



**Daphne H. Strutt (1917 – 1989)**

Daphne Strutt studied History and Costume Design at the Johannesburg Art School under the late Phyllis Gardner. On completing her studies she joined the staff of the Africana Museum in Johannesburg. She married a nephew of the late Colonel Cowley of Durban. Unfortunately her husband was killed in action during World War II.

Some years later Daphne married Dennis Strutt and relocated to Durban where Daphne worked for the late Dr Killie Campbell at Muckleneuk. In 1953 Killie Campbell promoted Daphne Strutt for the post of the curatrix of the new Natal Settlers Old House Museum, one of the ventures of Killie Campbell and the South African National Society to preserve the heritage of Colonial Natal. This was in St Andrews Street, next to Portsdown House the original Governors Durban residence. The house chosen was the old Robinson home, but on inspection was so riddled with white ants it had to be pulled down and rebuilt on a reduced scale. The museum housed a small but fine collection of settler dress and artefacts, much of it collected by the South African National Society and its members. Daphne was outstandingly qualified to set up the Old House Museum to look like a Victorian Colonial home, including her immaculate and perfectly dressed models to add authenticity to the museum. Many of the items were on loan from the South African National Society. Over the years this collection grew to be one of the most important collections of colonial clothing in South Africa.

In 1965 the collection was moved to form part of the Local History Museum in the Old Court House, Aliwal Street, Durban. Daphne had been involved in the early 1960's in the campaign to save the Old Court House from demolition, Durban's oldest Municipal Building. The Durban City Council wanted the site for parking for the Durban City councillors. Daphne took over the new position of curatrix of the Local History Museum, setting up a very fine museum of African and European artefacts. Unfortunately the Durban Municipality did not listen to the advice of Daphne and others concerned and stripped much of the interior of the building, ripping up the floors for panelling and putting

down concrete floors, covering over the handsome double volume Court Room. Pietermaritzburg has handled the transformation of their Old Court House in a much more sympathetic manner. As Daphne warned, a building built, allegedly without foundations and which had never had a crack, immediately developed cracks in the superstructure.

Daphne had wanted the whole building of the Old Court House for the museum, but was forced to have only the ground floor while the upper floor was occupied by the Municipal Children's Library. Eventually the Children's Library was moved out and Daphne was able to create the museum of her dreams. Unfortunately it came too late; retirement was only a few years away in 1982.

Nevertheless, Daphne enthusiastically set about her dream. She had already created an outstanding museum of artefacts from KwaZulu-Natal's past. The *pièce de résistance* was a large circular display of genuine colonial costume from the 1650's to the 1970's. Unfortunately after Daphne's retirement this outstanding collection, (one of the first in the country) was lost when Durban Municipality gave exhibit owners the choice of either donating their items to the Municipality, or taking them back. Most reclaimed their items (including myself though I now regret not taking all). Many people sold these rare costumes on auction at good prices, mainly to America. Consequently a unique collection of Colonial Clothing was lost to South Africa for ever. Only in recent years the French Revolutionary Soldiers uniform was auctioned at Sotheby's by Dr Shelagh Spencer and Brian Spencer. Also a jet brooch, belonging to my father Dennis King's Grandmother, Emily Ford, which Daphne had persuaded my father to donate for Daphne's model of the little women who ran the Victorian emporium in the new upstairs museum of displays representing Durban in various stages of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is no longer worn by the model, so must be worn now by someone else! Items missing from the museum after Daphne's retirement, included a valuable stamp collection belonging to the South African National Society, for its loss we were paid out by insurance.

Despite her many duties as curatrix of the history museum, displaying, meticulously restoring and preserving historical artefacts, in the late 1960's Daphne was persuaded to write a history of costume in South Africa since the arrival of the Dutch in 1652 to 1900. This is still to my knowledge, the definitive history of South African Colonial Clothing. Daphne also set up a collection of current clothing, particularly every day clothing, which is largely lost while ball gowns and wedding dresses have been preserved. Daphne's book was an illustrated history of styles and materials for men, women and children including footwear, underwear, hairdressing, accessories and jewellery. The book took over six years to complete (1975). Daphne contacted every museum and library in South Africa, following these letters with a personal visit accompanied by her long suffering husband. Daphne's knowledge of costume was phenomenal. I remember being fascinated when she explained that my Great, Great Grandmother, Janet King's cinnamon silk wedding dress of 1843 had been constantly turned and remade - white wedding dresses were only introduced by Queen Victoria in 1838. Janet King wore her wedding dress every Sunday of her life until she died aged 74 years old in 1887. The dress had been repeatedly unpicked, turned (the best side to the front) and re sewn in minute even stitches by hand and remodelled to accommodate changes in fashion.

What were Daphne and Dennis Strutt like as people? Dennis Strutt was a slender, tall military looking man always the perfect gentleman. Daphne was a slender, dark haired woman which especially as she grew older, had a purple streak through her greying hair. Rather than beautiful, she had a lovely arresting face, which in later years at work was hidden by rather large spectacles. Her

expression, when not animated, was rather melancholic. Her style of clothing was always individual and very chic.

Daphne had not completed her dream for the museum and its upstairs displays of insights to Durban's past from the time of the first British settlers (Henry Frances Fynn) to the end of the Victorian era. The Municipality permitted Daphne to stay on after retirement to complete her exhibits. Unfortunately she was replaced by a rather bombastic woman as curatrix, who went around loudly proclaiming that she had come to bring light into the museum and as soon as Daphne finally left, ruined and lost some of the collections, replacing them with inferior displays. Daphne had always made visitors welcome to the museum, her office and her workrooms. She was an avid collector, even on one occasion borrowing my family photographs to record costumes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This welcoming attitude ceased when Daphne retired.

When Dr Killie Campbell ("*dear Killie*" as Daphne called her) died in 1965, Daphne felt it her duty to continue Killie Campbell's hospitality to the South African National Society and its committee, transferring meetings from Muckleneuk to the Old Court House Museum. The South African National Society had a membership of about 250 members with around 70 attending meetings when I joined in 1968. Many of the members, like my parents and myself, were from old Durban or Natal families. Daphne and her staff spent most of the day before meetings preparing delicious sandwiches, snacks, dips and cheese boards. I suspect Daphne loved that sort of entertaining. I am not sure who paid for the refreshments, but they never reflected much in the South African National Society budget and I suspect some people came for the refreshments rather than the talk! Daphne was a long member of the South African National Society and of course liaised for us with the Museum and the Municipality.

Dennis and Daphne lived at Brighton Beach. Dennis died of a heart attack, having, according to Daphne, overstrained himself building a fearsome flight of steps down to the beach from their house. Daphne had no children from either of her marriages. In 1989, Daphne aged 71, went into hospital for an operation. Unfortunately it was one of those occasions when the patient is operated on, found riddled with cancer (neither Daphne nor Dennis were smokers) closed up and told to go home to die. Cannon Fuggel, the then Chairman of the South African National Society, was a great comfort to Daphne in her final days. Daphne bravely prepared herself for her death, giving away her possessions, including her book collection. A moving funeral was conducted by Cannon Fuggel at St Barnabas Anglican Church on the Bluff for Daphne on the 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1989, attended by her many friends and admirers.

To end on a happier note, a favourite memory of mine of Daphne is at an opening event in the Lecture Theatre at the Killie Campbell Library. Miss Joan Lugg accompanied her 92 year old father, Harry Lugg, the renowned Zulu linguist and writer of books on Zulu and Natal history. Daphne brought her 92 year old uncle, from her first marriage, Colonel Crowley. Her first husband's family adored Daphne and had always kept in touch. The speaker was the Vice Chancellor of the University of Natal, who fortunately knew both of the elderly gentlemen. Colonel Crowley set the ball rolling by roaring that he could not hear the Vice Chancellor who politely suggested that he move more closely to the front and that it was Cowley's regular complaint. Both Miss Lugg and Daphne were valiantly holding up their trembling nonagenarian partners, both of whom had refused seats to be brought, while they stood. (It was a crowded occasion, basically standing room only). Harry Lugg also

announced in a loud voice, often the prerogative of the deaf, that old Crowley had fallen recently and cut his head, while he had never fallen and was not going to sit while Crowley stood!

Daphne also had lovely stories to tell which she often told at the many meetings she was asked to address. The one which stays in my mind is of the Byrne Settler woman and her numerous brood, waiting of Addington Beach to be lowered by baskets to the rowing boat below to be rowed to shore from where they were carried, horror of horrors, by naked Zulus through the shore to the beach. At the last moment the new settler realised one of her brood was missing. She put down the baby in arms on the top of a bundle of blankets to be thrown to the rowing boat and went in search of her miscreant son. Returning, the boy with a stinging ear, to the Mother's horror she discovered that the bundle of blankets had disappeared. Her obvious concern was significantly a failure when others on deck assured her that the blankets had already been thrown overboard into the rowing boat. One can imagine her relief when on inspection it was found that the blankets had landed the right way up and that the baby lay happily gurgling in their midst. Daphne said that at one of the talks she gave, a hand went up and a woman said that that baby had been her grandmother!

The South African National Society decided on Daphne's death to honour her by creating the Daphne Strutt Prize for the best student of costume design at the Natal Technikon. Initially it was a suitable inscribed copy of Daphne's definitive book on Costume History of South Africa, by then a collectors' item. Later the Prize grew to include money as well. On the instigation of Theunis Eloff, the then President of the South African National Society, the Committee bought up all the outstanding books of Daphne Strutt which were being sold cheaply by Adams Book shop. Unfortunately this stock of books has run out and Myra Boyes is largely to be thanked for continuing to find copies online unfortunately at a much higher price, so that the South African National Society has been able to continue to award Daphne's book every year.

We are proud as the South African National Society to still be awarding the Daphne Strutt Prize in memory of a great lady, an outstanding Historian and Curatrix of Museums.

R.J.H. King

President of the South African National Society

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