

NSFT 2015 Annual Report

Natal Society Foundation flourishing.

At its annual general meeting on Saturday 5 December, the Chairman of the Foundation's Board of Trustees, Dr Christopher Merrett, said that the Foundation had had a most successful year.

The Natal Society was founded over 164 years ago, making it one of Pietermaritzburg's oldest institutions. Over the years it was synonymous with the city's library, but it was also involved at various times with the museum and drama societies. All that remains today after a great deal of political change and local government reorganisation are the NSFT collections (housed at the Alan Paton Centre (APC) on the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Pietermaritzburg campus) and a trust fund. The last was presciently established in June 1999 in anticipation of the radical change that did indeed subsequently materialise.

Henry Cloete's Natal Society of 1851 was an unashamedly colonial organisation, its *raison d'être* the gathering and dissemination of accurate data about Natal that would attract approved settlers from Britain: in the words of its founding document, 'collecting of authentic information, and the delivery of lectures or papers, on the physical capabilities of the district of Natal ... including Geography, Zoology, Geology and Mineralogy. Council shall have the power to publish.'

Such is the historic key to its current role in which the bulk of its resources are directed towards a publishing programme with a remit framed according to the 1851 terms of reference. Nor is this new: the NSFT and its predecessor has provided finance and logistical support to the annual journal *Natalia* for 45 years (issue 45 has just been published). But since 2010 the NSFT has been producing books from manuscripts that have little or no prospect of acceptance by commercial and academic publishing houses. Most of them reflect archival projects, recording histories that could all too easily be lost permanently from sight.

The NSFT's aim is to produce high-quality books in all respects – content, layout and binding – that are the equal of any published elsewhere in South Africa. And, in line with a commitment to freedom of information, all its publications, *Natalia* included, are immediately posted on its website. Access is, of course, free.

Between 2010 and 2014 NSFT published Bill Guest's historical account of the University of Natal's Faculty of Agriculture; Julie Dyer's history of public health in Pietermaritzburg; and, in its new writers' series, Phila Msimang's *Analytic Aesthetics*. In 2015 the NSFT took another significant step towards establishing itself as a serious publisher and achieved its annual target of three publications:

John Aitchison, *Numbering the Dead: The Course and Pattern of Political Violence in the Natal Midlands, 1987–1989*;

Mary Kleinenberg and Christopher Merrett, *Standing on Street Corners: A History of the Natal Midlands Region of the Black Sash*; and

Bill Guest, *Stella Aurorae: The History of a South African University: Volume 1, Natal University College (1909–1949)*.

A new development was the hosting on its website of a related title not published by the NSFT: *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University: The University of KwaZulu-Natal: Academic Freedom, Corporatisation and Transformation* by Nithaya Chetty and Christopher Merrett.

Three titles are already in an advanced state of preparation for publication in 2016. Such ambitious growth in publishing activity has been accompanied by a widening of the scope of business associates, particularly in the areas of proof reading and cartography. However, given the NSFT's commitment to quality regarding printing and binding, the options available in Pietermaritzburg are becoming worryingly limited.

Christopher Merrett
December 2015