

DURBAN IN THE 1920s AND 1930s

by NIGEL HUGHES

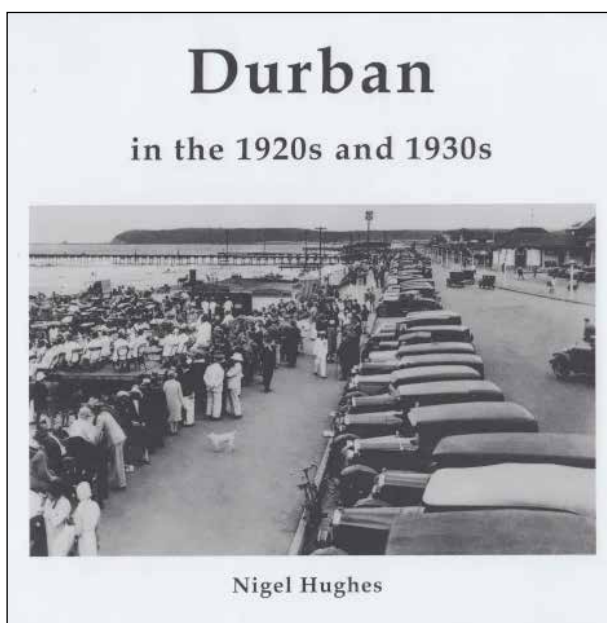
Craighall: Mertrade, 2021

SINCE the invention of photography in the nineteenth century the primary purpose of many photographers has been to objectively record a particular place. In many instances, their surviving photographs have become important historic records simply because of a photograph's ability to capture for posterity a moment in time. The examination of such photographs, particularly in retrospect, can be fascinating and instructive, as well as pleasurable. Nigel Hughes's book *Durban in the 1920s and 1930s* encapsulates this process.

The twenty-year period that Hughes has chosen is significant not only because it encompasses the years between the two world wars, but because it marks a time when Durban, founded a hundred years previously, was becoming a leading port city in Africa. Development of port infrastructure during this period played a crucial role in the evolution of the city's planning, which had consequences for its citizens. It is not surprising therefore that at the core of Hughes's book is Durban as a maritime centre.

With seventy photographs taken almost a century ago, all but one selected from his own library, Hughes presents a visual essay of Durban that captures the spirit of the era. His abiding interest in the important Bay area underpins the four chapters into which the plates are grouped: the Esplanade, the beachfront, Central Durban and surrounding areas, and the Bay. A map of the respective areas at the time precedes each chapter. These, together with a brief and insightful text accompanying each photograph, assist the reader to orientate the images within the city context.

Other than eight hand-coloured images, the plates are all in greyscale. Not only does this enhance the feeling of a bygone era but imbues the photographs with a certain gravity. While there is a strong sense of a dispassionate recording of reality, the well-chosen images give the reader insight into the diversity of Durban's society.



Furthermore, there are minuscule features which the viewer may have missed had Hughes not drawn attention to them, such as in the photograph 'Cato Creek and floating dock': 'with a studious eye the ornamental cast iron balustrading can be seen.'

Applying his extensive knowledge of the city's planning, architecture, and maritime, social and political history, Hughes highlights snippets of interesting information which provide texture and help

bring Durban in the 1920s and 1930s to life. For instance, one cannot help but imagine what it must have been like to be in the crowd on the Beach Promenade, stylishly dressed in Roaring Twenties fashion, leisurely watching and listening to the military band, enjoying refreshments at the Kenilworth Tea Rooms and perhaps taking in a 'talking picture' at the nearby cinema, before catching a trolleybus home.

Hughes uses the original street names but includes their new names in an index. That the streets are lined with many parked cars but are relatively free of moving traffic, is surprising. Naturally there were far fewer people in the city centre than today. But, in some photographs, such as those of the beachfront and Esplanade, people abound.

Interestingly, the preferred location for water-based leisure activities was initially the Bay of Natal rather than the beachfront. As photographs indicate, sailing was particularly popular, with the Point Yacht Club and the Royal Yacht Club conveniently situated on the Victoria Embankment along the shoreline. But the need for efficient transport of industrial goods to the port led to the construction of the Bayside railway line, completed in 1936, which skirted the newly straightened Esplanade. Running from the Congella marshalling yards to the Point, it formed a barrier between the city and the Bay, and gradually, other than for sailing, the focus of recreation moved to the beachfront.

Perhaps it is because Hughes's chosen period falls

between the world wars that the photographs express a sense of optimism in the city's development. For instance, the International Style and Art Deco buildings, many of them still standing, embraced the modern spirit of streamlined mechanisation, echoing European and American trends. This desire to look beyond Africa for a template reflects a confidence to make Durban a global player. Photographs of magnificent overseas passenger liners berthed at the Point and Maydon Wharf endorse this and demonstrate that by the 1930s, Durban had become a scheduled port of call on world cruises.

Many images depict the newly built versions of buildings still prominent today, including the Royal

Hotel, Grey Street Mosque, Playhouse, King's House and Howard College. Given that nearly a century has passed since then, it is remarkable that some buildings have survived while others are in a state of disrepair or completely altered. It is intriguing to look at, for example, how different West Street of 1930 is from Dr Pixie Kaseme Street, as it is known today.

Anyone interested in Durban's history is indebted to Nigel Hughes for seeking out images of the city and meticulously collating them into this important reference book. Its readers can look, learn and draw their own conclusions about a remarkable period of Durban's history.

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