

A SOUTH AFRICAN BOY'S YEAR AT HERMANNSBURG, 1871

by Milner Snell

A SOUTH African Boy: Schoolboy Life in Natal by Natalian was published in 1897 by Marshall Russell & Co. of London. Natalian was the pseudonym of Albert Baker who had grown up in Natal in the 1860s and 1870s.¹ The book gives a first-hand account of the rather haphazard education available to white children in the early years of the Colony.² Baker attended Maritzburg College, Hermannsburg and Hilton College, and left a revealing account of these institutions.³ Although he only spent a year at the Lutheran mission school at Hermannsburg, the chapter he wrote on his time there highlighted the conflict between the headmaster, who attracted the children of British colonials by offering education in English, and the directors of the mission in Germany who insisted German be the medium of instruction.

Albert Weir Baker was born in Pietermaritzburg on 1 September 1856 and grew up at 22 Longmarket Street. His father, George William Baker, owned a drapery shop, which he left in the care of his wife while he organised, and often accompanied, hunting and trading parties to the Zulu kingdom. George Baker worked at his businesses with 'a determined will' and was eventually affluent enough to buy a number of properties, including the farm Mount Ernestina near Greytown and Silverdale in the Town Bush Valley.⁴ He imported thoroughbred stallions and in 1896 presented the city of Pietermaritzburg with the swimming baths in Buchanan Street.⁵

After a stint at Maritzburg College, Baker spent a year at Hermannsburg. The Lutheran church had established

the mission near Greytown in 1854. In 1856, it began giving classes to the children of the Zulu converts who worked on the mission.⁶ As the number of Lutheran missionaries, as well as German and British colonists, increased, a boarding establishment was built to provide education for their children. Baker described how the school authorities sent a bullock-wagon to the market square in Pietermaritzburg to convey pupils to Hermannsburg. The journey of fifty miles took three days and the boys slept in the open for two nights.⁷ The school buildings consisted of the classroom, which was a long building divided in two to keep boys and girls separate, and a double-storied boarding establishment with a dining room and the quarters for the masters on the first floor and rooms for the boarders on the second. The boarding establishment offered basic accommodation, but the food was 'wholesome and good, and the supply plentiful'.⁸

The headmaster in 1871 was Johann Heinrich Müller. Pastor Müller had arrived in Natal in 1862 from Großalm-erode in Hessen.⁹ The school retained a strong denominational character and German ethos under Müller.¹⁰ The day began with a Bible lesson, and compulsory Lutheran church services were held on Wednesday evenings and twice on a Sunday. German was mandatory for all pupils and Müller fostered German among the pupils by making it obligatory for boys, who had been at the school for more than twelve months, to converse in the language at table.¹¹ Müller's actions support Hans-Jürgen Oschadleus's argument

that the Lutheran mission and church 'ensured the survival' of the German language and culture in Natal.¹² However, Müller adapted to the reality of running a school in a British colony.¹³ He increased the number of academic subjects offered at the school, employed more English-speaking teachers and English became the language of instruction.¹⁴ Hermannsburg also attracted pupils as it was the only high school that had a boarding establishment.¹⁵ The grammar school maintained by the Anglicans collapsed when a schism formed in the church over Bishop Colenso's biblical criticism,¹⁶ and Maritzburg College, opened in 1863, and Durban High School, established in 1866, were in their infancy, which made Hermannsburg a more stable option. By 1871 of the 60-odd boys, most were 'of English parentage'.¹⁷ The school drew pupils from Pietermaritzburg, Durban and the south coast, and prominent English-speakers who attended the school in the 1860s included Frederick Moore, last Prime Minister of Natal, Charles Saunders and George Leuchars.¹⁸

The board in Germany disagreed with Müller's language policy and wanted all subjects taught in German. Müller resisted this 'knowing that English parents would not tolerate it'.¹⁹ The board, however, sent out Gottfried Behr in 1871 to take over as headmaster and to introduce the new language policy. Müller was demoted to assistant master. Müller, popular among the boys, resigned and in 1872 founded Selborne College in East London. When the boys heard of the proposed language changes and Müller's resignation, 'the majority wrote off home, begging their parents to make arrangements for their being transferred to another school after the holidays'.²⁰ According to a graph,

drawn up by Inge von Fintel, showing numbers at the school based on enrolment registers, there was a drop from eighty to fifty pupils during Behr's time as headmaster.²¹ Behr returned to Germany in 1878 and H.W. Ahrens served as principal until 1906. During his time at the school, English once again became the medium of instruction.²² Numbers at the school, however, steadily declined and there were less than twenty children in 1906. This was due to an increase in the number of existing government schools, such as Maritzburg College and Durban High School, opening boarding establishments and generally improving their academic standards, as well as the establishment of Hilton College in 1871. (Baker left Hermannsburg for Hilton College). With well-run schools closer to bigger centres, there was no need for English parents to send their children to Hermannsburg.

It is worth looking briefly at Baker's later life. Baker read law and established his chambers just off Church Street in Pretoria. A fiercely religious man, he worked as a lay minister while practising law. In the early 1890s, Baker worked with Mahatma Gandhi on a complicated legal case. Gandhi was employed in India to come to South Africa to act as a legal consultant for Dada Abdulla, a wealthy trader in Durban, who was suing a former business partner living in Pretoria. Gandhi arrived in Durban in May 1893 and left on the last day of the month by train for Pretoria to meet Baker. (It was on this journey that he was thrown off the train at the Pietermaritzburg station.) He met Baker on 5 June and later recalled that he was 'received very warmly'.²³ Baker explained that there was no work for Gandhi as a barrister as the firm had

engaged the best counsel available. Gandhi, however, would collect information and liaise with Abdulla regarding the case (both men spoke Gujarati). Baker ascertained Gandhi's religious views at their first meeting, and in their correspondence, which continued after the case, he pressed on Gandhi to accept 'Jesus as the only son of God and the saviour of mankind'.²⁴ In 1896, Baker gave up practising law and founded the South African Compound Mission to work among the migrant labourers on the mines of the Witwatersrand. This was 'essentially a one-man-show', although Baker did develop a wide network of contacts that stretched into Mozambique and Kenya.²⁵ Baker died on 15 March 1951 in Howick.

NOTES

- 1 Alan Hattersley mentions Baker as the author of *A South African Boy* in *Pietermaritzburg Panorama: A Survey of One Hundred Years of an African City* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1938).
- 2 I would like to thank Simon Haw for commenting on a draft copy of this article.
- 3 Hattersley drew on *A South African Boy* for his chapter on education in *More Annals of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1936).
- 4 Natalian [Albert W. Baker], *A South African Boy: Schoolboy Life in Natal* (London: Marshall Russell & Co., 1897), pp. 15–16.
- 5 Hattersley, *Pietermaritzburg Panorama*, pp. 85 and 105.
- 6 U. Küsel, *Africa Calling: A Cultural History of Hermannsburg Mission and its Descendants in South Africa* (Magalieskruin: South African Heritage Consultants, 2017), p. 30.
- 7 Baker, *A South African Boy*, pp. 122–123.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 132.
- 9 Küsel, *Africa Calling*, p. 423.
- 10 *Deutsche Schule zu Hermannsburg: 125 Jahre Schularbeit* (Hermannsburg, 1971), p. 7.
- 11 Baker, *A South African Boy*, p. 138.
- 12 H.J. Oschadleus, 'Lutherans, Germans: Hermannsburgers' *Natalia* 22 (1992), p. 37.
- 13 *Deutsche Schule zu Hermannsburg*, p. 7.
- 14 Baker, *A South African Boy*, p. 135.
- 15 Simon Haw, *For Hearth and Home: The Story of Maritzburg College, 1863–1988* (Pietermaritzburg: M.C. Publications, 1988) p. 6.
- 16 Simon Haw, *Taking Stock: The Natal Education Department Looks Back* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Education Department, 1995), pp. 9–10.
- 17 Baker, *A South African Boy*, p. 122.
- 18 Oschadleus, 'Lutherans, Germans: Hermannsburgers', p. 32.
- 19 Baker, *A South African Boy*, p. 138.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 21 I would like to thank Sven Malzahn of the Mission House Museum, Hermannsburg for access to this document and assisting me with research for this article.
- 22 Harry C. Lugg, *Historic Natal and Zululand* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1949), p. 75.
- 23 Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or Story of my Experiments with Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 218.
- 24 *ibid.*, pp. 219–220.
- 25 B. Sundkler and C. Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 418.