

The Natal Society Library from 1977 to 1980: recollections of a chief librarian:

part 2, national and international exposure

by Tony Hooper

When I was appointed to be the chief librarian for the Natal Society Library, as described in part one of this ethnography,¹ I didn't realise how quickly I would relate to, and become part of the community. My ancestors all came from Natal, and the bones of most of them are buried there. Although I had grown up in Rhodesia, as it was then, and lived in other provinces of South Africa, I very soon identified as a Natalian – with their values and outlook. I wondered why Natal was different from the other provinces.

It was clear that the foundations of Pietermaritzburg society were on display around the city in the form of monuments to a turbulent history. From the time of Dingaan, the city had held a

central position in the interface between Boer, Brit, and the various Nguni tribes of the militant Zulu nation. Even before my ancestors arrived in Natal in 1850, each community had experienced war, depression, hunger or deprivation of various sorts. They had all been in conflict with one another during that time. All came from societies proud of their heritage. The conflicts bred both animosity and respect. Their slice of history helped to determine the values and attitudes of their parents, teachers and other behavioural examples. In Natal, as in Rhodesia and other colonies of the British Empire, discipline, and its by-product self-sacrifice, were expected. Courage and commitment to country were both demanded and prized.

Pietermaritzburg seemed to me to be filled with fine people of all races, who exemplified such values, and had done so for over 150 years.

To better understand the character of the people of Natal, I can do no better than to refer to the many obituaries of prominent citizens published in past editions of *Natalia*. There, friends and colleagues who had populated my years in Pietermaritzburg reflect on the lives of each other. The photograph of the Natal Society Council in 1979 contains many of those people. They are in the back row from left to right, Pat McKenzie (secretary), Bob Owen, Richard Steyn, John Sellers, Angus Rose, Councillor C.W. Wood, Councillor Harry Lundie and Tony Hooper (chief librarian). In the front row from left to right are Dr Frank Friedlander, Alan Norman (treasurer), His Worship the Mayor Councillor A.F. Tarr, the Deputy Mayor Councillor Pamela Reid (chairman), Simon Roberts (vice-chairman), Frank Martin MEC and Gordon Anderson.

At the Natal Society annual lecture in August 1988, Colin Gardner articulated a fitting tribute to a man who was the friend of so many members of the Natal Society and who epitomised the values and aspirations of the time.² Alan Paton was a regular visitor to the library while I was there, and a personal friend of Pat McKenzie, the chief administrative officer of the library.

Similarly, the tributes to Colin Webb identify why he played such an illustrious role as an historian and university vice-principal. As John Laband wrote about him, 'He played a prominent role in the founding of *Natalia* and was the first chairman of its editorial board (1971–1975), as well as a council member of the Natal Society (1965–1975, 1988–1992), and one of its vice-presidents (1988–1992)'.³ June Farrer and Jennifer Whitelaw wrote a fitting tribute to Sue Judd that was referred to in part one of this article.⁴ Four others from that time deserve special mention: Bob Stevenson, Michael Daly, Simon Roberts



Natal Society Council, 1979

and Pat McKenzie.⁵

Because of the prominent role she played in Pietermaritzburg before and after my tenure as librarian I must make special mention of Michael Daly's articulate obituary in memory of Pam Reid. He knew her better than I and captures well the contradictory, and sometimes exasperating elements of her personality; as is evident from this quote:

But Pamela Reid was made of enduring stuff. Against the odds she faced across the political divide, she remained unbending in principle and yielded nothing to her opponents. She was constantly disparaged and branded by them as hard and cold, excessively difficult and infuriatingly imperious; nevertheless, she gained their admiration and respect. Her adversaries were compelled by force of her example to acknowledge in her a formidable strength of character and an unshakeable belief in what was right and proper that rendered her impervious to corruption, whether in the cut and thrust of public life or in the private domain. But just as the obverse of every coin has its reverse, so it was with Pamela Reid. Away from the jar and friction of municipal politics, her steely-eyed determination and her distant manner could be gone in a wink and suddenly there would appear a more affable and less forbidding Pamela Reid. However, because of her innate reserve, she was not blessed with an easy camaraderie. On the contrary, she found it difficult to be at ease except with her very close friends. On occasion with them, she could easily erupt into another more convivial Pam altogether, full of spontaneous humour, a great sense of fun, subtle repartee and much charm. She was, without doubt, marvellous company when the shadow of the City Hall fell elsewhere.⁶

My wife Adje and I had been fortunate to have known both sides of the coin

that was Pam Reid; from the 'admiration and respect' to the 'spontaneous humour, sense of fun, subtle repartee and much charm.' It was she whose 'strength of character and unbending principle' had ensured the funding of the city's new library building on Market Square. When I arrived in Pietermaritzburg in 1974 that building was still being built.

Since then, much has changed. Pietermaritzburg is now called Msunduzi and the Natal Society Library is called the Bessie Head Library. According to the Msunduzi Municipal website

By 1 April 2004, when the libraries and staff of The Natal Society were integrated into the Msunduzi Municipality and became the Msunduzi Municipal Library Services this building had become very shabby over the intervening years due to overuse and lack of maintenance. Thanks to two major Carnegie grants a new children's wing was built and opened in June 2006 and a major renovation project was begun on the old building in 2007.⁷

If by April 2004 the library was over-used and underfunded it had done its job. The state of a library is not a reflection on the skill of the librarians, but rather a reflection of the values of the community it serves. Human nature remains the same. So, what had happened in the interim to make the community values change?

Back in 1851, a group of well-meaning citizens got together to find ways of improving the world that they lived in. That in itself was remarkable. In their small corner of the British Empire at a time when David Livingstone was lost somewhere in the vast unknown Africa to the north, both British and Dutch citizens of Pietermaritzburg had identified a need for education, enlightenment and understanding. One of the tangible and

lasting products of that meeting was the Natal Society Library.

By the end of World War II, racial superiority had been dealt a death blow by Aryan anti-Semitism on the one hand, and the contributions made to the victory of the Allies by their colonised peoples on the other. Although not entirely evident at the time, colonialism had no future. The divisions created in Africa by three centuries of engagement with Europe obscured that reality. At all levels of society, South Africans brushed up against one another to negotiate, on a daily basis, a new way of running the country. The frictional interface was not only political, but based on race, language and tribal groupings. With Council members who had lived through and participated in two world wars and the Depression, it is not surprising that the focus and objectives of the Natal Society changed to meet a new vision: to provide quality library services in a non-racial environment for the wellbeing of all the citizens.

This coalescence of people, events and history transformed the library into a reflection of the social divisions of the time. The long association of the *Natal Witness* with the Natal Society, both products of a very British-based culture, linked the two institutions as vehicles of that transformation. The founder of the *Natal Witness* was David Dale Buchanan, one of those who attended the first meeting of the Natal Society in 1851.⁸

Soon after I had moved to Pietermaritzburg, I was ordered to continue my military service in the Pietermaritzburg Commando in the grounds of the Natal Carbineers. Among the most congenial of my fellow officers was Richard Steyn, who in 1975 had been appointed as editor of the *Natal Witness*.⁹ Like me,

Steyn was there to complete his compulsory national service commitments. In his quiet, low-profile way he was to facilitate considerable positive exposure for the library during the period of my tenure as librarian. The result was that the Natal Society Library enjoyed far more press coverage than perhaps it deserved and certainly more than most libraries in the rest of the country received. He linked the long historical association of the *Natal Witness* and the Natal Society Library to enhance his newspaper's relevance to community values and interests, but also, perhaps, to help define them. The result was reflected in the opinions presented in the 'Witness Postbag'.

One of the debates was initiated by my professional colleague, C.J. (Niels) Fourie, head of the Natal Provincial Library Services (NPLS), which co-ordinated and funded all the other public libraries throughout the province of Natal. Niels Fourie was a product of his time. His family had been farmers caught up in the Anglo-Boer War. What the British did to the Boers in the scorched earth policy of farm burnings and the appalling deaths among women and children in the concentration camps, as described by BurrIDGE Spies,¹⁰ left Niels Fourie's family impoverished and resentful. He told me how he went to school without shoes, cold and hungry. For the many others like him, the National Party policy of apartheid reflected many of the issues that remained unresolved in the Treaty of Vereeniging at the end of the Anglo-Boer War.

Fourie saw the NPLS as a vehicle to implement the government's apartheid policies in public libraries throughout the province. Using the politics of the time, he wanted the Natal Society Library to fall under the jurisdiction

of the NPLS. The broader base of tax revenue available to his NPLS could provide leverage on the citizens of Pietermaritzburg to bring the Natal Society Library under provincial control. Fourie knew he had time, money and national legislation on his side. The Natal Society Library had history, sentiment and tradition on theirs.

In 1977 and 1978 the Natal Society Library showed the working reality of an institution at the cutting edge of the changes facing South African society as a whole. The main issue – the legality of the decision in 1974 to open the library to all races, and the impact of that decision on the use of the library – would not go away. It was a minor skirmish in an older, much larger, conflict, but I had reason to question the tactics used by Fourie. One or two of his staff told me that they had been requested to sign a petition against the open policy of the Natal Society Library. They were afraid that if they refused, they would destroy their hopes of future promotion.

In a letter to the *Natal Witness* Fourie wrote:

I can assure you ... that the proud history built up over decades by devoted whites has been handed over to the blacks, and the whites will just not support you in future. In my experience, integration is always acceptable to those people who can get something for nothing and without laboriously building over the years, while it is seldom acceptable on the same level or downwards.¹¹

Within days, the *Natal Witness* published a big, two-page spread that featured the special collections of the library, including the historic newspapers and rarer books and manuscripts to be found there. This was a treasure that Pietermaritzburg could not afford to

lose to the province.¹²

In 1978, a local leaflet entitled the *Spectator* reported that ‘because of the opening of the library to all races, it was impossible for whites to get a seat in the reference section upstairs as they were occupied almost entirely by non-whites.’ It also reported that ‘the whole of the Reference Section had been rearranged so that the books could be behind the counter ... because a large number of books had disappeared.’¹³

After the interview with a reporter from the *Spectator*, I was quoted as stating that the reason for the change to the layout of the Reference Section was to provide more tables to accommodate the larger number of people who were using the area. Over the two years since the library had moved into the new building, white membership had increased by 40%, while black membership had only increased by 10%. Whereas white users often came into the library for information, photocopied what they needed and left, many black users had nowhere else to study so they were inclined to stay. That in itself would give a misperception of what was happening. The *Spectator* report concluded that ‘even though Black education might be benefitting greatly, Black-White relations appear to be under a considerable strain as a result.’ At the time the *Spectator* report struck me as mischievous, but it was evidence of a wider, grassroots debate taking place within the community.

Nevertheless, the *Witness* continued to be the forum of choice for most public expressions of support for the library and what it was trying to do. It was a pressure release valve for citizens as well as a thermometer to assess the climate of opinion. The usual clichés were trotted out by people of all races, reflecting a society coming to terms

with inevitable change. They may have sounded like people being angry and defensive, but most were rather expressions of anxiety and uncertainty. Many people accepted the justice of the library being for the use of all the citizens of Pietermaritzburg, but if it was extrapolated into a generalised future policy, they were afraid where the path might lead.

Pam Reid and the Council of the Natal Society could see the benefit of wide publicity for our open policy, especially that to be gained on an international stage. They wanted the Natal Society Library to be mixing with the great and the good of the international library world. I was asked to arrange for the Natal Society Library to become an institutional member of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). Our application was accepted, so in 1977 they sent me to attend the 50th Jubilee Conference of IFLA in Brussels. Before I left, a press release appeared: 'With the tremendous increase in the amount of use of the library we are having to look at the possibility of low-cost automation to improve the service to the Pietermaritzburg community', I was quoted as saying.¹⁴

With the support of the British Council, I was able to investigate computerised circulation systems to speed up library lending transactions. To that end I added to my IFLA conference attendance a visit to London and Lancaster universities and public library systems in Hove and London. In Brussels I met up with Betty Stone. She had been one of my professors at the Catholic University of America Library School and was about to become the president of the American Library Association. Through her charm offensive in support of the Natal Society Library, I was able to meet leading people in IFLA and

from around the world. All were friendly and courteous and appeared pleasantly surprised at meeting a South African librarian. Antony Lewin Robinson, director of the South African Library in Cape Town, and I were the only South Africans there.

My conference attendance paid off in several ways. On my return to South Africa, the *Natal Witness* reported me as saying: 'As a South African library we are unique – our doors are open to all races, we are a copyright library, and we play a national role.'¹⁵ Asked about the issues discussed at the IFLA conference, I identified the impact of television on libraries, topical because of the comparatively recent introduction of television in South Africa. 'Television has defined the role of the library more clearly ... Libraries can offer more variety in the cultural field through a communications medium which is completely different'; although precisely what I meant by that now eludes me. In the light of the subsequent impact of the yet-unborn Internet, it appears to have been a more prescient statement than I originally intended.

Further media coverage of library activities came thick and fast. The *Daily News* reported that the Natal Society Library was planning to 'plug into the city computer' to 'reduce staff costs and increase efficiency'. The news item enlarged further on the impact of television on library services: 'The idea had emerged that library services should link up with the mass media to revitalise their approach. He was planning adult and children's programmes at the library in Pietermaritzburg to involve as many people as possible in its activities.'¹⁶

Three other news items appeared in the *Natal Witness* that month: one on a children's colouring contest that drew

250 entries; another on the participation of the Natal Society Library in a Books for Troops campaign; and the impact of a new import tax imposed by the minister of finance that hit the library with a 15% increase in the cost of books.¹⁷

The new import tax provided Pam Reid with a weapon to confront the government. 'As libraries are the main purchasers of books in South Africa and as most libraries are funded by public money raised through taxation, this double taxation is deplorable', she was reported as saying. The economic situation had a considerable impact on the library with a steady increase in registrations and use 'as people strive to improve their education and the efficiency of their business at least cost'.

In 1978, the Natal Society identified exceptional growth and therefore the tremendous success of the library in meeting the needs of the people of Pietermaritzburg. As a possible solution to the problem of crowding in the central library building, the development of branch libraries was mooted but a shortage of municipal funds at the time meant that any such proposal was not approved.

The dramatic increase in the price of books remained a problem. In her chairman's address to the members Pam Reid laid into the Associated Booksellers of South Africa cartel for their price-gouging by pointing out that the library was paying 50% to 60% more than the British published price for books. She illustrated the problem in terms that would have been understood most clearly by many in the audience: one could buy two bottles of whisky for the price of a novel.

The import tax and the increased price of books was the sort of budget squeeze that played into the hands of Fourie – or

so he hoped. As a politician Pam Reid could not let slip an opportunity to climb into the NPLS as well, stirring things up for Fourie:

At present, slightly over 10% of the Natal Society Library's annual operating budget comes from the Natal Provincial Administration. In other provinces non-affiliated libraries receive up to 50% of their operating budgets from the Provincial authorities, and it is considered that a similar arrangement should pertain in Natal.

Accusations that the deteriorating quality of books in the library is due to the presence of Asiatics, Coloureds and Blacks in the library are unfounded. Only 15% of the membership of the library is made up of people other than members of the White population group... The fact that a high proportion of users of the Reference Library are non-white students is a clear indication of the lack of available facilities for these people in their own educational institutions. The library itself cannot be blamed for doing its job as a legal deposit library.¹⁸

She also reported on my negotiations with the South African record industry to deposit one copy of every locally recorded pressing published so that a National Record Archives for the people of South Africa could be established at the Natal Society Library. It was a nice idea, but in the end it didn't get any traction at a national level.

All these statements were published in the *Natal Witness*. In an interview, I detailed the causes and expected consequences of a cutback in financial support from the City Council. 'Most of our budget items are fixed and we have no control over them, except for the book vote which has been cut by about 40%. This has been done despite the fact that book prices have risen almost 50% over

the last year.¹⁹ Several letters in support of the library were published and most were surprisingly supportive.²⁰ One reader questioned why we should receive ‘so much kindly service from the ladies behind the counter, plus the choice of hundreds of books absolutely free? Let us pay a subscription as we did long ago.’

Another, under the pen-name of Citizen, was critical of black students who rushed into the library when it opened in order to secure for themselves their chosen seat, only to work on their school texts rather than on reference works from the library collection. The writer asked the question what they were doing in the library when they should have been at school. ‘Were they staying away from school because of slack discipline or were they boycotting classes? This is certainly an urgent matter for the Director of Black Education to look into.’

More to my liking, Traveller wrote that ‘The Natal Society Library needs a really massive shot in the arm for its much-used book stock – and soon ... This famous library has done wonders on the proverbial shoestring ... The staff and management leave nothing to be desired ... This is one of our great copy-right libraries: it has an international reputation to keep up, and it has a large population to provide for; a population that just has to be well educated. This needs money of course.’ Traveller called for the City Council and the Provincial Administration to ‘give really generous grants to this vital library in our Capital City.’ I couldn’t decide whether this letter was written tongue-in-cheek, or whether it was naïvely serious. But I applauded the sentiment, and would happily have bought him a beer.

The following day, the *Natal Witness* picked up on the letters and backed us

totally.²¹ One reporter went to interview two black school principals about the reported behaviour of pupils who ‘haunt’ the library. J.M. Mbovu of Sobantu regretted what he termed ‘a Black children problem. When they finish exams, we provide them with “school passes” so that they can look for work ... But now it appears that when they don’t find work they go to the library, if they do not have money for the movies’. Canaan Buthelezi of Amakholwa High School said that the library should not be used as a school. ‘I have told my students not to go to the library during school hours, because I’ve always felt ashamed when I see Black students flooding a public library. Do other races do this kind of thing?’

Another *Witness* article had ‘Hard words for Govt’s tax on education’ as its headline and strongly supported the Natal Society Library’s defence of its open policy. It remained a social issue that bubbled away gently just beneath the surface, but other issues were coming to the boil, and opening the library to all races had receded into history.

In that climate, my tenure as chief librarian at the Natal Society Library was coming to an end. On 7 February 1980, having been appointed to the position of university librarian at the University of Cape Town, I submitted my resignation to Pam Reid. She was reported in the *Natal Witness* a day or two later as saying that my resignation had been accepted ‘with regret. But I fully appreciate his desire to extend his library experience. Since coming to Pietermaritzburg, he has become a valuable member, not only of the profession, but of the community as a whole’.

By the time I left the Natal Society Library, I had fulfilled the reasons for which I was originally appointed:

defusing the political climate resulting from Sue Judd's resignation; and presiding over the move to the new library building. My role had required me to deal with the public, the press, the Natal Society Council and its members. I had also represented the Natal Society at IFLA. It had been good experience for me and a great opportunity. The dedicated library staff were working well as a team and our stature in the community could not have been higher. Despite its few detractors, the Natal Society and its library enjoyed a great deal of media coverage and a lot of goodwill. The people had a new public library building fit for purpose and prominently situated in the centre of the city. For that, they could thank Pam Reid, the City Council and the Council of the Natal Society for the leadership, vision and energy they provided. The dedicated staff of the library over the years, including Sue Judd, June Farrer and Pat McKenzie, had all carried out the policy of their employers with commitment and competence.

All of them, in different ways, found the world they grew up in wanting and decided to do something about its inadequacies and injustices. A world in which people were segregated because of their skin colour was immoral and untenable, and they were motivated to change it into something better. The Natal Society Council knew that a new library building in the Pietermaritzburg of 1975 had to be accessible to all the people of the city – even if that did not apply to any other public library in South Africa at the time. By addressing the issues that confronted them, they did what they could and what they did was admirable.

If after almost 25 years that library had become tired and in need of refresh-

ment, it is a tribute to the vision and work of all the people mentioned in this article and many others. Even Niels Fourie's vision was ultimately realised when the Pietermaritzburg Public Library became part of the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Library Services and changed its name to the Bessie Head Library.

A day or two before I left for Cape Town, I walked out of the library to find a political demonstration taking place in Church Street. People were milling around, agitated and shouting. The mood was decidedly abusive and malicious. One young man, with hostile eyes and flaring nostrils called me a 'white racist capitalist' – or words to that effect. I did not take the insult personally. His was a mood that was to grow and to divide the community in the decade of the 1980s as the citizens adjusted to the new political tensions of the time.

Others must write about those who have presided over the government of Msunduzi and KwaZulu-Natal since then. But just as our deeds in the 1960s and 1970s have been judged by later generations, so, even now, their deeds are the subject of judgement. The facts of history will not go away. What we consider to be normal will always be subject to change. It is our responsibility as citizens to make our world a better place. That was what made the first meeting of the Natal Society in the Pietermaritzburg of 1851 so remarkable. The Natal Society Foundation continues to encourage those values over one hundred and seventy years later.

NOTES

- 1 Tony Hooper, 'The Natal Society Library from 1974 to 1980: recollections of a chief librarian' *Natalia* 50 (2020), pp. 32–43.
- 2 Colin Gardner. 'Alan Paton: often admired, sometimes criticized, usually misunderstood' *Natalia* 18 (1988), pp. 19–28.

- 3 John Laband, 'Colin de Berri Webb: an historian's tribute' *Natalia* 22 (1992), pp. 7–10.
- 4 Jennifer Whitelaw and June Farrer, 'Ursula Evelyn Mabel Judd (1917–1976): a tribute' *Natalia* 6 (1976), pp. 9–11.
- 5 For their obituaries see: Frank Friedlander, 'Robert Elliott Stevenson' *Natalia* 14 (1984), pp. 100–103; Jack Frost, 'Michael Daly (1931–2008)' *Natalia* 38 (2008), pp. 75–76; Jack Frost, 'Simon Roberts (1926–2009)' *Natalia* 40 (2010), pp. 156–158; Jack Frost, 'Patrick Campbell George McKenzie (1931–2019)' *Natalia* 49 (2019), pp. 103–105.
- 6 Michael Daly, 'Pamela Anne Reid, 1925–1996' *Natalia* 26 (1997), pp. 89–90.
- 7 'Msunduzi Municipal Library Services' (available at [Msunduzi | Library](https://www.msunduzi.gov.za/library) accessed 24 September 2021).
- 8 Ursula E.M. Judd, 'The origins of the Natal Society: chapter 4, 1850–1851' *Natalia* 5 (1975), pp. 42–47.
- 9 'The Natal Witness *The Witness* (newspaper), History: Steyn takes over 1974–1990' (available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Witness_\(newspaper\)#Steyn_takes_over_1974%E2%80%931990](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Witness_(newspaper)#Steyn_takes_over_1974%E2%80%931990), accessed 21 September 2020).
- 10 S. Burridge Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics: January 1900–May 1902* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1977).
- 11 C.J. (Niels) Fourie, 'Fourie takes up the challenge' *Natal Witness*, 29 August 1977, p. 10.
- 12 'Natal Society Library a vast source of knowledge' *Natal Witness*, 14 September 1977, pp. 3–4.
- 13 'Library complaint' *Spectator*, April 1978, pp. 1, 8.
- 14 'Chief librarian on European tour' *Natal Witness*, 26 August 1977, p. 11.
- 15 'Library chief returns' *Natal Witness*, 1 October 1977.
- 16 'Library may plug into city computer' *Daily News*, 3 October 1977.
- 17 *Natal Witness*, 14 October 1977.
- 18 Natal Society, *Annual Report together with the Balance Sheets and Revenue and Expenditure Accounts for the Financial Year ended 31st July 1978*.
- 19 'Library faces cash squeeze' *Natal Witness*, 16 November 1978.
- 20 *Natal Witness*, 27 November 1978.
- 21 *Natal Witness*, 28 November 1978.