

THE ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF NATAL 1984–2021

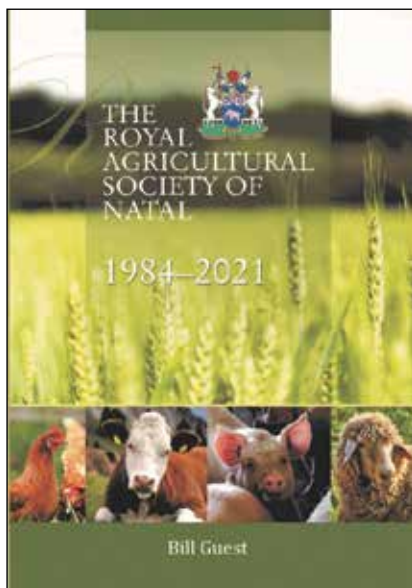
by BILL GUEST

Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation and the Royal Agricultural Society of Natal, 2022.

INSTITUTIONAL histories are bread and butter work for historians and seemingly simple to approach: the institutions or organisations usually have comprehensive archives and have kept contact with past workers, committee and board members, and others, so the historian doesn't have far to go or deep to dig in order to put the history together. There are drawbacks, especially when you are writing a more recent history: those involved are often still alive or only recently passed, well-known in the community, and the organisations or institutions are not too keen on critical analysis. Bill Guest has become an old hand at this and, once again, he picks up where others have left off before him in his latest offering.

Ruth Gordon's earlier volume, *The Royal Show*, left the story hanging in 1984 and Bill Guest follows much the same format, ordering the material chronologically and providing synopsis and reflection at the end of each chapter and at the end of the book as a whole. It is clear from both books that this institution has played a significant role in colonial and, later, provincial history. The two books read like a who's who of colonial Natal and KwaZulu-Natal society and, interestingly, not to those only involved in agricultural pursuits.

There can hardly be a white person in the province who has not attended at least one Royal Show and the gradual multiracialising of the Show in the mid-to late-1980s probably means that few people of all races can claim that they have never attended the Show or the Garden Show. The first time I went on



a school trip, I ended up with a stomach ache and sat most of the day bent over on any chair that I could find. I'm not sure if it was a case of too much of the Fudge Lady's fare or just the over-excitement of going on the school trip that we had waited years for.

I was later to become involved in the Museum Service stand that won an award (although Guest doesn't say what that was: I received the award at a dinner after the show one night as I was on duty at the stand, but even I can't remember what it was for and think it was best first-time exhibitor in the public service category). Apart from the display of the various functions of Museum Service, including a picture of me recording information in the Fort Napier cemetery that seemed to grab attention and comments like 'I don't want that job!', we demonstrated wheel-

wrighting, which attracted considerable interest. The Midlands Museums Forum stand a few years later also caused a bit of unease among certain members of the public – it had a display mould of a coiled snake proudly displayed at the front of the stand and many would not come anywhere near to look at the rest of the displays.

Guest includes the Garden Shows which were in their infancy when Gordon wrote her book. I can't remember how many Garden Show stands I helped put together. A lot of hard work, but the Midlands Container Gardening Society despite its roots in the show culture was suffering from the very problems that were to manifest on a macro scale and force the RAS to re-evaluate its existence: lack of attraction to the younger generation; the demise of show 'fever' or competition; and a generational shift in volunteerism from the somewhat colloquial agricultural or garden pursuits to the big issues like global warming and social ills.

Agricultural and garden shows are a particularly British invention and changing demographics and generational mind shifts have necessitated changes in management and thinking around what will sustain them in the future. However, I think the greater commercialisation of the shows has cost them their uniqueness. As kids we wanted to go to the Show because certain things were only available there (I would like to know how many poofy cushions were sold annually!) Now one gets hounded at both the Royal and the Garden shows by the pillow sellers and shoe cleaners, hairdressing tongs and nail and cream products or massage gadget sellers. Even the shift to promoting tourism and turning part of the Show to that purpose, which in many

ways is an offshoot of the downscaling of individual agricultural pursuits, has not been that successful and certainly no rival to the Durban Expo.

The underlying current through the book is the attempts the Royal Agricultural Society (RAS) has made to move with the times, and this is very much aligned to finances. The RAS has debated remaining on the site it has occupied since 1900 and the thinking shifted between embedding itself on the site, firstly by acquiring the site from the municipality and then purchasing adjoining properties, to rationalising those property decisions and leasing out facilities or selling off portions of the site. When the RAS moved to the site, it was on the outskirts of town, but it soon found itself situated within a residential area and running an agricultural show in a residential area brought with it numerous problems. Town planning decisions like the sale of the polo fields across Chatterton Road, thereby requiring stabling for the horses used in the very popular equestrian events to be moved on site and creating a parking nightmare that was never fully resolved, frustrated the RAS and shifted thinking towards moving off the site, which we now know is to finally happen within the next few years.

So, what does the future look like? Guest has included a very comprehensive account about how the RAS came to acquire the property and then to sell it. It is common knowledge that a consortium has bought the property for development, subject to environmental authorisation. That process includes a heritage impact assessment, which identified a number of halls that need to be retained as well as the main arena and some of the bridges over the Dorpspruit. The show will probably be

held there for the next year, but we have already seen the demise of the Garden Show. The RAS is currently favouring a model that has been practised in the Western Cape where funding from the sale of the showgrounds has been used to promote smaller agricultural shows. To this end it will acquire property on the periphery of Pietermaritzburg, probably towards Durban in order to continue to attract visitors from that area. But will another Durban family look out of their back door on a cold and wet day, see that there was enough blue sky 'to make a man's trousers', as the Scottish saying goes, and head off to a freezing day at the Show as we did some fifty years ago?

Bill Guest has covered the difficult period of the dying days of the Royal and Garden shows as we have come

to know them and the book is a good reference work with a good index, with notes included at the end of each chapter. The book succinctly packages nearly forty years of the activities of the RAS, its various and often long-serving presidents, general managers, senior staff and volunteers, all listed in the appendix for easy reference. As in the earlier work, the crafts section is covered well but one wonders how that will fare in the future as the focus returns to agriculture. A new era dawns for the RAS but the uncertainty that has plagued it over the years and particularly during the period covered in this volume remains. We can only wish this provincial institution well in its move to new premises and new ventures.

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