

# *The historian of Victorian Natal:*

## *A.F. Hattersley and a provincial historical tradition*

*by Milner Snell*

Alan Frederick Hattersley's obituary in *Natalia* 6, written by fellow historian and friend John Clarke, was entitled 'The historian of Victorian Natal'.<sup>1</sup> It was an apt description. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Hattersley was a prolific author of works on the British settlers in Natal during the nineteenth century. Hattersley, the first head of the history department at the University of Natal, was one of a number of historians trained at universities in Europe who took up posts in South Africa at the time of World War One. Hattersley, not as well known as some of his contemporaries, adopted and developed a provincial historical tradition, and was popular among English-speaking white Natalians at a time when they felt threatened by the emergence of a black working class and increasingly aggressive Afrikaner nationalists.

### **Early life and writings**

Hattersley was born in 1893 in Leeds. He attended Leeds Grammar School, winning the history prize in his final year in 1910, and graduating with a double first from Downing College, Cambridge, in 1915.<sup>2</sup> He successfully applied for the post of lecturer at Natal University College, which had opened five years earlier, in December 1915, after reading about it through the Cambridge University Applications Board. He sailed for South Africa in April of the following year and arrived in Pietermaritzburg 'late on a Sunday evening in May 1916'.<sup>3</sup> His first impression of academic history at South African universities was not positive. He later commented that 'in 1916 the teaching of history fell far short of realisable standards at scholastic and academic levels. At the university colleges it was possible for a student to get through the first two courses



*Alan F. Hattersley*

without having worked on a single document or primary source.'<sup>4</sup> In defence of the University College, it was at the height of the war and the university consisted of only ten staff members and 36 students. It was only after the cessation of the conflict 'that lecturers and students returned in a flood to the College.'<sup>5</sup>

Hattersley's research and writings until 1930 were on topics of European and imperial history. This is not surprising as he had trained in European history at Cambridge. His first book was *The Colonies and Imperial Federation*, published in 1919.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by *A Short History of Western Civilisation* (1926) and *A Short History of Democracy* (1930).<sup>7</sup>

His work on Western civilisation sold the most copies of all his books.<sup>8</sup> It went into a number of editions and was translated into Spanish. *A Short History of Western Civilisation* and *A Short History of Democracy* were prescribed texts for the first-year course at the university until the late 1950s.

In the early 1930s, Hattersley began to focus on South African history with the publication of *The Great Trek, 1835–37* (1931) and two years later *South Africa, 1652–1933*.<sup>9</sup> In 1935, he wrote *History Teaching in Schools*.<sup>10</sup> Like many liberal historians of the time, including W.M. Macmillan, C.W. de Kiewiet and E.A. Walker, he argued that much of the racial conflict in South Africa was a result of a misunderstanding between races because of differences in language, levels of civilisation and views on land ownership.<sup>11</sup>

### **Annals of Natal**

From the mid-1930s, Hattersley changed the focus of his research from general South African history to the history of Natal. There is no evidence to show exactly why he decided at this point to move away from a

broader sub-continental approach to adopt a narrower provincial one, but he was probably influenced by national and regional politics. White Natalians had reluctantly entered the Union of South Africa in 1910; their decision determined by economics rather than any political or constitutional desire to be South Africans.<sup>12</sup> In the Colony, white English-speaking Natalians had enjoyed social, economic and political predominance, but in South Africa they were a minority outnumbered by Afrikaans-speakers. White Natalians regarded the National Party victory of 1924 as a threat to their way of life.<sup>13</sup> General J.B.M. Hertzog's insistence that the interests of South Africa come before those of the empire worried Natalians, as did the government's policy on bilingualism. The removal of the monarch's image from stamps and proposition to remove the Union Jack from the South African flag further antagonised whites in Natal, who felt their symbols of Britishness and identity were being removed.<sup>14</sup> In Natal from the 1920s to 1950s there was a strong reaction to Afrikaner nationalism, which was manifest in the emergence of political movements agitating for separatism or greater autonomy for the province. The emergence of a strong Afrikaner nationalist movement was in part a response to the urbanisation of black workers. A process of secondary industrialisation began in the manufacturing sector during World War One, which resulted in the increasing urbanisation of both whites and blacks. This led to the establishment of a semi-permanent black working class in the cities and to increasing worker militancy and demands for economic and political improvements.<sup>15</sup> The rapid urbanisation of Africans was a major concern for successive white governments that attempted to control the phenomenon through legislation such as the Native Areas Act in 1923. It was against this backdrop that Hattersley began writing on Natal history.

The history of British settlers in the province became Hattersley's area of specialist study and he wrote a number of books on the topic. His works on Natal can be divided into four categories: the annals of Natal, in which he compiled and annotated primary documents; histories of Pietermaritzburg; histories of the Colony; and works on institutions established by colonists. In 1936, his first comprehensive work on Natal, *More Annals of Natal*, was published.<sup>16</sup> The book was a compilation of the reminiscences of a number of British settlers who had come to Natal in 1850. He used this approach in two other works, *Later Annals of Natal* (1938) and *The Natalians* (1940).<sup>17</sup> The compilation of documents was a historiographical tradition in Natal that

had developed in the last two decades of the nineteenth century by John and Christopher Bird. In 1883, in the build-up to Responsible Government, the council of the Natal Society requested that John Bird, a former magistrate of Pietermaritzburg, 'enter upon the work' of compiling the annals of Natal.<sup>18</sup> A select committee of the legislature accepted the recommendation and £150 was set aside for Bird to begin the work. (It was completed in 1885 and eventually published in 1888.) Bird began his history with the sighting of Natal by Vasco da Gama in 1498. This was followed by a chronological and thematic narrative, which dealt with the ships that called at Port Natal until the 1820s, the rise of the Zulu kingdom, the arrival of the trekkers and their conflict with the Zulu and the annexation of Natal by the British government. John Bird's work ended with the arrival of the first British lieutenant-governor in 1845. Bird's son, Christopher, also a prominent civil servant, was appointed by the Natal government in 1897 to collect material on the early settlers. The papers collected by Bird were never published and Hattersley toyed with the idea of editing them. Although he eventually did not pursue the project, he made use of the material collected by Christopher Bird to deal with the first generation of settlers, in roughly the period from 1845 to 1875. There is no direct evidence why Hattersley chose John Bird's model, and any conclusion would be speculative, but it could be that he saw parallels between the times that John Bird was writing about and his own. Bird wrote his work during a period when white Natalians were involved in a strong debate over the future of the Colony and the road it should take. Similar debates were taking place in the 1930s when Hattersley was writing on the province.

### Histories of Pietermaritzburg

In 1938, Hattersley's *Pietermaritzburg Panorama* was published to commemorate the centenary of the founding of the city.<sup>19</sup> It was only the second book written on the history of Pietermaritzburg. The first, J. Forsyth Ingram's *The Story of an African City*, had been published forty years earlier.<sup>20</sup> John Laband, writing in 1988, considered *Pietermaritzburg Panorama* 'still the best book ever written on the City ... a pleasure to read and a mine of information.' He pointed out that 'it is the elegantly constructed story of white Pietermaritzburg, full of fascinating details, excellent vignettes and memorable anecdotes. But if Hattersley is full of sympathy for the trials and triumphs of the settlers, he has barely a mention for the blacks.'<sup>21</sup> Hattersley wrote a second work on Pietermaritzburg, entitled *Portrait of*

a City, in 1951.<sup>22</sup> On this occasion, he chronicled 'the domestic affairs of ordinary people'.<sup>23</sup> It was meticulously researched and vividly written, but a nostalgic and romanticised longing for the past. Hattersley set the tone in the preface when he wrote:

I shall hope also to convey some sense of the quiet charm of the streets of the city. If I have lifted a corner of the memory, to remind you of scenes that are gone for ever, of the flickering candle-light of the Victorian parlour, of the leisurely days of the creaking horse omnibus with its straw to keep the feet warm and its leather straps to prevent one falling out, of vigil outside the stage doors of old colonial theatres, a bunch of flowers in hand, I shall feel more than content.<sup>24</sup>

### **Portrait of a Colony**

In 1940, Hattersley wrote *Portrait of a Colony* in 'an attempt to recreate a vanished society in one of the former British colonies overseas'.<sup>25</sup> *Portrait of a Colony*, with *Oliver the Spy*, was his favourite book and was considered by Clarke 'one of his best works on Victorian Natal'. It was an important work in Hattersley's development as an historian, as with its publication 'he knew that his own gift lay in the evocation of the Victorian era'.<sup>26</sup> The first chapter dealt in some detail with the conditions in Great Britain that led to many people leaving the country and settling in the colonies in an attempt to find 'freedom from chronic economic insecurity'.<sup>27</sup> Subsequent chapters were concerned with the impressions and experiences of the settlers after their arrival in Natal and the political and social life of the colonies until the late 1870s. Like all of Hattersley's books, it was carefully researched and elegantly written. The African population was mentioned briefly in the last chapter, which was mainly concerned with the establishment of the reserves and the supply of labour to white-owned farms. The book ends when 'one evening in January 1879 two exhausted horsemen rode up to the gates of Government House with news of the tragic disaster at Isandhlwana'.<sup>28</sup> For Hattersley, the Anglo-Zulu War was a watershed moment in Natal when 'the pioneering conditions of early colonial days seemed to vanish almost overnight, with the bustling activity of Imperial troops, the pushing forward of the railway and the achievement of communication by cable'.<sup>29</sup>

### **Centenary of the Natal settlers**

In 1949 and 1950, Hattersley became involved in celebrations to mark the centenary of the arrival of the Byrne settlers in Natal. He wrote a series of articles for the *Natal Witness* in 1949, which were subsequently

reprinted in a short work called *The Natal Settlers 1849–1851*. Hattersley was on the committee that arranged a week of celebrations held throughout the province in May of 1949. He arranged an exhibition of artefacts from the settlers at the Natal Museum and wrote most of the script for a pageant that dealt with the arrival of the settlers, and which was performed in the Pietermaritzburg city hall.

His most comprehensive work on the settlers was *The British Settlement of Natal*, published in 1950 as part of the centenary celebrations.<sup>30</sup> He had undertaken most of the research during a 'dismal and bitter winter' he spent in Britain in 1947.<sup>31</sup> It has been accurately described as 'one of the best reference books for the student of Natal settler history' and Hattersley's 'magnum opus'.<sup>32</sup> The work was in some ways a more detailed version of *Portrait of a Colony*, published ten years earlier. *The British Settlement of Natal* began with a chapter in which Hattersley dealt with the white traders who settled at Port Natal in the 1820s and African history. It was one of the few occasions in which Hattersley dealt in any of his books with Africans beyond a cursory mention. Drawn from the writings of Theophilus Shepstone and A.T. Bryant's *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, Hattersley's narrative was fairly standard for the time.<sup>33</sup> The Bantu tribes moved south from the area around the Great Lakes at about 'the dawn of the Christian era'.<sup>34</sup> By the beginning of the nineteenth century numerous 'tribes' inhabited Natal. From 1820 to 1821 these tribes were 'attacked and overpowered' by Shaka, a military genius who wrought devastation on the region.<sup>35</sup> The first chapter was followed by one on the Republic of Natal under the Voortrekkers and the establishment of British rule. Four chapters deal with the establishment of emigration companies and the conditions in Britain in the 1840s that led to large-scale immigration. The remaining chapters were concerned with the arrival of settlers in Natal and the economic, political and cultural development of the Colony. In the preface he reveals that he had written the book 'in the hope that it may reveal to young Natal not only the debt owed to the first home-builders, but the strength to be drawn from the past'.<sup>36</sup> It is clear from this statement that he saw parallels between the nineteenth century and the times in which he was writing. The publication was financed by the provincial council. Its decision to finance Hattersley's work and his official involvement in the organisation of the centenary celebrations showed that he had been accepted by the white English-speaking political establishment as the 'official' historian of the region.

## Professor and supervisor

Through his own writings and as a supervisor of postgraduate theses, Hattersley, as Bill Guest argues, ‘laid important foundations for the humanities at NUC.’<sup>37</sup> In 1930, he supervised the first master’s thesis, which was on the Langalibalele rebellion. This was followed by fifteen more theses by the 1950s on topics of settler history, politics and the socio-economic development of the Colony. His students respected his abilities as a scholar and the seriousness with which he approached his research and writing. He was, however, a reticent man and even postgraduate students found him somewhat distant. John Sellers, later a lecturer in the history department at the university, recalled:

As a research student in training it was necessary for me to make regular visits to the Natal Archives Depot in Pietermaritzburg Street which, in 1945, was a much more modest building than it is today. The professor and I would arrive regularly on our bicycles at the appointed hour on two afternoons of the week. The room set aside for research students faced Pietermaritzburg Street. On a platform at the very front sat the supervising official. I had a table below but immediately in front of him while Professor Hattersley worked right at the back of the room on his own research projects, but he was always ready to be interrupted if I had encountered any difficulty. On reflection today, I am grateful for the careful and conscientious tutoring that I received from a scholar who was a dedicated master of the research technique and whose name will forever be linked with pioneering studies on the history of nineteenth-century Natal.<sup>38</sup>

## Later works

Hattersley retired from the chair of history in 1953. He continued to write books on Natal and remained active in academic affairs in his retirement. By the 1950s, he was writing histories of institutions, such as schools and military regiments, established by British settlers. These included works on the Natal Carbineers, the Natal Society, Hilton College, Grey’s Hospital and Merchiston.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, in the later years of his retirement, he moved away from focusing on Natal and his last four books were not concerned exclusively with the province. *Oliver the Spy and Others* was published in 1959, followed a year later by *The First South African Detectives*.<sup>40</sup> In *Oliver the Spy*, Hattersley wrote about interesting but not always well-known personalities. Most of the chapters dealt with men who lived in the Cape Colony, but there were two well-researched and detailed chapters on Charles Barter, magistrate of Pietermaritzburg, and Peter Sutherland, surveyor-

general of Natal. *The First South African Detectives* was concerned with early police detectives and some of the cases they had to solve. His last two books were *Convict Crisis and the Growth of Unity*, published in 1965, and *An Illustrated Social History of South Africa* (1969). The former deals with resistance at the Cape against the landing of convicts from Britain at Simonstown in 1849. The latter was concerned with the personal and domestic life of South Africa from 1652 to 1910. By reverting to a broader history of South Africa, the book is one of the best known, and ‘perhaps his most important’ according to Guest.<sup>41</sup> In the last years of his life, Hattersley battled Parkinson’s disease, dying in July 1976.

## Overview

Hattersley was the dominant figure in Natal historical writings from the 1930s to the 1950s and still remains one of the most prolific historians to have written on the province. He was a product of a Victorian and imperial society and lived and worked in a colonial city for sixty years, and it is not surprising that he had developed an interest in nineteenth-century settler history. His choice of topics was probably also influenced by the English-speaking white response in Natal to working-class African militancy and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. Hattersley’s books provided white Natalians with a history that highlighted the hard work, endurance and success of their ancestors. His works, well researched and elegantly written, are nostalgic. He did not deal at any great length with the negative aspects of white settlement, such as racial legislation, methods of land accumulation and treatment of labour.

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## NOTES

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- 28 *ibid*: 223–224.
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