

Alexander Petrie

1881–1979

He must have been the best-known nonagenarian in Pietermaritzburg — a kenspeckle figure [that may be easily recognised; remarkable in appearance — *Editor*] in his own Presbyterian church, in the Victoria Club, at University of Natal celebrations, at St Andrew's Day dinners of the Caledonian Society, and of course everywhere in the streets of the capital. For his age, too, he was undoubtedly the most genial personality for miles around, with a collection of jokes that in due course percolated — so good were they — to almost every social stratum in the town.

My first meeting with him came about as a result of a need to contact a friend or contemporary of R.D. Clark (famous headmaster of Maritzburg College, 1879–1902). I wanted Professor Petrie to write an article about his friendship with Clark who had died in 1917. During our talk at the Victoria Club the professor sat quietly listening to my plea, the only sign of awareness being a slight flicker of his eyes as he listened to my Scottish accent. From this casual meeting there came about a friendship despite the fact that he gently refused to write the article.



A. PETRIE

Photograph: *The Natal Witness*, Pietermaritzburg

What developed instead was a mutual interest based on Dr Jamieson's famous *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* which first appeared in 1808 with further revised editions in 1825, 1846, and 1867, culminating in a grand 1880 edition of five large octavo volumes, now a collector's piece. The five volumes had been given to me by an elderly Scottish friend.

Among the scores of ancient Scottish words there were some that particularly appealed to him. One was *burdalane*, an old word from the Maitland MSS "used to denote one who is the only child left in a family; a bird alone, or solitary . . ."

Another was the infinitive *gar*, to cause, force, or make as in the term "That'll gar ye greet". Also *to chap* meaning to knock or tap as "to chap at the door."

Then there was *hantle* meaning a considerable number, for example "a hantle o' siller", derived from the Swedish "antal or handtal", that which may be counted by the hand.

The professor seemed to derive considerable pleasure from searching the close-packed columns of Jamieson's *Dictionary* for old words heard in his childhood nearly a century previously.

In addition there were his jokes and witticisms, so good that over the years they were remembered and quoted by public speakers. I know one retired businessman who has a considerable collection of 'Petrieana' on tape.

His letters, however, are not quite so well-known. I have seen some of them and they bear out the old saying that the style is the man, for they contain anecdotes humorous and revealing relating to incidents of the past concerning friends and colleagues in the University and schools. All of them, of course, had passed on. But he selected new friends from later generations, too. One letter written some months before he left Pietermaritzburg for good he signed off with 'Ever yours' in Latin, adding that he understood this was a frequent letter-usage of the late General Smuts.

For many years his home was at the Victoria Club where everyone, members and staff, was quietly proud of having so distinguished a person under their roof. The Indian staff cherished him and saw that he lacked nothing in the way of attention or comfort. He had visits from his daughters and friends both inside and outside the club. There were up-to-date newspapers and periodicals for his reading and TV was available when he wished to view a special programme.

His daily examination of *The Natal Witness* impelled him to send occasional letters for publication. One of them was about the hottest day experienced in Pietermaritzburg. The letter appears in an April issue of 1959 and shows how logically he could present his case:

"Sir, — The hottest day ever is apt to be the one with which people are struggling at the moment and an appeal to cold statistics — though even these, one would imagine, must have got warmed up a bit during the past week — to correct their estimate will not do much to make them feel cooler. But I believe that such an appeal would disprove the claim made in a recent *Witness* report for the comparatively modest figure of 106 degrees as an all-time Pietermaritzburg 'high'.

It is, of course, very much a case where chapter and verse are essential, so I would specifically name Friday, January 14, 1924, when a temperature of 110 was recorded at the Botanic Gardens.

This figure, to my knowledge, has not been equalled since; nor, as far as I can gather, is there any general desire that it should be.

But it supports the probability that a scrutiny of the records would show that 106 has been topped more than once within fairly recent years.

The 110 degrees, however, of January 14, 1924, has I believe been checked and confirmed before now and can be accepted as reliable . . .

A. PETRIE”

Towards the end of his life he contracted pneumonia but made a good recovery despite his advanced age. However, his daughters felt that the time had come to take him to Johannesburg where he could be with the family. In due course he celebrated his 98th birthday on October 26, 1979, receiving of course many congratulations from his friends in Natal.

He died in his sleep on Saturday morning, December 1, 1979, having been spared a long illness of severe pain. *The Natal Witness* published the news on the front page, paying tribute to the grand old man.*

In his day he had employed his facility in verse-composition in commemorating various occasions, including obituaries, and there is a certain appropriateness in concluding this tribute with the lines which he composed on the death of his friend R.D. Clark. They apply perhaps even more strongly to himself.

“Yet in our ears, till hearing dies,
One set slow bell will seem to toll
The passing of a genial soul
As ever looked with human eyes.”

JOHN CLARK

* Among the other tributes paid to Professor Petrie was that of the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Natal, Professor N.D. Clarence, who delivered the address at the Memorial Service held in the Pietermaritzburg Presbyterian Church, Longmarket Street, on Tuesday, 11th December, 1979. The present Professor of Classics, Professor Magnus M. Henderson, also wrote an obituary which was published in *The Natal Witness* on 12th December, 1979.

Professor Petrie was the first Professor of Classics at the University of Natal (or Natal University College, as it was then known), and thus was one of the foundation professors of the College, which was established in 1910. He held the Chair until his retirement in 1947. He has been described as “the Nestor of classical studies in South Africa”. Not only was he a skilful and dedicated teacher with a lecturing style all of his own, but he also published six books. In 1948 he was designated Professor Emeritus of Latin and Greek; while in 1950 a further honour was conferred upon him by the University of Natal with the award of the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature. Professor Edgar H. Brookes, who wrote the *History of the University of Natal*, which was published in 1966, “respectfully and affectionately” dedicated this book to Alexander Petrie.

Editor