

Old Days at N.U.C.

(BY A FOUNDATION PROFESSOR)

“Round about” nine o’clock on the morning of Monday, the 19th of April, 1910 — when the majority of present N.U.C. students were still quite young — two, perhaps slightly nervous, figures might have been noticed in the vestibule of the Camden Hotel, in Pietermaritz Street. They were the present Professors of Classics and Chemistry — only twenty-four-and-a-half years younger than they are to-day. They had landed at Durban the day before *ex* the “Kenilworth Castle,” and had travelled up to Maritzburg (by train) the same evening under the sheltering wing of Mr “Jock” Robertson, then Acting Registrar of the infant N.U.C., now the popular Secretary of the Natal Education Department and father of a recent Rhodes Scholar. At the hour and the place referred to, they were awaiting the arrival of Sir Henry Bale, then Chief Justice of Natal and first Chairman of the N.U.C. Council, to pilot them to the Maritzburg College, which was to be the scene of their labour *pro tem*. After an exchange of greetings and a few minutes conversation with his two protégés, the great man surveyed them benignly from his height and remarked, “I’m beginning to think professors are not so formidable people after all!” That, naturally, was a little bit of a knock for them to start with, for what good were professors, anyway — the very first of the genus to be seen in these parts — if they could not inspire a little awe in the inhabitants — at least until familiarity should breed contempt? However, the writer, at any rate, remembering, very opportunely, that the two things that had made Scotland great were John Knox and hard knocks, waved away the remark with as little apparent discomposure as possible and took his place alongside his colleague in the brougham, trusting that the (free) ride and some of the sights of the City en route might do something to repair the damaged *amour propre*. Arrived at their destination, “without (like Dr Johnson) any memorable accident,” and after sundry introductions, the two not-so-formidable-after-all people addressed a few — one of them, it was alleged, rather more — words to the assembled senior pupils, after which they were put in touch more particularly with such of them as had been nursing a long-standing thirst for their respective subjects, and with the members of the M.C. staff who had been doing their best to satisfy it. The talk, in either case, must have been largely time-table, if things even got as far as that. But, whatever happened, it was an epoch-making morning. The work of the N.U.C. had begun!

For the new-comers — and here it should be mentioned that Dr Warren was already *in situ* at the Natal Museum and catering for Zoology — work at



Professor Alexander Petrie in the 1930s.

(Photograph: Natal University College Magazine 1934)

the Maritzburg College had at least the attraction of the novelty of the conditions under which it was conducted. The ancient Classics, which had survived so many rude shocks before then, were not to be put out of countenance by the humble environment of a "tin shanty," which froze one on a winter morning and baked one at mid-day. Given enough texts to go round, a classical teacher could be happy on a desert island. But the Professor of Chemistry (*and Physics!*), it is to be feared, was set to the intriguing task of making bricks without straw, in the matter of the requisite apparatus. This, of course, is no reflection on the school equipment, which was no doubt adequate for school purposes; but it was obvious that advanced science teaching must be carried on under difficulties until such time as the N.U.C. buildings proper should be available and reasonably furnished. And here it is a pleasure to recall the generous co-operation of the M.C. staff in reducing difficulties, of whatever kind, to a minimum. That the conduct of University classes alongside their legitimate school work constituted, for them, a mild nuisance, cannot be gainsaid: to their credit, they never let it appear so, and lasting friendships were formed in those first few months both with the headmaster (Mr Barns, later, and until recently, Registrar of the N.U.C.) and with other members of the staff, some of whom have since passed on or have been transferred to other spheres of labour.

And so, from the middle of April till the end of June, 1910, the trail was blazed at the Maritzburg College. The first of August, however, saw another and considerable, fluttering in the academic dovescotes when Professors Bews, Roseveare and Waterhouse (all very formidable!) arrived from overseas; and with the appointment of Professors Besselaar and Inchbold (both already in South Africa) the college of eight professors as originally provided for was complete. Of these, it may be noted, four (including the

Principal) are still active members of the staff; three have retired; one (Inchbold — Law), to our great sorrow, was carried off by enteric at the end of 1916, and his memory, appropriately — for he was the life and soul of the College Debating Society — is kept green by the annual Arts v. Science debate which bears his name. When one sets the eight teachers of 1910 against, roughly, the score (in Maritzburg) of 1934, and remembers that the number of subjects taught has remained fairly constant in the interval (though the student body, it is true has grown out of all knowledge), one is prepared to find that the designation of the original chairs was comprehensive and generous to a fault. Practically all of them were double-barrelled, either expressly or implicitly (English and Philosophy, Chemistry and Physics, Botany and Geology): indeed, a man with two barrels only was, comparatively speaking, in clover: precisely how many barrels were to be counted to, say, “Modern Languages and History,” was a moot point. It was a touching tribute — for all its suggestion of Aberdeen (or may be Yorkshire) inspiration — at once to the mental agility and to the physical endurance of the appointees: a man, in those simple days, was quite clearly expected to do a man’s, and a day’s work! In practice, however, as it was easy to predict, the demands made by the composite chairs upon their occupants were soon found to be excessive, and the breaking-up process, which has gone on more or less continuously since, started almost immediately. Lectureships in History and Physics, for instance, were instituted as early as 1912, both being erected in course of time into the present substantive Professorships. The Chair of Education, an entirely new creation, dates to 1921.

Simultaneously with the arrival of the full staff, as has been described, the Arts subjects, at least, were housed in the Town Hall, mainly on the first floor on the side adjacent to Church Street. Unfortunately, however, no attempt was made to secure what would now be known as a “zone of silence” in our neighbourhood: the clang of the tram gongs made sleep difficult even in the Latin classes, and passing motorists — though admittedly much less numerous than to-day — did not seem to care two hoots, or even three, that an earnest attempt was being made to conduct the Higher Education a few feet above their blatant horns. The result was that the classes were later transferred to the top floor on the opposite side, where the greater distance lent a little more enchantment to the din, and where a teacher had to stick to his work if for no better reason than that he might get dizzy and topple over the sill if he ventured to look into the street from his crow’s-nest. Now, too, regular meetings of Senate began to be held, the venue being (as it continued to be for the duration of Dr Warren’s connexion with the College) the Director’s room of the Natal Museum, and several more or less apocryphal stories which are still current regarding the earliest meetings of all under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Bale — after whom members of staff acted in this capacity, for a year or more, in turn — show that the administrative spade-work was not without its humours. Our first regular Registrar, appointed about this time was J.A.P. (popularly known as “X”) Feltham. B.A. (Cantab.), D.S.O., Feltham was the most human and genial of men, but, without doing him injustice, a little harum-scarum in his methods. The writer remembers finding him one day rather hot and bothered over some document which had gone astray, when he

presently exclaimed, with a triumphant air, "Ah, here we are! I wondered how I couldn't lay hands on it. *It was in its proper place!*" There was a deep significance, as well as humour, in that remark, and it will be sufficient to add that before many more months had passed the work of the office was proceeding at the steadier and more reliable pace set by David Robb, whose reign was destined to cover the bigger half of the first quarter-century of the College's existence.

All this time the N.U.C. had been represented, in its own right, by some forty acres of virgin veld on the hill of Scottsville, towards which we hopefully waved such as had the temerity to inquire where the College buildings were situated. In the later months of 1910, however, mounds of earth and stacks of bricks, as well as a crane or two breaking the sky-line in the direction mentioned, told that something, or somebody, was getting a move on at last, and things were sufficiently advanced to allow of the foundation-stone of our future home being laid with due ceremony (by the Duke of Connaught) on December 1. Dr Sormany, whose services to the College, it may be remarked, had been co-extensive with its life, was the chief spokesman for the Council, deputising for Sir Henry Bale, who died, by a singular, and sad, coincidence that afternoon. "*O fortunati, quorum iam moenia surgunt!*" we exclaimed, with Aeneas, as the walls, after seemingly endless weeks of burrowing, began to show above the veld, and the townsfolk sat up and took notice. From then on, the new buildings were naturally the subject of occasional visits to mark the progress that was being made, and the writer recalls giddy climbings of ladders and walks along rafters in charge of the Clerk of Works, when a wrong step might have meant Latin-less and Greek-less weeks for a certain number of the students. As it was, their luck was out!

At length, after the winter vacation of 1912, we were able to move into our new abode, and the official opening by the then Minister of Education (Hon. F.S. Malan) followed on the 9th of August, before a representative gathering which filled the Hall. Then, if not before, it was really felt that the N.U.C. had "a local habitation and a name," and staff and students alike walked about their new domain with an air of proprietorship. There was still, of course, a considerable amount of work to be done on the buildings, and in the matter of noise we were really, for some time following the occupation, "out of the frying-pan into the fire:" however, the smiths, "with busy hammers closing rivets up" gave not so much "dreadful note of preparation" as the happy note of approaching completion, and the thought that it was so enabled us to carry on. With the passage of the weeks, the hammering died away, and the city on the hill settled down into the "serene, academic calm" to which it was entitled. In those disturbed days, professors who had their pitch on the ground floor had to keep a sharp eye for the possible sudden disappearance of members of their audience through some trap-door (the better 'ole?) that had been left to give access to a fitting underneath which had still to be adjusted. On one notable occasion, at least, when unauthorised subterranean ventriloquism competed somewhat prominently with "the master's voice," the Senate — a rare experience in the history of the College — had to take mild disciplinary action.

The self-contained quadrangle, as completed in 1912, continued to house all the College departments — with the exception of Zoology and Law —

until 1923, when the clamant need for increased accommodation was met by the provision of the spacious Science Block erected in close proximity. Up till then, Chemistry shared the back wing with Physics — a fact which was frequently, and forcibly, conveyed to sensitive noses, or indeed noses of any kind, in other parts of the building. Particularly when the wind blew towards the town, the Arts people would have found gas-masks invaluable; and it was actually alleged that the budding Faradays in the Chemistry “lab.” took advantage of that atmospheric condition to let loose upon their unfortunate fellows all the weird odours ever boasted by a Cologne or a Wigan — with perhaps a few extras thrown in! Whether it was a specially virulent species of stink-bomb that was being tried out, or whether it was that some enterprising heckler on the eve of a general election had placed an order for a consignment of synthetic “election” eggs, could only be conjectured: it was obviously out of the question to investigate the cause of the trouble on the spot!

The existence of the N.U.C. in visible form unquestionably did much to stimulate social life among the sixty or seventy undergraduates then in attendance by providing it with a permanent rallying-point. The hostels, of course, which have revolutionised things in this respect in more recent years, were then the dream of a far distant future, and students were scattered in lodgings throughout the town — a fact which was illustrated by the unexpected sources from which missing library books were sometimes recovered. A drive through the Y.M.C.A. alone would usually be good for half-a-dozen volumes. Sports grounds and tennis courts, too, if more practical politics than hostels, were necessarily a matter of time. And yet in those early days, in spite of all handicaps, the foundations of the bulk of student activities, as they are to-day, were well and truly laid: the hour brought the men and the women. The S.R.C., for instance, the Debating Society, the Rugby and Tennis Clubs, soon to be followed by a number of others, were practically coeval with the College itself, and it is almost startling to recall that the N.U.C. Rugby team were actually finalists in the Senior Murray Cup of 1912, and runners-up in the York and Lancaster the same season. Memory descends through the haze of the years the giants who in those days carried the N.U.C. Rugby colours to victory: the evergreen “Bill” Payn — who, by the way, has had the distinction of sending to us the first representatives of the second generation of students — Bertram Vanderplank, Charlie (“Station”) Norman, Hugh Rymer, and others. “Give the ball to Rymer!” was the slogan of Rugby “fans” of the day when ‘Varsity were on view, and if Rymer got it, it was pretty much in the same case as the almost-sold Arab steed of one-time school readers: “who overtook him might have it for his pains.”

And so we were settling down nicely, both to work and play, when along came 1914 and with it, in August, like a bolt from the blue, the European Armageddon. The honourable part played by the N.U.C. students who were of age for service in the far-flung conflict is best, if sadly, told by the not (we trust) unworthy War Memorial in the College Hall, where, among the thirteen names recorded — Dutch as well as English — one reads those of such ornaments of our early student body as Norman Lucas and Norman Watt. The first and immediate effect of the war was to send our numbers down with a bang to the low figure of barely forty, and for the next year or

two work was conducted in the all-pervasive atmosphere of tension and depression. Eventually, in 1918, the College buildings were placed at the disposal of the authorities as a soldiers' convalescent hospital, and the Arts classes were once more housed in the City — this time in the then Railway Offices (now the S.A.P. headquarters) opposite the Imperial Hotel, provision being made for the retention of access to the science laboratories at Scottsville. However, on the historic 11th of November in the same year came the Armistice, bringing promise of a brighter day for the N.U.C. as for the world at large, and in due course we resumed occupation of our familiar quarters, which we trust we shall not have to vacate again for a similar purpose. The return of happier conditions was immediately, and strikingly, reflected in the attendance roll, which jumped, in 1919, to the hitherto undreamt-of figure of over 120, and from then till now the College, in this matter, has gone from strength to strength.

The war years were trying ones in other respects for the youthful N.U.C., for the future of University Education in South Africa was in the melting-pot and much of the time of both Council and Senate was occupied in scanning and considering successive legislative proposals or commission reports which were mostly abortive. It was accordingly with a sense of relief that something like stability was achieved by the Malan (F.S.) Acts of 1916, which definitely replaced the old examining University of the C.G.H. by three new teaching Universities, the N.U.C. taking its place (which it still occupies) as a constituent college of the University of South Africa, which (with Cape Town and Stellenbosch) came officially into being on April 2, 1918. With the worrying problem of its place in the general scheme of things settled, the College has since been able to concentrate on its own individual expansion, and though this is a matter which belongs to its modern, rather than to its ancient, history, there are two things which are too outstanding to pass over. The first is the important step of the institution of University courses in Durban in 1922, culminating later on in the splendid Howard College. The second is the appointment of a Principal (in the person of Dr Bews), which the task of co-ordinating the work in the two centres rendered both desirable and necessary, in place of the floating Chairmanship of Senate, which, if it had served the College well in its time, had outlived its day. And now — if we may venture to peep into the future — the UNIVERSITY OF NATAL?

That is a consummation which, if it should fall to some of the "old contemptibles" to witness it within the term of their active service, might well make them content to say, with Simeon of old *nunc dimittis*. But the fact that we are in a position even to visualise it shows how far we have travelled since that near far-off day when there was lit, in Maritzburg, a candle which, under Providence, has not been put out. In the course of the twenty-five years that lie between, it has languished sometimes, maybe, for lack of nourishment: it has flickered, almost to extinction, before some ruder blast, but ever and again it has revived and shot up into new life. And as those who bore a humble hand in the lighting of it see it to-day burning with a steady, and hopeful, flame, they may exclaim with more than a touch of pardonable pride, "*nec tamen consumebatur*."

ALEXANDER PETRIE

(Reprinted from the N.U.C. Magazine, 1934)