritzburg, and such persons may send in their voting papers by another member, provided the papers be authenticated by the signature of the subscriber, and also specify in his own handwriting the names of the persons voted for.
5. The Council shall meet at least once a month, and shall have power to frame bye laws, having effect until the next Annual or Special Meeting, which shall confirm or disallow them, in manner hereinafter provided.

1. *Natal Society records*, Vol. 1, pp. 9-16.

6. In the event of parties elected to the Council declining to act, or in the event of vacancies occurring by death, resignation or otherwise, during the year, the persons next in number of votes on the ballot list for the year, shall be deemed to be chosen on the Council, and summoned accordingly.
7. His Honor the Lieut. Governor for the time being shall be requested to be Patron of the Society.
8. The property of the Society shall be vested in three Trustees, to be chosen by ballot at a General Meeting. They shall be removable only by non-subscription, non-residence in the district, insolvency, or by a vote of at least three-fourths of the subscribers present at a meeting specially called for that purpose.
9. The Trustees shall not have the authority to purchase any landed or other property (that power being solely vested in the Council for the time being) but are required to form a perfect inventory of all the effects of the Society and to present it at the annual general meeting of subscribers or whenever called upon by the Council.
10. The annual meeting of the Society shall be held on the third Tuesday of the month of June on each succeeding year, at which the accounts of the Society duly audited shall be presented; the Council for the ensuing year chosen, and the general business of the Society transacted. In the absence of the President and Vice-President any general meeting may choose a Chairman for the occasion.
11. Special meetings of the Society may be called at any time by the Council or by any ten members on giving at least fourteen days' notice, in some one of the public newspapers, stating the objects thereof; and no business shall be transacted at such special meetings unless so notified.
12. The means employed in prosecuting the objects of the Society shall be the collecting of authentic information, and the delivery of lectures or papers, on the physical capabilities of the district of Natal, and the parts bordering thereon, including their Geography, Zoology, Geology, Mineralogy and Botany; the peculiarities of climate and soil, with special reference to the purposes of Agriculture and Commerce; also the history, national characteristics, and social condition of the native tribes; together with opinions and suggestions as to the best practical methods of developing the varied resources of this portion of the African Continent, so as most effectually to promote the interests of Agriculture, Commerce and Civilization.
13. The Council shall have the power to publish the whole or any part of its proceedings as they shall deem fit. And the publication of all papers, being part of the proceedings of the Society, shall be under the entire direction and control of the Council.
14. A Library and Museum, illustrative of the objects of the Society, shall be formed as soon as practicable.
15. No alterations or additions shall be made to the Laws, except at an Annual or a Special General Meeting; notice of all such alterations or additions shall be included in the circular or advertisement calling the meeting; and the consent thereto of at least three-fourths of the subscribers present shall be indispensable.

This constitution calls for one or two comments. It will be noticed that already 'The Natal and East African Society' has been shortened to 'The Natal Society'. The net, however, was not to be cast merely over Pietermaritzburg; arrangements were made (Rule 4) for the voting arrangements of persons residing three hours' ride away. Above all (in view of the way matters developed) it is interesting to note that the Library came at the end, almost as an afterthought, and then it was to be 'illustrative of the objects of the Society'.

The Committee met again next day at the Court house,² Henry Cloete taking the chair. The rules were carefully considered and amended, and it was then resolved that they be submitted to subscribers at a meeting to be held on 17 June. An interesting argument now enlivened the meeting; Dr. Johnston moved that a sub-committee be appointed to recommend for election at the General Meeting certain eligible office-bearers. However:

The Rev. Dickson and A. Walker strongly objected to the proposal as virtually superseding the election by ballot already determined on; as infringing the liberty of choice by members generally, and as implying a reflection on their common sense and judgment. The Chairman emphatically expressed his concurrence in the objections made and pronounced the proposal to be not only injudicious and invidious but so contrary to the basis laid down by the public meeting of the 9th inst., that if it had met with a seconder he should still have felt it to be incompetent for him to put it to the vote.

The idea was hurriedly dropped. The next resolution, however, had something of the same idea; editors were to be asked to publish the draft rules together with the list of subscribers. (This would obviate having people nominated who had not paid.) The meeting closed with a sub-committee formed to canvass subscriptions; nominated were Dickson, Archbell, Walker, Macleroy and Robinson.

One absentee from the provisional committee meetings is notable. Where was J. M. Howell? He had moved a stirring resolution (the first) at the inaugural meeting, and was to be a tremendous live-wire once the Council started work. However, he was a man of wide interests and concerns. His name frequently appears in the papers, and at this period we have proof that he was worried by reports from the Cape of barbarous murders by Hottentots and Kafirs on the Eastern frontier. He was:

prepared at an hour's notice, at my own expense, without any remuneration, and in the meanest capacity, to fight again the battles of my country. Say but the word and you will find me ready.³

The general meeting called for 17 June duly took place⁴ with Henry Cloete in the chair. The rules, with a few slight amendments, were approved unanimously.

The next business for the meeting was the election of the officers, when some discussion took place as to whether the nomination of candidates would not be the more regular mode of procedure. The

2. *Natal Society records*, Vol. 1, p. 15.

3. *Natal Independent*, 22.5.1851.

4. *Natal Society records*, Vol. 1, p. 17.

discussion was conducted with some warmth, but finally terminated in the reading over of the list of subscribers eligible for office, from which everyone was at liberty to vote . . .

A ballot then took place, and the results were as follows; Cloete was elected president, Moodie was elected vice-president, and the treasurer was to be J. Archbell. The secretary was to be J. C. Toohey and the trustees elected were C. R. Sinclair, J. Archbell and J. P. Hoffman. The council members were the Rev. W. Campbell, R. Thomson, G. Macleroy, P. H. Zietsman, C. R. Sinclair, P. Otto, and J. M. Howell or A. Walker.

Business then turned on offers of books. It was J. M. Howell who made the very first offer: fifty books to be presented as soon as the Society was ready to receive them. The Rev. Mr. Campbell then rose to say that Mr. Moffat would present fifty volumes on South Africa (a gesture he apparently later regretted). The Recorder said he parted from his books as from dear and valued friends, but after such munificence, he would also donate fifty volumes.

The Chairman was gratified to see the interest His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor had taken in the welfare of the Society, and regarded it as a prelude to the able support that would be rendered to it by His Honor, both in his public and private capacity — especially in the granting of a suitable site for an appropriate edifice in which to conduct the Society's affairs.

The meeting closed with votes of thanks to Mr. Robinson, which he acknowledged 'with great feeling', and to the Recorder. Needless to say, the last word rests with the likeable and industrious Archbell, but recently elected to two offices. In his *Natal Independent* for 19 June he writes:

The formation of this Institution having been brought so far as now to be regarded as a consummated and perfected Society with ample machinery for promoting its objects, and liberal funds for accelerating its progress, its aspect may be viewed in its immense bearing upon the interests of Natal, as magnificently grand, and peculiarly propitious, and loudly and unmistakably announcing an onward movement, which must advantageously tell upon the varied sources of social happiness, and general welfare, or it will demonstrate that we are wanting in the performance of the duties we owe to the common weal of our adopted country. It has been suggested, and we perfectly concur in the view, that the union of the library establishment with this institution will be highly advantageous to both. Several truly spirited persons have signified their intention, should such union take place, to make to the society munificent presents of books, etc. This is right, and if we may record another advantage, it is that which will be derived from the union of this and the D'Urban Agricultural Society. The mutual benefits will be obvious to all.

The 'library establishment' was indeed soon to be swallowed up, but the idea regarding union with Durban Agricultural Society never came to anything.