

A Remarkable Survey — The Natal Scene at Union

In 1910 the South Coast Junction Literary Society acquired its own lecture hall.

I suppose I was brought up short more by that fact — having in mind an image of modern Rossburgh — and what it says about the energy of our Edwardian forebears (for the era hadn't changed with the passing of the monarch) than the news that Greytown and Dundee now had electricity and telephones, or that the new zoological gardens at Mitchell Park, which you reached by electric tram, had dromedaries, emus, wildebeest and a lion house. South Coast Junction was apparently even more progressive than the villages up the line, which often had literary societies, but couldn't sport, as the 'Junction' did, the 'social farm' run by the Salvation Army. Facts like these come in myriad quantities — and often with excellent photographic illustration — in what is a beautifully bound and engraved volume, the *Descriptive Guide and Official Handbook* of Natal, produced in 1911 by the Tourist Department of what was now the South African Railways, but still edited and printed in Durban. What I hope to demonstrate here is that these Guides of the NGR/SAR are rich Nataliana, and that any library worth the name should try to salvage remaining copies.

Glancing through them can be disconcerting, though. The sight of those full-dress Edwardians, the ladies frilled and skirted whether on South Beach pier, at the Umsinduzi Boat Station, or striding next to the tourist wagon en route to Giant's Castle, fills one with distinct feelings of inferiority. (I felt awfully junior on seeing the photograph of the interior of the new Natal Museum. There they all are, in position by 1910, my favourite party pieces: the two rhinos fighting, the lion attacking a zebra, the elephant with trunk upreared.) This was the generation that thought nothing of building a special branch of the Pietermaritzburg City Tramway to the Mayor's Garden in Alexandra Park, for use on festive occasions! Not all Natal trams were electrified by the way — one travelled from the railway station to that latest fashionable resort, Isipingo Beach, one and a half miles, by tram of the horse-drawn variety. Quiz question (while we are stopped at Isipingo): Where is Dick King buried? Answer: In the Isipingo cemetery.

The *Guide* makes clear what a blossoming of major buildings there was in the 1900s, pretty well compelling the judgement that our 'ancestral' genius was frankly Edwardian. Not only was there the Maritzburg City Hall of 1901, Durban's City Hall and municipal complex of 1910, the University

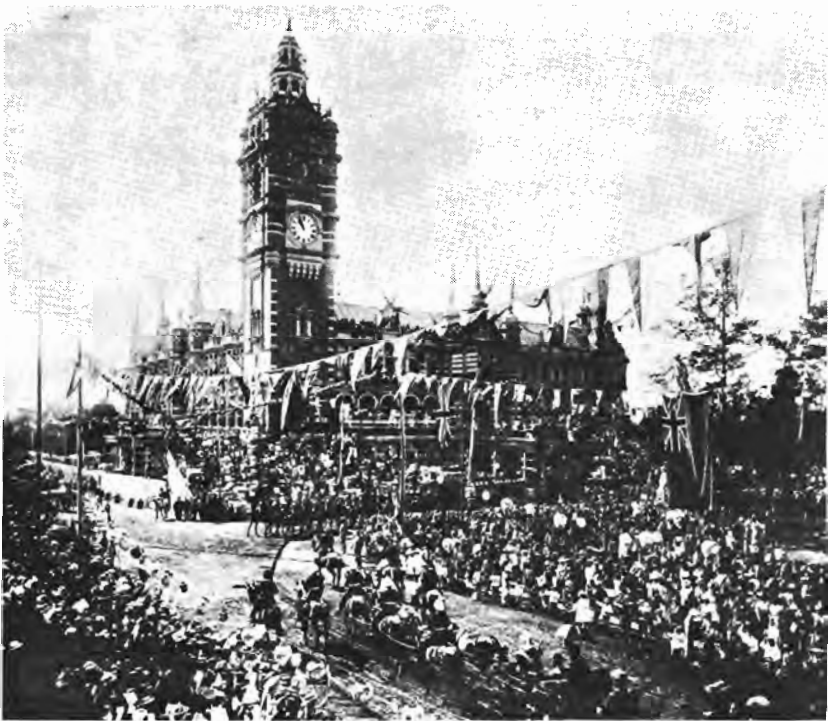


Alexandra Park, Pietermaritzburg

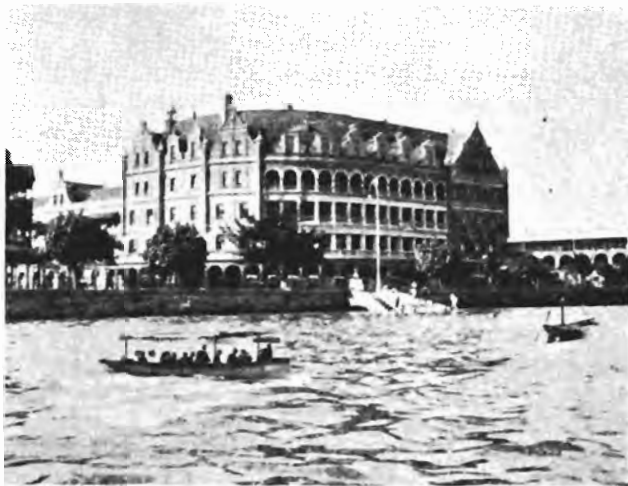
1. Queen Victoria Diamond Jubilee Pavilion
2. Mayor's Garden Party
3. Bandstand

College Buildings reaching completion, the Mounted Police Barracks in Alexandra Road, the Natal Museum, the Durban Club, the West Street shops, the Waverley and Marine Hotels, but also such works as the turfing of the Durban beach front between 1906 and 1909, and the consolidation of the beautiful 'embankment' (now the considerably less beautiful Esplanade) in the same years. Taking in the splendid Bay View from the smoking room of the Club, you would probably miss the 94 acres of swamp that had been reclaimed, whereby timber ships were now tying up at Congella Wharf. Progress of this order saw also the new furrows laid at Weenen and Winterton, and the engineering of the hard-top road between Gingindlovu and Eshowe to put the capital of Zululand, 'English-looking and clean,' firmly on the map, since it could now be reached by traction engine rather than post-cart. (Cleanliness was an industry: we learn that the Inanda 'school for native girls' did business on the side as a laundry, and that 'a great deal of Durban's washing' was done there.)

Not all Edwardian construction was successful. The attempt in 1905/6 to rebuild the wharf at Port Shepstone failed to open the channel that would have resuscitated that promising metropolis. But there were compensations — at the failed wharf one could take a tourist motor launch, drawing 3'6", for a trip of 8½ miles up the Umzimkulu River. And if you thirsted for



Opening of the Town Hall, Pietermaritzburg, by T.R.H. The Duke and Duchess of York, 1901.



Marine Hotel, Durban.

more, a shallower craft could take you further to the site of one of Natal's biggest success stories, the Umzimkulu Lime and Cement Company, basking in the achievement of having won the lime contracts against all foreign comers for the building projects of those years, the post-offices, the city halls and even the new Colonial Buildings. (The stone for these enterprises, we discover, was quarried at Alcock's Spruit, near Newcastle.)

Where would the timber have come from for such a large building programme? Perhaps from the forest near Deepdale on the Umkomaas, now linked by the 'Cape' line, and from which 'yellow wood, sneeze wood, stink wood, white pear and wood suitable for wagon making are sent to market.' Country life of the time had some interesting variations. 3 000 ostriches were being farmed around Greytown and Weenen, and one wonders whether the 'oyster bed at Umzumbi' was just left to trippers. Dairy farming was still laid low after two decades of rinderpest and East Coast fever (two thirds of the cattle population was lost) and the province had shamefacedly to import its condensed milk. A white population of almost exactly 99 000 owned 33 000 horses (same as the present-day ratio of motor vehicles?) while the black population, nearing a million, had 25 000. Horse-breeding was 'down' since the war, of course, but in other sectors there was a resurgence. The 'mealie' (deriving, the *Guide* suggests, from the Portuguese word 'milho', and 'only a few years ago sneered at as a Kaffir crop') was suddenly discovered to be an exportable cereal. The sequel is perhaps best illustrated by the fascinating photographs of maize cultivation using steam traction. But that success story would hardly deflect the wattle farmer, whose product, which raised £16 540 in 1896, earned over £200 000 in 1910. Perhaps this euphoria explains a note of racial sourness: the *Guide* regrets that banana production, worth £80 000 per annum, is 'now almost entirely in the hands of Asiatics'! Undoubtedly there was the odious side to the people who had been systematically introducing trout into Natal rivers since 1899.

The story on Industry is equally euphoric (though the *Guide*, with nice deference to origins, records that the first steam engine in Natal was — no, not the Point locomotive of 1860, but a unit imported in 1855 to power a locally invented sugar mill.) The roving colonial eye, blending acquisition and imagination in equal measure, noted that there was graphite and copper in the Ngeli mountains, china clay at Padley's, a coal seam at Chaka's Kraal Station, and — hush, hush, — that petroleum had been tapped 'two miles distant' from Chaka's Kraal Station. (All proceeds to *Natalia* should this information prove lucrative.) A gold-mine that came into production at Melmoth in 1909 produced 182½ ounces in three months. Did you know that there was once a brick and tile factory at Gezebuso, that Park Rynie had a whaling station, that weekend trippers to Sweetwaters weren't put off by the iron-works there? Did you know that Verulam once sported — Oh those naughty 1900s — three tobacco and cigar factories? More offensive smoke was blown into the idyllic air of the South Coast by Messrs. Kynoch's new 'forest of chimneys' at Umbogintwini (those go-ahead entrepreneurs having already installed a factory on the Bluff to convert whale oil to glycerine.) The race of cigar-smokers had to think quickly in 1905 when the main water-supply to Durban, two reservoirs at Sarnia, was damaged by floods. Result: by 1910 Durban was supplied from a dam on the Upper Umlaas. The *Guide* describes this as 'the largest body of fresh water in Natal'. (It was washed away by floods in 1943. Nagle Dam, on the Umgeni River, was officially opened in 1950. Ed.).

Also astonishing is the widespread electrification and automation, especially in the sugar industry. (Sugar, the *Guide* tells us in an interesting aside, was in Natal before the white man came, in the shape of *umoba*, an indigenous plant.) Mount Edgecombe mill was packing sugar bags automatically by 1910, but had been outstripped by Sir J. Liege Hulett's five-storey tea plant at Kearsney, electrically operated throughout, and



Interior of Scott's Theatre, Pietermaritzburg.

producing 1 500 000 lbs of Assam tea per annum. Not only could you visit the Kearsney factory and estate: you were assured — provided parliament wasn't in session — of a personal greeting from the great man should you do so. Best way was by Natal's only private passenger-carrying railway, opened by the estate in 1901 and connecting with the main-line trains at Stanger. Such activity no doubt explains why the colony's coal production quadrupled between 1900 and 1910 — most of it being consumed, of course, in the bunkering of ships — 9 passenger lines operated into Durban at this date.

The *Guide* produces a nice crop of 'Did you know?' Natal names. Did you know that when the Boers occupied Newcastle they changed its name to Viljoensdorp? — that Kelso was called 'Alexandra Junction', Renishaw 'Crook's [*sic.*] Siding', Paddock on the Harding branch 'Murchison', Tongaat 'Victoria', or that Creighton was more commonly known as 'Dronk Vlei'? But then, did you know that Stanger was named after the first Surveyor-General of Natal? Or that the original name for the Drakensberg was the 'Kahlamba' mountains, or that the Aliwal Shoal was first reported in 1848 by James Anderson, master of the 'Aliwal', which worthy, having survived the discovery, went on in good imperial fashion to get a knighthood and a directorship of the Eastern Telegraph Company? (In 1884, the *Guide* tells us, as a result of a ship striking the Shoal, ten thousand railway sleepers were washed up on the Bluff. It's full of that sort of off-beat information. Some more quiz questions — definitely for buffs only. What station would you buy a ticket to if you wanted to get to 'Burntown [*sic.*]'? Answer: Hemu-hemu, on the Donnybrook branch. Could you post a letter to Curry's Post in 1910? Answer: *Only just* — the post-cart service had been disbanded, but there was a runner who collected the mail at Balgowan station while the train stood for watering!)*

The Edwardians, then, didn't only consist of the languid gentlemen in gaiters who posed with fishing rods on the banks of the Mooi, or took the night train to Somkele, the terminus in Zululand, to join hunting expeditions into the interior. There was also the Brownie-wielding generation for whom Table Mountain was a natural 'rendezvous for picnickers, photographers and scientists.' They looked eagerly out of the train at Seven Oaks to spot hartebeest, and studied the *Guide* for the 'list of Views of the Drakensberg from the main-line.' They rejoiced that the mountains were now only a day away — you could now plan a visit to Champagne Castle via Loskop on the newly opened Winterton branch line. There were the advocates of the two-day trip from Verulam — horses at ten shillings a day — to see the 200 ft. falls on the Umzinyati River, or who arranged with the owner of the Dalton Hotel to do the excursion to the Edwards Falls (ever heard of them?) eight miles away. (Top honours for the 'prettiest waterfall in Natal'? The Umlaas, 6 miles from Cato Ridge. And while you were in the district, why not stroll three miles up Umtimbamkulu from Manderston station, to get the view of the Bluff lighthouse!?)

These were a more refined variety of imperial scrutineer than those who thronged the Ladysmith battlefields in tours arranged by Thomas Cook. They were the sort for whom 'words fail to find adequate expression' for the view at Mont aux Sources, but who would generously offer a point of



Sweetwaters station on the N.G.R. main line.

comparison: the drop below Drei Schusbergspitze in the Dolomites. Most awe-inspiring of all — and let us remember how inaccessible the Tugela Valley must have been at this time — is the casual mention of expeditions from Krantzkop to Msinga for the view at Episweni Mountain: ‘a veritable castle of snow-white quartz’, which ‘in the dark forest looks like a fairy palace.’

What does one feel — nostalgia or guilt!?

W.H. BIZLEY

***Editor's Note:**

There was still a post office at Curry's Post until about World War 2 at which the postmistress was believed to read one's postcards!

