

Reginald Alfred Banks

1890–1980

Reginald Alfred Banks died in July 1980 at the grand age of 90. With his passing yet another cherished link with the past has been broken, for this man, the tenth Director of Education in Natal and a man among men, played a significant role in shaping education in this province during the first half of this century.

Reginald Banks was not born in the land he was to serve with such distinction and dedication, but emigrated here with his parents in 1897 when he was only seven and it had been discovered that he had a weak chest.

Most of his schooldays were spent at Maritzburg College and there he displayed many of the outstanding qualities that were to characterise his later career. He was a good all-round sportsman. He played cricket, was a member of the First XV, was Senior Athletics Champion and was Regimental Sergeant-Major of the cadet corps. In addition to this he was an outstanding scholar and in 1908, after heading the list of Natal candidates in the intermediate B.A. examination, he was awarded a four-year scholarship to Cambridge.

At Corpus Christi he read for the Natural Science tripos and was awarded the B.A. (Hons) in 1912. At this stage he had no thoughts of teaching but had determined upon a career in the mines and so spent a year preparing himself by reading such subjects as geology, metallurgy, surveying, and elementary engineering. However, on his return to South Africa, he found the mines disrupted by strikes, and phthisis prevalent among miners. Somewhat deterred, he changed his mind and accepted the offer of a teaching post in the Natal Education Department. Thus, in September 1913, at the age of 23 he began his teaching career at Newcastle.

Such was the calibre of the man and his work that Mr Banks earned rapid promotion. Within three years he was headmaster of Utrecht Senior School and four years later he became headmaster of Merchiston. In 1928 he returned to Northern Natal as headmaster of Dundee Secondary School and three years later he was appointed Inspector of Schools. In 1940 he became Chief Inspector and then in 1941 he succeeded Mr F.D. Hugo as Director of Education.

Mr Banks was Director of Education for nine years until his retirement, in May 1950, at the age of 60. These were not easy years. The Second World War and its aftermath created a number of problems, placing the Natal Education Department under considerable strain. The fact that it was able to operate so smoothly was largely because of the dedication, inspiration and efficiency of its Director. The principal problems during the war years were a shortage of staff and grossly inadequate financial resources. Teachers who volunteered for active service could not be replaced; there were no funds to keep existing buildings in good repair, let alone to build urgently required new schools; and the shortage of petrol made it difficult for inspectors to carry out their duties efficiently.

These problems did not end with the cessation of hostilities. Finance remained a problem, proper maintenance of school buildings was still difficult and new buildings were few and far between. Furthermore, recruitment of new teachers was not easy and the relationships between teachers and the administration were not always cordial, especially over questions of salary.

Through all this Mr Banks was able to inspire his staff by his own exemplary behaviour, guide the Department safely and efficiently, and even see its work expand. In those days the Natal Education Department provided education for all races in the province, involving twice as many pupils and schools as it controls today. Yet the available resources were inadequate and both the inspectorate and the administrative staff were much smaller than now. It is only when this is realised that it is possible to place the achievements of Mr Banks into perspective.

Despite the difficulties, however, much progress was made in education under the directorship of Mr Banks. The Natal Education Ordinance of 1942 consolidated previous ordinances and provided, amongst other things, for free secondary education for pupils in white and coloured schools; for free primary education for pupils in Indian schools; and for compulsory school attendance for all coloured children between the ages of 7 and 15 years. The expansion in secondary education for whites, which had been observed when Mr Banks took office, continued apace and by 1948 it was possible to abolish the Standard 6 Certificate examination and to leave promotion at that level to the schools. Other highlights of Mr Banks's term of office were undoubtedly the celebrations surrounding the Royal Visit in 1947 and the centenary of education in Natal in 1949. It is also worth recording that he was a member of the Council of the University of South Africa, a member of both the Council and the Senate of the University of Natal and a member of the Joint Matriculation Board.

Mr Banks retired after 37 years' service, and it is significant that in the various tributes to him, people spoke not only of his great ability as an administrator but also of his qualities as 'a fine gentleman' who had 'endeared himself to the teachers of Natal'. It was also a fitting tribute that, two years after his retirement, the University of Natal should have conferred upon him an honorary D.Litt degree in recognition of his distinguished service to education in Natal.

In retirement Mr Banks was almost as active as he had been in service. For 17 years he served, in a temporary capacity, the Provincial Library Services, which he had founded in 1950, after he had retired. Only then, at the age of 77, did he decide to retire finally.

Mr Banks is undoubtedly one of the outstanding figures in the history of education in Natal.

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Photograph: *The Natal Witness*, Pietermaritzburg