

Notes and Queries

Macrorie House Museum: hope for the future

If the compiler of *Notes and Queries* may be permitted a remark, it must be to reflect that Mr Frost's 1990 editorial prognostication that Graham Dominy would prove a considerable asset to *Natalia's* editorial committee has proven true. Mr Dominy's interests and concerns have provided several Notes for this number of *Natalia*, including this first. Many of them are cause for anxiety rather than satisfaction, but it is appropriate to open on a note of optimism.

The future of Pietermaritzburg's well-known settler history landmark, the Macrorie House Museum, which has been hanging in the balance for several years, now looks much brighter. There has been persistent wrangling between the Simon van der Stel Foundation, the owners of the building who wish to sell it, the museum's Board of Trustees, the owners of the collection and managers of the property who cannot afford to buy it, and the Pietermaritzburg City Council which refuses to buy it for a market-related price (arguing that since it gave the Foundation the original purchase price of R15 000 in the 1960s it should not have to buy it again). The Board of Trustees have been running the museum on a shoestring budget (aided by a small grant from the City Council and the Natal Provincial Administration) and have been unable to get adequate funds for the museum because of the dispute over the property. This has meant that the museum has become more and more run down despite its attracting increasing numbers of visitors.

In February 1991 the Pietermaritzburg Society attempted to break the deadlock by arranging a high-powered meeting at Macrorie House which brought together all interested parties. Progress towards an equitable solution was made at the meeting, but the National Council of the Simon van der Stel Foundation later expressed reservations which delayed matters considerably.

Several months of public protests, including a well-supported Pietermaritzburg Society petition, circulated on 18 May, International Museums Day, followed, but the problem could not be resolved. Finally the museum's Board of Trustees offered to purchase the property for a much reduced price and their chairman travelled to the Transvaal to persuade the National Council of the Simon van der Stel Foundation to reconsider its position. Agreement has now been reached whereby the Foundation will sell Macrorie House Museum to its Board of Trustees for R25 000, provided that the building continues to be used for museum purposes, that the Trustees maintain it in a manner befitting its historic and architectural status and that the Foundation can repurchase it for the

same price if it is no longer to be used as a museum. The Foundation also hopes to become involved in conservation activities in Natal again.

The Province and the City Council have been approached for financial support and are viewing the request sympathetically, so for the first time in perhaps a decade the Macrorie House Museum is to be placed on a sound foundation from which it can grow and adapt into a new role for the future.

Vandalism at Natal's battlefields and historic sites

Against this optimism, Graham Dominy notes a distressing recent phenomenon.

The battlefields, cemeteries and monuments commemorating various wars and campaigns in Natal and KwaZulu have been subjected to increasing vandalism over the past few years. There have been cases of opportunistic vandalism which have resulted in the defacing of monuments or the destruction of individual memorials. Sometimes unsophisticated local communities are suspected, but the worst cases are not usually caused by bored teenagers, or poor rural people thinking that there is treasure buried under an imposing cross. The worst cases are caused by organized networks of well equipped grave robbers complete with metal detectors.

In late 1990 and early 1991 there was a spate of systematic grave robbing at Anglo-Zulu and Anglo-Boer sites in Natal and KwaZulu. Isandlwana and Khambula battlefields were among the worst affected, although the isolated military cemetery at Tchengula near Ladysmith was also comprehensively vandalised. The prime suspects were foreign curio-seekers and the KwaZulu Monuments Council has uncovered evidence of a chain of smugglers who used local people in KwaZulu to rob graves and cairns and who smuggled the cartridges, medals, badges and memorabilia out of the country and sold the material in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America.

The police investigations uncovered some material in South Africa and court cases are pending. KwaZulu officials visited the United Kingdom and traced more material there. The National Monuments Council has also requested the authorities not to issue an entry visa to an American citizen allegedly involved with the illegal excavation of material at Khambula.

The problem received widespread publicity in South Africa and abroad and there has been a marked decrease in the number of incidents reported.

Desecration at Fort Napier military cemetery

After the limited, but welcome, success of the authorities in curbing the robbing of cemeteries and sites in rural areas, there was a shocking occurrence of vandalism in Pietermaritzburg itself. The Fort Napier military cemetery, where the earliest graves date back to 1843, was the scene of appalling destruction in early July. This was not, however, attributable to organised grave robbers, as the cemetery is next to the unsightly entrance to the new Pietermaritzburg prison and the presence of the prison guards and a caretaker in the cemetery has been presumed to be a deterrent to premeditated vandalism.

Some 65 headstones were knocked over, some were completely smashed and others seem to have been used as missiles and flung against ornate railings and other graves. The grave of Sir Henry Binns, Prime Minister of Natal (1897–99), is one of the most prominent of those damaged, but it may be possible to restore the headstone. The railing around the grave of Col. Anthony William Durnford, who was killed at the Battle of Isandlwana, was also chipped and many of the oldest and most beautiful memorials have been damaged. Mr Andrew Hall, the Regional Representative of the National Monuments Council, told the *Natal Witness* that the ‘destructive energy involved is staggering’. He estimated that to replace the graves would cost some R130 000 and that simply to repair the damage would cost R60 000.

It appears that the offenders were local teenagers who hung about in the cemetery during the school holidays. The police arrested a group of minors who have been convicted in the Children’s Court and sentencing is pending. The National Monuments Council intends proceeding with a civil claim for damages against the offenders’ parents.

Thomas Baines: the McGonagall of Shepstone’s 1873 Zululand expedition?

Thomas Baines’s contribution to the literary heritage of Natal is not widely acknowledged. Mr Dominy illustrates Baines’s claim to wider recognition.

Thomas Baines’s works of art are well known and highly prized items of Africana. The Brenthurst Library in Johannesburg preserves many of them and has published several magnificent art history works of ‘Bainesiana’. The most recent of these is Jane Carruthers’s beautiful book, *Thomas Baines: Eastern Cape Sketches, 1848 to 1852* (Johannesburg, 1990). What is hitherto unrecorded are his efforts as a poet!

Baines, who was born in Norfolk, England in 1820, died in Durban in 1875 and spent most of his last years in Natal. Despite this connection, Baines’s time in Natal and his artwork done in this region is neither as well known nor as well documented as his Eastern Cape and his Central African work.

I visited the Brenthurst Library in January 1991 to do some research on Baines’s little-known sketch of the Langalibalele Rebellion (See my recent paper in the *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 3, Oct. 1991) and came across an item of verse in Baines’s handwriting recounting the Natal colonial foray into Zululand in 1873 to ‘crown’ Cetshwayo kaMpande, the Zulu king.

Much has been written on Theophilus Shepstone’s expedition to stage a coronation of Cetshwayo. John Laband and John Wright, in their short biography *King Cetshwayo kaMpande* (Pietermaritzburg, 1980), describe the events at the Mlambongwenya homestead as a ‘caricature of a “coronation” ceremony’. Shepstone’s motives were indeed rather dubious and the expedition was highly theatrical — in fact some of the coronation regalia draped on Cetshwayo was borrowed from the wardrobe of the Natal Society’s amateur dramatic group in Pietermaritzburg! What is well known is the fact that Cetshwayo’s alleged breaches of the so-called ‘Coronation Promises’ formed one of the pretexts for the British invasion of Zululand in 1879.

One of the most interesting analyses of these events is Norman Etherington’s ‘Anglo-Zulu Relations 1856–1878’ which appeared in

Andrew Duminy and Charles Ballard's compilation, *The Anglo-Zulu War: New perspectives* (Pietermaritzburg, 1981). Etherington effectively demolishes the carefully nurtured colonial myth of the benign Shepstone appearing in Zululand in response to desperate appeals from the new king for a benediction from 'Somtseu'. Furthermore, he links Thomas Baines with Shepstone's visionary plans for expanding Natal influence to the Zambezi and beyond.

Baines was closely involved with the Shepstone family and Theophilus clearly admired and respected his work as an artist and as a geographer. In his turn, Baines served as an imperial artistic propagandist. This did not help his pocket and much of his work in Natal was a drain on his financial resources. He accompanied the expedition to Zululand at his own expense, although he was attached to the Natal Volunteers in a vague way which must have given him meals and shelter. According to J.P.R. Wallis, *Thomas Baines: His life and explorations in South Africa, Rhodesia and Australia 1820-1875* (Cape Town, 1976), Baines described himself as the 'artist and geographer' of the Zululand expedition, but he received no monetary compensation from the colonial authorities, nor did the notoriously mean Colonial Treasury even pay him for the valuable cartographic work which he did *en route*.

To help make ends meet Baines acted as the special correspondent of the *Natal Mercury* for the expedition and sold some of his sketches to the



'The Victoria Mounted Rifles at Rendezvous Camp, Tugela River, August 1st to 8th 1873'. Baines has drawn himself in as the figure on the extreme right.

(Photograph: Killie Campbell Africana Library, reproduced for Natalia by the Natal Provincial Museum Service)

Illustrated London News which engraved and published a few, such as a fine sketch of Cetshwayo's carriage. He also drew sketches of various scenes at the request of several individuals. The one which we reproduce here was requested by the men of the Victoria Mounted Rifles.

Baines's account of the expedition was published in instalments in diary-form by the *Natal Mercury* in early September 1873 and makes fascinating reading, although his pro-Shepstone slant is very clear, as it is in the poem reproduced below.

Cetshwayo was not anxious to meet Shepstone and sent various excuses and changed the venue for the meeting several times before finally entering the Natal camp on 28 August 1873. Baines was not able to get a clear sketch of the king 'as he stood leaning on his harpoon-shaped spear near Mr Shepstone', nor could he get near enough for a good sketch at any later stage of the ceremonies. When Baines tried to sketch during crowded stages of the ceremonies he had to conceal what he was doing lest he be accused of a gross discourtesy: 'I made a slight sketch here, concealing my paper as carefully as clergymen did their notes when it was unlawful to read a sermon before the king'.

Baines did, however, give the *Mercury* readers a clear verbal picture of Cetshwayo: 'He appeared rather tall, but so stout that had he stood alone his height would not have been observable'. According to Wallis, Baines also described the king's features as expressing 'tolerable good nature, combined with shrewdness and determination rather than high intellect'. What is interesting to a reader in Natal in 1991 is the absence of 'cultural weapons' which Baines remarked on: 'Indeed the whole assembly were merely in their ordinary walking dresses and unarmed; hardly any except the *imbonga* — a court flatterer and jester — having even a few sticks and a small walking shield'.

The great artistic recorder of 19th century southern Africa was unable to make a significant enduring visual record of the expedition and therefore his doggerel verse assumes a significance which it would not otherwise have attained. It is not a good poem and had Baines managed to complete one of his superb watercolours of the 'coronation' the poem would have deserved to languish in complete obscurity in the Brenthurst Library.

The text is roughly written in a small notebook (*Baines African Collections*, MS 049/11/3). There are many words crossed out and the punctuation is extremely poor. In some places there are alternative words, lines and even stanzas; in others, the script is so indistinct as to defy decipherment. Thus 'swig' seems an unlikely rhyme for 'down', and 'Double Bass' may be a mystery for some *Natalia* reader to solve. These and other doubtful words have been italicized. The original spelling has been left unchanged, including the spelling of Zulu personal and place names, but apostrophes and the possessive case have been inserted. Where Baines has clearly deleted an alternative it is omitted, but the alternative stanza has been included.

The poem is reproduced with the permission of the Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg.

Thomas Baines's doggerel verse on the coronation of Cetshwayo

In Zululand there lived a chieftain
 a prince he was of very great fame
 He was the son of Great Umpande
 and Ketchewayo was his name
 He sent at once to father Somtseu
 saying wouldn't it be a jolly thing
 If you'd come up with a little party
 from Natal and make me King
 Singing Re lol lol lol

Says Somtseu I'd not be unwilling
 to do you honour *c/o Natale*
 But your relative had a knack of killing
 His visitors in his royal Kraal
 and long ago your uncle Dingaan
 played that trick on Piet Retief
 So I'll have two guns and a little escort
 To do more honour to you o chief

Says Ketchewayo no come to Ondine
 Oh my Father and crown me there
 and I'll feed you on fat instead of on lean
 Beef and give you pots of beer
 But when we came to the place appointed
 All as eager as hungry cats
 We didn't find the nation's *nointed*
 but a few old women and lots of rats

When we climbed by kloof and mountain
 expending Voorslag tow and reim
 passing Ondine & Oham and family
 Till we reached *amathlabatine*
 But Ketchewayo sent a messenger
 Oh my father don't stop there
 that place was unlucky to all my family
 and twill be the same to me I fear

So we moved on the *river* Umvolosi
 and next day we trekked again
 and we made our camp neither snug nor cosy
 on the banks of the river *Umlambengwain*
 There we found that grumbling would *not avail us*
 our biscuits & melies were going Down
 our coffee and sugar began to fail us
 and we'd neither tobacco nor our ration *swig*

Then the chief sent another message
 Oh won't you come and visit me
 I would like to come to you first
 but I'm out of sorts *d' ye see*

for I got tired with six days hunting
 and the doctors they made a fuss
they gave bolus pill and blister
 and as a matter of course I'm wuss.

Says Somtseu pray convey my compliments
 to your mighty Zulu King
 He may get someone else to crown him
 For I'm blowed if I don't go back again
 Oh says Ketchewayo now send a doctor
 If you thinks I'm chaffin you
 And if he finds I'm Shammin' Abram
 I'll give in and come for *true*

So thinks Ketchewayo I'd better cave in
 If I wants any good out of this Somtseu
 or else my skin I won't be saving
 For the Boers will thrash me till all is blue
 So the first visit there he paid us
 and listened to the music of our band
 and a present of ivory he made us
 and our cannon they thundered in Zululand

[and then we let off a lot of rockets
 and next day we crowned him King
 and *turned our faces home to you*
 and then we let off a lot of rockets
 with Catherine wheels & other displays
 which trebled £20 from Natal folks pockets
 But *Double Bass* is the Slave who pays]

[This bracketed stanza seems to be an alternative to the next verse]

And on Thursday the — of August [date omitted in the text]
 we went to his kraal and crowned him King
 and hurrahed till our throats were as dry as *sawdust*
 But he didn't give us beer to wet them again
 So now you see how we won our battle
 Between Ketchewayo and Somtseu our chief
 and the Zulus *they sent* us a lot of cattle
 and we escaped all mischief by the skin of our teeth
 and this in brief is a true narration
 of the great events that there befell
 how we got safe out from the Zulu nation
 and are now marching homeward through Natal.

Threat to Fort Pearson and the Ultimatum Tree

The balance between the preservation of significant elements of our heritage and the development of new facilities has ever been difficult to maintain. Graham Dominy notes a new manifestation of a perennial concern, and one that again touches on the affairs of King Cetshwayo.

While some state agencies have been fighting to protect historic sites, the activities of others are seriously endangering the historic complex of sites on the Thukela river which stand on the line of the new N2 toll road on the north coast. The National Road Transportation Commission plans to route the new dual carriageway across the river *between* Fort Pearson and the Ultimatum Tree, both of which are proclaimed national monuments and are a few hundred metres apart.

The British ultimatum to the Zulu kingdom which preceded the Anglo-Zulu War was handed over to King Cetshwayo's representatives on the banks of the river under the tree now known as the Ultimatum Tree in December 1878. The tree itself was severely damaged in the 1987 floods and has virtually died. The Natal regional committee of the National Monuments Council is seriously considering cutting down the dead tree and presenting the wood to cultural institutions for reworking as appropriate objects, as the British did in 1987 when hurricane force winds uprooted many historic trees in Kew Gardens and at other nationally important sites.

Fort Pearson is on a knoll above the Ultimatum Tree and was the base for the British column which invaded Zululand along the coast. It was a vital bastion during the siege of Eshowe and guarded by both military and naval detachments. There is a military cemetery nearby and a viewsite manned by the Natal Parks Board.

Extensive publicity and letters of protest to Members of Parliament, etc., etc. have failed to make much of an impression on the road planners. The Environment Conservation Act which became law in 1989 makes provision for professionally conducted Environmental Impact Assessments to be conducted before such projects are undertaken, but no such report has been drawn up for this route. The transportation authorities are adamant that they will not change the route, but they have provided funds for an archaeological and for a botanical survey.

In a sense history has sabotaged this site because it was identified by the Royal Engineers and the officers of the naval brigade as the best crossing point of the river in 1879 and modern engineers are of exactly the same opinion. Nobody denies the need for a new road on the North Coast, but this need should not give the engineers *carte blanche* to destroy one of the most important and best preserved historical sites in Natal. Therefore the refusal of the transportation authorities to follow the procedures laid down in the Environment Conservation Act for scientifically based impact assessments to be undertaken as part of the planning process is extremely disturbing.

Rail route centenary

The rail link between Natal and the Transvaal through Laing's Nek and the ascent of the Drakensberg to Van Reenen were both completed in 1891. The note that follows is culled from an article contributed by Bruno Martin to the May-June 1991 number of *S.A. Rail*.

The Natal railhead reached Ladysmith in 1886. The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand provided the incentive for a main line extension into the Transvaal, and the Natal Government decided to construct a line to the Orange Free State at the same time. Work on both routes out of Ladysmith began in

1888, and the engineers were confronted with the great challenge of locating railbeds to scale the steep rise of the escarpment.

Having learned from the disadvantages of the line from the coast to Ladysmith, the engineers set the ruling grade at 1-in-70 (rather than 1-in-30) and the minimum radius of curves at 122 metres (instead of 91) on the section towards Charlestown. Only for the Biggarsberg and Drakensberg ascents was the gradient increased to 1-in-50, and 30 kg/m rails were used for the heavy Dubs engines which would work the Laing's Nek part of the line. For the first time on Natal's railways, the important engineering practice of systematic compensation for curvature was applied on the track alignment — in effect, the gradient of curved and straight track being adjusted so that the locomotive would exert the same amount of pull throughout the ruling grade.

When the section to Newcastle was opened to traffic in May 1890, work on the trackbed to Laing's Nek was already well advanced. The principal ascent involved a climb of 406 metres over a distance of 27 kilometres. Two reverses were laid out to overcome the Ingogo Heights, and a 674 metre (2 213 feet) tunnel with a 1-in-70 gradient would take the track beneath the crest of Laing's Nek. The contract for the tunnel was awarded to R. Wagstaffe & Co., and the headings met on 24 January 1891. On 15 February the track was completed to Charlestown, and the official opening of the line to the Transvaal border station was done by Governor Sir Charles Mitchell on 7 April 1891. President Kruger was present at the ceremony, and at 2.45 p.m. he joined the train to embark on an official visit to Natal.

Sir Charles, this time in the presence of Sir Henry Loch, High Commissioner and Governor of the Cape, performed the official opening of the Laing's Nek Tunnel on 14 October 1891. Some 500 men had worked to remove 195 000 cubic metres of rock and soil from the bore at a total construction cost of £80 000, and the Laing's Nek Tunnel — hailed as the greatest engineering feat of its kind in the country — was the longest on the Southern African rail network until it was superseded by the 800 m Stockton Tunnel on the Mooi River-Estcourt deviation in 1914.

With only bridge structures and rails being replaced to carry heavier rolling stock, the original track alignment remained unaltered for forty years, until realignment and electrification were carried out as employment schemes during the Depression years. Subsequent changes were considerable, however, and the boring of a new tunnel led to the abandonment of the original one in 1984.

The branch line to the Orange Free State, meanwhile, generally followed the watershed of the Klip and Sand Rivers before climbing the escarpment — rising 268 metres in 12 km., with three reverses on a grade of 1-in-30. Van Reenen was reached on 8 August 1891 and the Ladysmith-Van Reenen section was opened to traffic in November. By mid-1892 the 38 km link to Harrismith had come into service, with the N.G.R. operating the line under an agreement with the Volksraad. Again, the alignment remained unchanged for many years: the first and third reverses were linked into a single loop in 1924, and electrification came in the thirties. The present alignment dates from 1961.

Seat at Breakfast Rock

T. B. Frost leads not only the *Natalia* editorial panel but also the Pietermaritzburg Ramblers' Club. He records one of his happier, and more literal, duties as chairman.

The Pietermaritzburg Ramblers' Club, one of the oldest such organizations in the country, celebrated its seventieth birthday in 1991. To mark the occasion, it had a seat constructed on the top of Breakfast Rock in the Ferncliffe nature reserve as a gift to the citizens of Pietermaritzburg. The inscription on it reads:

This seat was presented to the citizens of Pietermaritzburg by the Pietermaritzburg Ramblers' Club to mark its seventieth birthday and in appreciation of the pleasure gained by generations of Ramblers, past and present, in walking the hills of the city.

June, 1991

Breakfast Rock, from the top of which the hiker has extensive views over the city, got its name from the fact that it was there that ramblers, in the days before easy transport, stopped for breakfast on hikes yet further afield. The surrounding area is also historic in that here, from this escarpment, Jesse Smith, who arrived in Natal in 1850, quarried stone for some of the city's early buildings, as well as for the graves and headstones of its pioneer citizens.

The seat is constructed from blocks of Scottish granite which also have historical associations. Reportedly brought to Natal last century as ballast in sailing ships, they were used as the foundation stones for the municipal tram lines when these were built in the early years of this century. When the last of these old lines, that running down Commercial Road, was dug up in recent years, the blocks were rescued by the municipal Parks Department and stored.

In a short ceremony the new seat was officially received (opened?, dedicated?, consecrated?, enthroned?, unveiled?, sat upon? — what on earth do you do to a seat?) by Deputy Mayor Rob Haswell on behalf of the city council, who officially sat upon it for the first time, together with Jack Frost, Chairman of the Pietermaritzburg Ramblers' Club.

Schooling for all?

Just as the last number of *Natalia* was being prepared for print, the then Minister of Education and Culture in the House of Assembly, Mr P.J. Clase, announced a shift in policy which has had a significant impact on the schools administered by his department, that is, the 'white' state schools, including those of Natal. John Deane of *Natalia's* editorial panel is singularly well-qualified to provide an explanatory note.

In September 1990 Mr Clase announced that parents could vote to open their schools to children of all races by deciding on one of three 'additional models of schooling'. These were complete privatization; retention of public school status, but with admission policy in the hands of the school; and a state-aided option, under which staff remain state employees, but the board of management accepts financial responsibility for everything else. These 'models' are labelled A, B and C respectively.

There were probably two main reasons for this departure from the hitherto exclusively 'own affairs' vision of public school education which prevailed in Mr Clase's ministry: the embarrassment of half-empty white schools in a country desperately short of schools, and growing demands from white parent communities all over South Africa for more say in who should attend their schools.

Certain conditions attached to the new plan. The arrangement was still seen as part of an 'own affairs' situation, where one department was constitutionally able to 'render service' to another by educating some of the latter's pupils. Therefore, no matter how many vacancies there were, white pupils were to remain in the majority to 'preserve the ethos' of the school. Furthermore, parent communities voting for a new 'model' were to do so by a very convincing majority — at least an 80% poll, and a 72% majority in favour of the change. Initial public reaction to the proposal was that the Minister had deliberately made the requirements impossibly high.

Whatever the Minister's reasons for the percentages he laid down, the prediction that they were impossibly high proved very far from the mark. In Natal, many schools voted during October or November, all but a few obtaining the required percentages with ease. By January 1991 more than sixty of the approximately 250 Natal Education Department schools had been declared 'model B schools', this being the model favoured by the overwhelming majority of schools that voted. During 1991 more schools voted, and by June there were almost a hundred and twenty. These were mainly urban and English-medium, but with a good sprinkling

of parallel-medium schools in country towns. Voting continues, and the list of 'open' schools grows longer, but the number of African, Indian and Coloured pupils admitted to Natal Education Department schools will probably not exceed two thousand by the end of 1991.

Minister Clase's 'additional models of schooling' are generally perceived to be a transitional phase before 'own affairs' education disappears. The 'opening' of some white schools must, however, be seen in proper perspective. Filling all vacant places in all white schools would not even begin to solve the problems of *millions* of African children not receiving any schooling at all. At least the 'model B' phenomenon shows that large numbers of white parents in Natal are no longer prepared to maintain racially exclusive schools.

The Great San stone saga

Perhaps because they are generally awed by science, lay people take a delight in discomfitting scientists. The recent discovery of an apparently unique piece of San rock painting in Pietermaritzburg provided much fodder for the sceptics. The find was made by a small boy, Richard Henwood, and remained unrecognized for two years, until a class project on cave paintings reminded him of the sometime door-stop that now lay in his garden. Richard, by then a sensible eight-year-old, and his teacher referred the painted stone to the Natal Museum for expert study. The paintings were typical of the San art of the Drakensberg region, and two features of the find made it a potentially important rarity: the painting was on a single dolerite stone whereas Drakensberg paintings almost all take the form of a frieze in a rock shelter; and the stone was found on open ground, near the Maritzburg Golf Club and much closer to the city than any previous find.

Museum archaeologist Aron Mazel was, however, properly cautious. The paintings looked genuine, but authenticity had to be demonstrated. The chemistry of paint being complex, UCT suggested that a sample of the paint be

sent to the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit for dating. Any date older than 150 years would be persuasive evidence of authenticity.

The sample was too small to be subjected to the full range of Oxford tests, but the results indicated an age of some 1 160 years before the present. Dr Mazel remained dubious: it was not absolutely certain that the source of the dated carbon was the pigment itself, rather than perhaps the stone or organic matter on the stone. The geology and botany departments of the local university reassured him. Further consideration of the paintings, which had some unusual features, left the experts divided — some were sceptical, others satisfied that the figures were representative of San art. After a year of very careful study, Dr Mazel was persuaded to publicize the discovery.

Public excitement over the find was as nothing compared to the huge enthusiasm for the next pronouncement. The Oxford dating of 1160 BP was almost exactly eleven-and-a-half centuries out. Having seen the newspaper story of Richard Henwood and his stone, a Mrs Joan Ahrens came forward to claim the painting as her own — a copy of a San painting, completed 11 years previously in an art class. It was a claim which had to be treated with the same scientific scepticism as the original find, but in the end Dr Mazel had to concede that the dating techniques had misled him.

For the popular press the story ended there. For the scientists, it did not: the mistake presented a challenge, not a defeat. For the Oxford unit, the explanation for the incorrect dating lay in the fact that Mrs Ahrens had used some oil-based paints, thereby introducing old carbon and mixing it with new to produce, inadvertently, a false age. The carbon dating technique has not been invalidated, but there is a new awareness of the need to identify the source of the carbon in dating samples. For the Natal Museum and University, the mistake has spurred closer research into the chemistry of San pigments, and comparisons with modern paints have revealed some hitherto undetected differences. Richard Henwood's discovery may have embarrassed the scientists, but it has also pointed the way to valuable new work. In the first report of his find, Richard declared his intention of becoming an archaeologist himself. If he reflects carefully on what has ensued, he will be all the better qualified to enter the field.

Hanging up the nets

Durban's Local History Museum is distributing a video film on the history of that city's seine fishing community. Produced by University of Natal researchers Dianne Scott and Costas Criticos, the film traces the experiences of the Salisbury Island Indian community that first fished with seine nets from rowing boats. Good catches sustained the fishermen until the 1950s, when over-fishing and pollution of the Natal coast, together with technological progress, threatened their livelihood. Harbour development and Apartheid legislation also contributed to the disintegration of the community. Drawing on the recollections of the fishermen's descendants and on archival films and photographs, the video is a unique narration and documentation of a neglected facet of Durban's history.

The video can be ordered from the Local History Museum, Old Court House, Aliwal Street, Durban. It costs R27, with the usual postal charges if it is ordered by mail.

Compiled by MORAY COMRIE