

# *Whither the wraith?:*

## *The Macrorie Collection at Baynesfield Estate*

*by Debbie Whelan*



THE Macrorie Collection is named for Reverend William Kenneth Macrorie and his wife Agnes who came to Natal in 1869 following the controversial excommunication of Bishop Colenso. They lived at ‘South Hill’ in Loop Street

(now Jabu Ndlovu) for 25 years, until the house was sold when they returned to England. In 1966, the house, by then derelict, was bought by the Simon van der Stel Foundation and leased to the Macrorie House Trust, which later bought the house. The museum opened

in 1975, with the collection consisting of items of the Victorian period, donated by people in Pietermaritzburg, together with Bishop Macrorie's pulpit and reredos from his church at St Saviours. It was overseen by the 'Board of Trustees for the time being', which over the years, has consisted of many significant personalities in the city.

Over the years, this museum has held a strong place in the hearts of the people of the city. Val Sterley served as the first curatrix, and then for many years, Mari-gold Rei. However, it was the resignation of the dynamic curatrix Roxanne Thomas at the end of 2015 that signalled a decision to close the museum, based largely on reduced funding, in addition to constant threats to the collection and the building as a result of criminal activity which added significantly to the financial burden. Linda Ireland stepped in by interim arrangement, which became more permanent than intended. The museum closed its doors to the public at the beginning of 2017, in order to move the larger items of the collection to their new home in Joseph Baynes House, on Baynesfield Estate.

Fundamentally, the responsibility as the Board of Trustees is to the house and the collection, and this decision was not taken lightly. Discussions were held at the beginning of 2016 with Myles van Deventer, the manager of the Baynesfield Estate, and the potential of the move of the collection, and its inclusion into the Joseph Baynes House collection embraced. The decision to move the collection to Baynesfield Estate was based on the financial and physical security of the collection, as well as contributing towards a greater historical landscape: in essence, consolidating the Victorian era in one place.

Happily, this was achieved through

the transfer of Roxanne Thomas to work on the Baynesfield Collections at the beginning of 2017. The removal of the collection and ancillary items to Baynesfield was as professional as resources allowed. Donors and owners of loan items were contacted with respect to the move; however, there were many instances in which these people had died, or moved away. Further, the bulk of the furniture and collection items were transferred professionally although there were instances in which the more utilitarian items were subject to a move a little like Operation Noah (the evacuation of animals at the time of the inundation of Lake Kariba) with pieces of furniture being ferried off on the back of bakkies after hours and weekends. However it all fitted in and the success of the last few open days at Baynesfield has paid testimony to our decision.

The house is presently in the process of being sold, with the intention that proceeds from the sale will be used in order to secure the services of a collection conservator at Baynesfield Estate, and ensure longer-term protection for the collection.

The Board of Trustees has realised that times and contexts change, and as much as it is a pity that the Macrorie House Museum, a long-time institution in the city of Pietermaritzburg, is closed, there is a new and exciting opportunity for the longevity of the collection in the twenty-first century. One only has to ask, as many have done, whether the ghosts of the house have moved with the spirit of the collection. Time, I am sure, will tell.