

Obituaries

Norman Wynne Bowden

1983 saw the demise of one who had enjoyed only one year of retirement after a distinguished career of 52 years in Natal education.

Norman Wynne Bowden was New Zealand born and was educated at the Auckland Grammar School and the University of New Zealand. Here he graduated B.A. and was awarded the Senior Scholarship in French and Latin, majoring also in English. After a year or two teaching at his old school — a teaching qualification was not obligatory in New Zealand at that time — he arrived in South Africa to spend a year studying Latin under the legendary Professor Petrie at the Natal University College.

Instead he was persuaded to do an education diploma, and so found himself in 1931 teaching at Durban High School, an association which lasted until 1949. Under Langley, Black and Martin he served 'School' admirably as a most successful teacher of Latin and Mathematics, as senior resident master and, for sixteen years, as sportsmaster — a real all-rounder. It was his proud boast that, while he was sportsmaster, D.H.S. did not once lose the quadrangular athletics contest with Glenwood, St Charles and Maritzburg College.

In 1950 he left on promotion to the new Northlands High School as vice-principal to Percy Hardaker — his first venture into co-education. Further promotion saw him at the helm of the Windsor Park Primary School in mid-1953, his first venture into the primary field. Thereafter followed his most challenging assignment — his appointment as principal of the Westville Junior School on the tacit understanding that he was to nurture it into a high school.

The dice seemed loaded against him. There were primary school facilities only (no laboratories, no housecraft equipment, no hall), a postage stamp sized sportsfield, no tennis courts, and so on. Rugby practices were held in Pinetown. Obviously the local community, fairly opulent and inclined to look towards private schools or Durban High School for its children's education, was not to be easily induced to support the fledgling high school.

Even so, after only one year there, Wynne's charisma was such as to persuade the people of Westville to afford him the bare minimum of twenty secondary pupils necessary to warrant the Education Department's setting up a Standard 7. This was the start of the meteoric growth of the school which, by 1963 when he left, numbered 790 and had acquired an enviable reputation amongst Natal schools in all fields of activity, especially the academic.



Mr N.W. Bowden.

(Photograph: Natal Training College Archives)

Wynne's next post was at the Natal Training College where he was appointed Rector in 1964. This was a time when radical changes were being made in teacher training. The old two-year qualification was to go; at least three years was to be required of all student teachers, and many used the third year to train as junior high school teachers. Thus the Department hoped to relieve the teacher shortage at this level.

His special contribution here was to persuade young men into teaching, and his efforts were considerably boosted when the Department provided the College with a men's residence — the Bowden Residence. During his tenure the number of men students grew from 25 to 60 and Natal was provided for some years with a small but steady stream of that most scarce commodity — male English-speaking teachers.

In 1971 he officially retired for the first time, only to spend the next year back in the classroom, teaching his beloved Latin at Maritzburg College. Then after seriously considering a return to the coast, he accepted the post of Reader in the Department, vetting publishers' submissions in respect of their suitability for and place in the school.

After a second short 'retirement' he was presented with another great challenge. The Catholic Marist Brothers who, since 1877 had administered — and, in early days, staffed — St Charles College, made it known that the school was to close at the end of 1978. It was only in that year that the Old Boys of the school decided that St Charles must, at all costs, continue in existence. And it was to Wynne Bowden, now 72 years of age, that they turned to lead the rescue operation.

This he did to a degree that silenced — staggered, even — the prophets of doom who gave St Charles, reduced to a roll of only 110 boys from Class I to Standard 10, no chance of survival. By the time he left in 1982, after four short years, the school was very much alive and well, with a roll of 350.

Wynne's service to the teaching profession extended beyond the confines of the school. He was an active member of the Natal Teachers' Society, for some years a member of its executive and in 1953/4 its President. For many

years he served the Department as Examiner in Arithmetic, Mathematics, English and Latin.

This recital of successes is indeed impressive. Yet it is not his successes as such that one remembers of Wynne. It is Wynne the man, fully committed and loyal to whatever institution and post he served; persistent — obstinate, even — in the pursuit of the best for that institution; the so-very-human being who always had time to listen, guide and counsel. This is what one recalls of this ever friendly and chatty person.

These personal qualities, more than any organizational or administrative ability, were the source of his success. Simply put, he loved people and saw good in everybody, made the most of their good points and was patient and tolerant of their failings. With few exceptions, all responded to the warmth of his personality and gave him their wholehearted support and regard.

Mention of his name to a past pupil or colleague is enough always to induce a smile, for it is only with affection that one can recall his memory. He radiated goodwill. During his regime Westville, Natal Training College and St Charles were all noted for the happy atmosphere that prevailed; this atmosphere stemmed largely from the man at the helm.

HECTOR COMMONS

