

NSFT 2016 Annual Report

A challenging year for the Trust

At the annual meeting in December trustees recorded with great sadness the sudden death on 29 October of administrator Peter Croeser at the tragically early age of 67. Peter, after playing an important part on the council of Natal Society Library at the time of its transfer to the municipality was then instrumental in shaping a new role for NSFT as a publisher. He served it as chairperson, trustee and administrator and represented it in a number of places, perhaps most importantly on the editorial committee of Natalia. He was replaced on 1 December as full trustee and administrator by Phila Msimang.

While the objectives of the Trust were fully met in 2016, a number of changes, both planned and unanticipated, were put in place. A perplexing crisis erupted in January after the trustees insisted that Natalia should be subject to independent proof reading following the identification of errors in its 45th (2015) edition. The involvement of a supposed 'über proof reader' resulted in much venting of emotion and the making of several demands. The upshot was the resignation of the current and a former editor. Adrian Koopman and Elwyn Jenkins filled the breach for Natalia 46 (2016) and in September the Trust was delighted to announce the appointment of Debbie Whelan of Durban University of Technology as Natalia's editor from 2017.

A second major change involved the decision, mainly as a result of limited human resources, to replace individual book launches with an annual, mid-year Book Day. The first, held on 30 July at the Tatham Art Gallery, introduced to the public Bill Guest's Stella Aurorae volume one (published in 2014) and John Conyngham's Hazara. The event was well attended and resulted in brisk sales that included NSFT's backlist. Indeed, the print run of Hazara was soon so depleted that permission was granted to the author to arrange with local publisher Shuter & Shooter for a paperback edition. In ceding rights, the NSFT unfortunately had to remove the book from its website, thus undermining its commitment to online free public access.

In another policy change the NSFT decided that in future its author contracts would make no reference to royalties. There were compelling reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that most Trust publications are archival in nature and almost certain not to find a mainstream publisher, commercial or academic. Furthermore, as most copies are sold at cost either direct or to booksellers, royalties become part of production costs rather than sales success. And the amount of voluntary work put into otherwise unpublishable works effectively constitutes a royalty in itself.

The NSFT's aim is to produce two titles per annum. Apart from Hazara the other 2016 imprint was Bill Guest's Stella Aurorae volume two, which will go to the printer in early 2017. Four NSFT titles and two others for which the Trust is providing technical assistance comprise a publishing programme that will occupy the next two years. Apart from Jo Marwick's expertise in layout and design and Jenny Cooke's efficient maintenance of the website, the NSFT has the assistance of two proof readers and a cartographer. The NSFT's website has attracted a growing number of visitors with the number of registered users reaching over 150.

Relations with the Alan Paton Centre remained cordial and the Trust's collections (Hattersley and O'Brien) remain in good hands although concern was expressed about general campus security in view of violence associated with the fees-must-fall campaign. In May the APC committee, including the NSFT representative, met the Vice-Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

To comply with s.51 of the Promotion of Access to Information Act of 2000, Peter Croeser and staff at Hay & Scott drew up a manual for the NSFT, which is available from the website.

During 2015 the trustees held four scheduled and one extraordinary meeting. The trustees must be thanked for their advice and support, especially Gillian Richmond for her financial summaries. The Trust's lawyers, Hay & Scott, especially Pauline Hazelden, proved particularly supportive during the hiatus created by Peter Croeser's death.

The Trust's affairs are in an excellent state and its objectives during the year under review have been amply fulfilled.

Christopher Merrett
December 2016