

Early 'Varsity Days

(BY A FOUNDATION STUDENT)

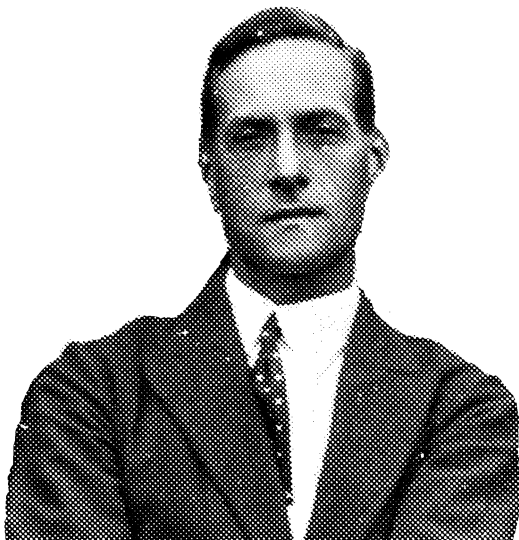
As the end of the present term will be also the close of the first decade of the Natal University College's existence, the following reminiscences will be something new, and perhaps of a little interest, to the present students of the 'Varsity.

When one looks at the 'Varsity of to-day, that magnificent and conspicuous building clearly visible from whatever route one approaches Maritzburg, whether by rail or road, one can hardly believe that, at the beginning of February, 1910, the first 'Varsity classes were held in a two-roomed wood and iron building especially erected for the purpose in the grounds of the Maritzburg College! These two rooms were merely of ordinary dwelling-room size, one being for the B.A. and the other for the Intermediate students. The furniture in each room consisted of a chair and small table for the Lecturer, with a trestle-table for the students!

Until Easter, the Lecturers, except Dr Warren, were all members of the Maritzburg College, sharing their time between the two institutions. But the unpleasant conditions caused by the February sun on a wood and iron building induced a change in the plans of the Lecturers, accustomed to the comparatively cool, tile-roofed Maritzburg College building; so very soon we B.A. students attended lectures in the carpentry-room, sacrificing dignity to comfort! The Science students were fortunate in being able to spend most of their time in the chemistry and physics laboratories of the school. In passing, one might add that the official name of Pietermaritzburg College School was given to the old College, with the instituting of the N.U.C.; however, a few years ago the original name was restored.

Besides law students, for whom special lectures were arranged in town, there were about twenty-five men students and a dozen lady students enrolled in the 'Varsity's first term. Naturally, the classes were rather small; for instance, the B.A. students, in a natural minority to start with, were arranged into four groups — the Literary and Science sections, each subdivided into Junior and Senior classes! The Senior Greek Class consisted of two students, the French Class of one! Under such circumstances, individual tuition was quite feasible! Naturally, with these divided classes, extra rooms, wherever possible, were used, the Prefects' study and reception room of the College School being first choice.

After Easter, the Professors in Classics and Physics arrived. One wonders what must have been the feelings of Professor Petrie at having to wander from one room to another far distant, looking for his various classes! Dr



Mr S.E. Lamond.

(Photograph: Maritzburg College Archives)

Denison, of course, would confine himself to the Chemistry and Physics laboratories. One should add that the medical students used to attend at the Museum in town for lectures in Anatomy, etc., given by Dr Warren.

From February to June of the first year, the N.U.C. was tucked away inconspicuously in the College School grounds and buildings; but after that the 'Varsity was to be found entirely in the Maritzburg Town Hall, with the exception of the Chemistry, Physics and Anatomy classes, which carried on as during the first term. When the August term opened the institution was fully staffed, according to the original plan, and all the Professors (there were no Lecturers in those days) were formally introduced on the opening day to the students by the Chairman of the University College Council (Sir Henry Bale, Chief Justice of the Colony), who, by a bitter coincidence, died on the day of the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone of the present building at Scottsville.

Before we had been settled at the Town Hall long we realised that the change from the College School was not altogether for the best. The frequent interruptions to lectures caused by the nerve-racking din of heavy trolleys, trams, traction-engines, and a motor-taxi with a particularly shrill and long-winded hooter on which the driver seemed to take an unnatural pleasure in practising, made us appreciate the quiet working hours in our original quarters. There was nothing for it, however, but to adapt ourselves as comfortably as possible to our uncongenial surroundings: it was Hobson's choice.

Only for one purpose during the whole of the year did the students hold any formal meetings, and those in order to choose the 'Varsity colours. At the first meeting, two committees — one composed of lady, the other of men, students — were elected to visit the local outfitters and select patterns; curiously enough, at a subsequent open meeting, the colours chosen were those selected by the male committee.

It was not until October that the first undergraduate caps and gowns were ordered by a local outfitter; the wearing of these gowns during lectures became quite "the thing," but no objection was made to a student attending a lecture without one.

¹ Practically at the end of the year — almost too late to be of any use to the Senior B.A. students — the 'Varsity Library was started, the borrowing of books being under the control of the recently-appointed Registrar, Mr Feltham, who, if I am not mistaken, held the rank of Captain and had gained the D.S.O.

At the beginning of December of 1910 the foundation stone of the present building was laid by H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught. Practically every student attended the ceremony in his own, or a borrowed, cap and gown. The importance of the occasion, combined with the presence of His Royal Highness, naturally made the function one of great interest to the town.

In spite of the adverse conditions under which work had been carried on throughout the year, and probably because of the individual tuition of which the smallness of the classes had permitted, the successes in the Cape University Intermediate and B.A. Examinations at the end of the year were practically 100 per cent, one of the students gaining honours in Botany in the latter examination. Towards the end of the B.A. Examination, which, for the Literature students, was held in the Supper Room of the Town Hall, a violent thunderstorm, accompanied by a deluge of rain, made it necessary to resort to electric lights, because of the comparative darkness; before long the electric current failed, so that we candidates were now quite in the dark. The Presiding Commissioner had to grope his way to the caretaker's quarters and borrow a candle or two, from which to give each candidate a few inches. What a chance for unscrupulous candidates! However, partly out of curiosity and partly out of an unspoken desire to set the Commissioner's mind at ease, each of the three candidates present went to a window well apart from the other two, and there amused himself watching the miniature cloud-burst pouring on to the street outside, until the Commissioner had placed a lighted stump of candle at each desk. Fortunately, the storm did not last long, and soon the sun appeared again.

It is interesting to note that among the foundation members were the Rhodes Scholars for the four years 1910-1913, inclusive. Proficiency in athletics played then, as now, a considerable part in the selection of the Rhodes Scholar; but, curiously enough, of corporate 'Varsity sport there was none in the foundation year, although most of the fellows had been in the cricket and rugby teams of their respective Colleges the year before. It so happened that most of the students, not realising the possibility of the formation of a 'Varsity team, had promised themselves to local cricket and rugby clubs, the result being that, when the sporting members were approached, it was too late. Some enthusiasts attempted to obtain funds from the authorities for the purpose of hiring a tennis court for the students, but in vain. In fact, the first 'Varsity Rugby was only started two or three years later.

The two most successful students in the B.A. and Intermediate Examinations, respectively, of the foundation year, were both killed on active service while holding commissions. The latter student, N.C. Lucas,

came top in South Africa in the examination, and several years later, for a little time during the course of the war, was appointed to lecture temporarily at Edinburgh University, until he received his commission and went on active service. G.V. Pearse, another foundation member and Rhodes Scholar, after long service as an Artillery Captain, has rejoined his Oxford College, of which he is cricket captain, and was recently awarded his cricket Blue. Several other 1910 students gained their commissions during the war, but space forbids me to go into details.

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