Beyond School: Some developments in higher education in Durban in the 1920s and the influence of Mabel Palmer

Early in 1921 Mabel Palmer stepped ashore in Durban to take up a teaching position at the Technical College. Her particular brief was to organise and teach the tutorial classes of the Workers' Educational Association, an adult education movement affiliated to the Durban Technical College. A decade later when the Natal University College in Durban was formally constituted, Mabel Palmer was one of its founding staff. The intention of this article is to view the influences and events of this seminal decade, not through the minutiae of a systematic, chronological study of higher education in Natal, but through the experience of an individual deeply involved in it both formally and informally. Mabel Palmer was indeed one of Natal's most colourful and able educationists.

Natal had been slow in coming to a resolve in favour of higher education. Sir Henry Bulwer's draft bill in 1877 for a Royal College of Natal under a Rector failed to reach fruition. Colonists, politicians and education officials alike contributed to the prevailing opinion that even a high school education unfitted its charges for the practicalities of a pioneering society. Robert Russell, Superintendent of Education from 1875 to 1901, was a particular devotee of this point of view. Referring to the protagonists of a higher quality of education at Maritzburg College and Durban High School he observed in 1886,

I am glad to notice a disposition on the part of both Head Masters to devote more attention throughout to what are called the “ordinary” subjects. As most of our youths have to make their living in the Colony, their education ought to furnish them with the tools and weapons necessary for the work and battle of life . . . There is no distinct line of demarcation between our Primary Schools and our High Schools, nor indeed can there well be until a considerably increased population furnishes a sufficient number of youths intended for professional life or for the Home Universities.
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It was this utilitarian approach which influenced the Natal government when it eventually faced the higher education issue in 1904 for it appointed a commission to explore technical education, “that form of education which helps man to earn a living”. The Natal Technical Education Commission delineated certain trends which were to remain features of higher education in Natal. For example, it mingled academic and technical training. It recommended one full teaching university in South Africa of which the Colonies in which it was not situated should have constituent colleges or institutes for “higher and technical” education. The subjects it envisaged ranged from English, philosophy and history to sanitary engineering, telegraphy and business training. Furthermore, it saw Pietermaritzburg as the seat of the institution with an obligation to supply the needs of Durban in addition. “Home” conditions and the reality of the Natal setting were constantly juxtaposed. Debate was heated and opinion divided. The recommendations were shelved and not even debated in Parliament. But the work of this Commission contributed in no small way to the establishment of the Natal University College in Pietermaritzburg and the Natal Technical College in Durban and thereby to the dual structure of the University of Natal.

While Pietermaritzburg waited for yet another commission in 1909 to obtain its university, Durban took the matter into its own hands. On 4 April 1907 Dr S.G. (Sam) Campbell convened a meeting in his home. Under the chairmanship of Sir Benjamin Greenacre some twenty citizens, including Sir David Hunter, chairman of the abortive 1907 Commission, resolved to found a Technical Institute to be financed by the Corporation and Government and to be managed by a local committee representing the Townsmen, the Town Council and the Government. Events moved rapidly. On 8 July 1907 the Governing Body of the Durban Technical Institute was constituted and two months later the classes were formally opened. On Sunday, 10 January 1909 Sam Campbell himself drove his carriage and pair to the docks to meet the first principal, Benjamin Mason Narbeth. In 1915 the Institute became the Durban Technical College and in 1922, the Natal Technical College. In that auspicious year the first steps were taken towards moulding some of the departments into the nucleus of the Natal University College in Durban, a process which reached fruition in 1931. It is with some significance that Roy Campbell recalled what he believed was his last view of Durban in 1944 in these words:

As the ship turned round in the bay I could see the new University College which my father founded, and, nearer the centre of the town, the vast Technical College, also his own creation, which grew from a night school. Here, along with a few other volunteers, he used to teach youths unable to afford schooling, in his spare hours from his medical practice, in a dilapidated building, which he rented himself for the purpose. He had a fear of illiteracy, which I do not share, having met, among Spanish peasants who could not read, the most happy, cultured, brave, and dignified people on earth, far more intelligent than most professors. Nevertheless these buildings are superb monuments to the pugnacity of a great and witty fighter in a single-handed battle against the money-grubbing, shopkeeping mentality of the successive Town Councils of Durban.
It was no ordinary woman who entered this milieu when Mabel Palmer joined the Durban Technical College staff in 1921. Born in England in 1876, she was a Victorian young lady, cribbed, cabined and confined by constricting clothes and limited horizons. She writes vividly of her longing to ride a bicycle, march in a procession and enter Parliament, all of which luxuries were forbidden to women when she was a girl. Yet she entered Glasgow University in 1893, one year after it was opened to women, and graduated with her M.A. in 1900, winning the University silver medal for the best essay in philosophy, the medal and prize for the most distinguished arts graduate of the year and a fellowship to the London School of Economics. At Glasgow she adopted Socialism and Fabianism which remained the impelling forces of her life. From 1909 to 1919 she served on the executive of the Fabian Society earning the close friendship of George
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Bernard Shaw, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and H.G. Wells, and the description by Margaret Cole, of "something of a stormy element in Edwardian Fabianism". It was at a meeting addressed by Mabel early in 1915 that no less a personage than Virginia Woolf saw fit to join the Fabian Society. Not that she was impressed by Mabel who, she wrote, "drivelled at length about Peace — I could understand, always, and confute generally, all that she said; so that I think it must have been very bad." Many were Mabel's achievements during this time. She won a fellowship to Bryn Mawr College in the U.S.A. and made a close acquaintance with Quakerism. She was a lecturer in philosophy and assistant to the Professor of Classics at Armstrong College, University of Durham, from 1904 to 1908. She was Lecturer in economics at King's College for Women, University of London, from 1908 to 1915. It was she who initiated the idea and actively participated in launching the first Fabian Summer School for Socialists in 1907. She wrote editorials for the Daily News from 1908 to 1910, the first woman to do so since Harriet Martineau. She was a suffragette, a friend and co-worker of the Pankhursts. She taught in the Workers' Educational Association tutorial classes of London University from 1910 to 1917 and Leeds University from 1918 to 1919. She taught factory girls doing men's work in London's East End during the 1914-18 war. All of this she gave up, yet in a sense brought with her when she settled in Natal. The fact that her migration and choice of Natal were incidental to circumstances connected with her unsuccessful marriage does not detract from the vigour with which she adopted her new environment and threw herself into the hurly-burly of South African society.

Mabel Palmer's first and most immediate sphere of influence in Durban was in the Workers' Educational Association. Some background to this movement and its establishment in Durban is necessary.

It was launched in England in 1903 by Albert Mansbridge, a young co-operative worker of Christian socialist leanings, as a means of involving the working classes in their own adult education on the co-operative principle. For some years the educational work was of a popular character supported spasmodically by Board of Education grants. When it seemed that a more advanced standard was called for, it was A.E. Zimmern, a tutor at New College, Oxford who suggested to Mansbridge a link with the University Extension Movement and the application of the tutorial methods of Oxford and Cambridge to W.E.A. work. As a pioneer experiment Mansbridge chose a class of thirty miners and operatives at Rochdale committed to two years' study, and R.H. Tawney, a Balliol scholar at that time lecturing in economics at Glasgow, was selected as tutor on the advice of Zimmern. The partnership proved successful. Tawney found his class as receptive as his Oxford students, as they were more mature and experienced, even if less prepared academically. The class found Tawney's tutoring sympathetic and effective. The 1907 Summer Extension Conference at Oxford followed and the Oxford Tutorial Classes Committee was set up to develop the approach. William Temple acted as secretary for the university and Mansbridge for the W.E.A. Other Oxford colleges and other universities established Joint Committees with the W.E.A. and tutorial classes began. By the end of 1909 Mansbridge wrote excitedly to Zimmern that thirty five classes had already been formed. Evangelical humanism; Christian socialism; many labels have been used to describe this marriage of labour and university to promote.
education of high standard and liberal tradition for the personal enrichment of the worker. Mansbridge expressed it thus:

The true appeal is that they lift themselves up through higher knowledge to higher works and higher pleasures, which, if responded to, will inevitably bring about right and sound action upon municipal, national and imperial affairs; action brought about without conscious effort — the only effectual action.8

On a Saturday afternoon in April 1916, in the Durban Technical College hall, Principal Narbeth addressed a meeting of some fifty people — including a number of women — on the advantages of the Workers' Educational Association. The meeting was under the auspices of the Natal Federation of Trades and Labour Unions and came at a time of increasing Labour influence in Natal.9 Narbeth traced the progress of the movement in Britain, laying emphasis on the need for working class education since political power was everywhere extending beyond the professions. He sketched the range of W.E.A. activities and drew attention, in particular, to the university tutorial classes, describing in detail the importance attached to discussion and written work. The essence of the movement, he indicated, was a spirit of comradeship, democratic control and the right of every human being to the fullest educational development. A Joint Committee, consisting of Narbeth, representing the Technical College, and representatives of the Federation of Trades and Labour Unions and of the audience, was appointed with a view to forming a branch in Durban and drafting a syllabus.10

As a curtain-raiser the committee offered a series of five Saturday evening lectures from 20 May to 15 July to be delivered in the Trades Hall in Gardiner Street alternating with the Saturday evening series offered by the Technical College. Topics included "Geography and War", "An Introduction to Sociology" and "National Education Policy", the last by Narbeth himself.11 Haltingly the tutorial classes came into being under the supervision of R.J. Hall M.A. (Oxon.) of the Technical College. The British pattern was adopted, though not without some improvisation. A query during a College Council meeting early in 1917 that the one tutorial class being conducted by Mr Hall could not be recognised while class members paid no fees to the College was generously pushed aside by the Principal, supported by Dr C.T. Loram, in the belief that the W.E.A. members attending the class should receive every encouragement. A query during a College Council meeting early in 1917 that the one tutorial class being conducted by Mr Hall could not be recognised while class members paid no fees to the College was generously pushed aside by the Principal, supported by Dr C.T. Loram, in the belief that the W.E.A. members attending the class should receive every encouragement.12 During 1918 there was progress in that tutorial classes were being held in the College on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. A Pioneer Course of five lectures was also given at each of Umbogintwini, South Coast Junction, Hillary, Malvern and Red Hill but no permanence was achieved.13 By 1920 it was envisaged that the first effort in Durban away from the class centre in the College would be at Greyville, which was outside the orbit of tutorial classes because a double tram journey was involved. It was thus with a view to extending tutorial work to the suburbs that a grant of £200 was made from the Union Government in 1920 towards the appointment of a Staff Tutor for the W.E.A. classes.14 Early in 1921 the Principal was able to report:

The need for an additional tutor with a fresh viewpoint was met by the appointment of Mrs Mabel Palmer, M.A. and her advent appears to be infusing new life into the movement.15
This infusion of new life was probably based on two main factors: Mabel Palmer’s direct experience of the W.E.A. movement in England and her own intellectual power. From 1910 to 1916, at Leicester and Enfield, Rochdale and Ilford, Sutton and Camberwell House, at King’s College and Morley College, she had been teaching economics and economic history through topics such as “Hobson’s Theory of Distribution”, “The Making of Modern England”, “Evolution of Government”, “Women’s Work in the Twentieth Century”, and “The Evolution of the Home”.16 Professor Zimmern himself was one of her referees for the post in Durban. Her determination to maintain the standards and spirit of the W.E.A. in Durban contributed in no small way to her reputation for strong-mindedness and irritating persistence. Dr Humphrey Jones, Vice-Principal of the Technical College at the time, recalls how he felt compelled to limit her to ten minutes when she spoke at Board of Studies meetings, as she would prolong proceedings by holding forth interminably! Yet Jones admits that her
W.E.A. students — some of them leading citizens of Durban — were captivated by her. Her unquestionable success rested on her own brilliant grasp of whatever subject she was handling. And she was versatile. She taught civics in the Technical High School, economics and colonial history to teachers working for their Secondary Diploma and Domestic Science Certificate, diploma work for adult employees of the municipality, and the W.E.A. classes. Her Thursday evening “Control of Industry” class in 1921 included several presidents and secretaries of trades union branches and a headmaster of one of the Durban schools. While she was pleased with the energetic and spontaneous discussion in the class she regretted that only three essays were written in the course. She was a fiend for work. She conducted a weekly course on “Banking and Currency” and “Industrial History” at the Y.M.C.A. She branched out to South Coast Junction with a course on “Prices and the Cost of Living”. And she ran a regular social evening for her tutorial class and other students in the Arthur Smith Hall at the Technical College. In the May after her arrival she visited the Johannesburg W.E.A. on request to reorganise the branch on the Rand. She organised a League of Nations Study Circle under the joint auspices of the College and the Durban Branch of the National Council of Women. She also conducted a course of lectures on the teaching of civics attended by thirty-three practising Government School teachers. In October 1922 the W.E.A. staged a Conference on Adolescent Education in conjunction with the Durban Teachers’ Society, the Y.M.C.A. and the Juvenile Advisory Board. On three successive evenings it dealt with topics such as ‘Need of Continued Education’, ‘Various Types of Continued Education’, ‘Cultural and Vocational Education’ and ‘The Organisation of Continued Education’. Mabel Palmer herself delivered a paper on ‘Various Types of Adolescent Education’. Resolutions were passed urging the educational authorities to increase the provision of adolescent education. The hand of Mabel Palmer in this conference is obvious. It is with justification that Wyn Rees observes:

She was undoubtedly the most highly qualified person yet to join the staff of the Technical College — and certainly one of the most gifted. The Workers’ Educational Association was never successfully launched elsewhere in Natal and it says much of the Durban Technical College that it should have provided the academic link in this educational outreach to labour, which was normally provided by a university. It says much for Mabel Palmer, too, that she gave the W.E.A. international academic standing, notwithstanding the deficiencies she discerned in the South African adaptation of it. Great distances, the weakness of the trade union movement in a country largely agricultural, and the racial composition of the population militated against it, but she never stopped promoting it.

At the same time that Mabel Palmer was bustling around in W.E.A. activity, another development was taking place at the Technical College which was to draw on her expertise and capture her imagination. This was the development of university classes. In 1919 the Natal University College Senate had investigated working with the Technical Colleges in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. While this was not feasible in Pietermaritzburg, Dr Sam Campbell again walked the tightrope in Durban and application was made to the University of South Africa for recognition
of the College’s post-matriculation classes in Engineering and Commerce. In August 1922 the Natal University College Council resolved to establish, in Durban, Departments of Commerce and Engineering. These would remain at the Technical College while money was raised to erect university buildings in Durban. Thus when classes in these subjects opened in 1923, university education in Durban had officially begun. On 9 March 1923 Professors Clark (Electrical Engineering), Neal (Mechanical Engineering) and Oldham (Commerce) and Mr Atkinson (Auditing) joined the University Senate but remained on the staff of the Technical College. There were sixteen students in 1923, forty-five in 1925 and eighty-nine in 1928. The gift in 1923 of £50 000 by T.B. Davis in memory of his son marked the beginning of a separation of university education in Durban from the Technical College and from Pietermaritzburg. The path to separation was not without hurdles, and it was only after J.W. Bews had spelt it out firmly at a half-way meeting at Inchanga in 1928, that plans for Howard College in Durban were drawn and work on the site was begun in 1929.

On 18 March 1931 Mabel Palmer wrote the following letter to Dr Bews:

I am very glad indeed to have your letter to-day containing the formal intimation that University work in Durban is to be transferred to the control of the Council of the Natal University College and have much pleasure in stating that I agree very readily to being transferred. Her transfer was the culmination of nearly a decade of service to the embryo university classes at the Technical College. While still in the Departments of Sociology and Humanities in the context of the W.E.A., she taught economics to the university students. In 1928 she was transferred to the Department of Commerce under Professor Oldham and while her field was economics, records show that she was also teaching economic history and philosophy of art. It was perhaps this versatility which, though a mark of her brilliance, contributed to the lack of definition which seems to have been a difficulty in her professional life. In a letter to Bews in 1934 she expressed her frustration at having no say in course and syllabus construction in her own subjects while under Professor Oldham’s jurisdiction, ending thus,

I feel horribly discouraged about the whole situation and the continuance of the Technical College tradition. I sometimes feel that I should acquiesce in being a jack of all trades under orders, just do what I am asked to do and give no other time or interest to the college. But that attitude would be fair neither to myself nor to the college and if I am driven to adopting it through weariness at these misunderstandings it will make my last years in Natal far from happy.

In fact Mabel Palmer never ceased giving with her usual verve and tenacity. It is not easy to assess the direct or indirect influence of any individual, but it seems fair to suggest that her role in inspiring academic excellence, influencing opinion, promoting new concepts, developing fresh fields of study and constantly providing a perspective from a worldwide academic experience should not be underestimated. It is worth considering some examples.

In September 1928 when the van der Horst Commission had taken a stand against university classes in Durban, Mabel Palmer published a masterly two-part article in the Natal Advertiser entitled ‘Why Natal Needs a
Regional University’. In the first part she points to the fallacy engendered by the Oxford and Cambridge tradition that university education should be centralised, cultural, and residential. She pleads for the students of Durban at the time who would be precluded from university education if it were elsewhere. Comparing her own experience at Bryn Mawr and the London School of Economics, she contends that a small residential college can be less stimulating than an urban non-residential university. She pleads for university status to be given to “bread and butter” subjects emphasizing that “University education is, or should be, the training in thinking and in character given to that section of the community who are to function as leaders and experts”. In the second part she concentrates on the value of local research. Referring to the work done by Professor Bews himself in Natal plant ecology, she pleads for the extension of knowledge pertinent to Natal: sub-tropical agriculture, industry, economics and commerce, and race relations. She draws attention to the need for part-time university education suitable to a town like Durban, including the provision of non-degree cultural opportunities for adults. Above all she pleads for the unique spirit of Natal to be embodied in its own place of learning, inspiring loyalty and pride. She concludes:

Can we not therefore hope that some day the heights of Stellawood may still be crowned with the beautiful buildings of a university college which shall embody our belief that in making our homes in Durban, we have become “citizens of no mean city”? One can only surmise that this highly original and informative, if slightly sentimental article added grist to the mill of those who were determined to push on with a university in Durban.

Then there was her bold pursuit of the idea that Durban should be a world centre for a School or Institute of Inter-racial Economics. In 1928 she presented a lengthy memorandum, carefully argued and substantiated, to the Durban Joint Council for Europeans and Natives, a copy to H.E. Jones, Vice-Principal of the Technical College — where she believed it could be implemented if not at the new university — and a copy to her friend and collaborator in Black trade union politics, Mrs Ethelreda Lewis. In due course the memorandum was submitted to the Natal University College Council by Maurice Webb who was primed by additional notes from Mabel. Even her London friends, Sidney and Beatrice Webb supported the idea. Though unsuccessful in that form at that time, her proposals were enlightened and had university expansion in Durban at heart. Here was a forerunner to later developments in Social Anthropology and African Studies in Durban.

In 1929 Mabel Palmer achieved a more effective sphere of influence when she was appointed to the Senate of the University of South Africa. She was immediately made a member of the Committee on Social Studies. As convenor she played a major part in preparing a syllabus for a proposed B.A. (Social Studies) to be implemented at the constituent colleges. In 1936 she ran a major conference on the training of social workers and nearly a decade later was still serving on the Social Studies Committee as an additional member. For many years she also served on the African Studies committee.
There is a sense in which Mabel Palmer was the intellectual in politics. For her the fruits of education would be the improvement of man’s lot in society, and for her, in Natal in the 1920s, that meant a subtle involvement in Black politics — in helping them to help themselves. Hence her support of Clements Kadalie and A.W.G. Champion in the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union to the extent of initiating the activity among her friends in Britain which developed into the London Group on African Affairs. Hence, too, her energetic involvement in the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives in Durban. In her capacity as secretary and research secretary she was a little too energetic for main-line liberals like C.T. Loram who, she perceived, suspected her of too radical an approach. To a greater or lesser extent a developing university could not have been unaffected by one who practised as well as ardently preached the upliftment of the underdog. And this even before she launched her great work of founding the Non-European section of the Natal University College in 1936 and organising it for twenty years. Such influences are immeasurable.

Natal has always been susceptible to influences from Britain and this was particularly true in education. Perhaps the main reason for the slow development of higher education was that those who aspired to it believed they could only obtain the real thing by obtaining it in Britain. It is to the credit of Durban that it possessed citizens of the insight of Dr Sam Campbell who were prepared to overcome the apathy, take the plunge, and meet the materialistic, mercantile character of the port city by promoting a Technical College. As the centre from which higher education spread to the people, whether through the Workers’ Educational Association or through university classes, the Technical College was a masterpiece of realism and adaptability. In Mabel Palmer the movement towards higher education in Durban in the 1920s had an equally resourceful ally. Bringing with her the forces of liberal humanism, Fabian socialism, W.E.A. idealism and feminist militancy, she advanced on the realities of Durban with courageous acceptance and helped to build the University of Natal. There is something irresistible in the sensitive spirit that was able to write in her old age,

... pawpaw with orange or lemon juice is one of the reasons I am glad I came to Natal. The other is the sight of jacaranda trees in bloom in October. I have one tree in the garden which is a great joy every spring.

REFERENCES:
2 For a brief account of the issues of this Commission see E.H. Brookes, A History of the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg, 1966) pp. 4-6.
3 Roy Campbell, Light on a Dark Horse. (Penguin, 1971, originally published, 1951), pp. 15-16.
4 She was born Mabel Atkinson and married Andrew Palmer on 2 July 1914. The marriage was short-lived.
7 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Gilbert Murray Papers, Mansbridge to Zimmern, 17 November 1909.
9 It was in the election of March 1921 that the Labour Party was to have its spectacular victory, winning 5 out of 8 seats in Durban and Pietermaritzburg alone.
10 Natal Mercury, 10 April 1916.
11 Natal Mercury, 16 May 1916.
12 Technical College, Durban, Council Minutes, 2 March 1917.
13 Technical College, Council Minutes, Joint Committee on Tutorial Classes, 22 October 1918.
15 Technical College, Council Minutes, Principal’s Annual Report for 1920.
17 Personal interview, Dr H.E. Jones, 7 August 1978.
18 Technical College, Council Minutes, Principal’s Annual Report for 1921. South Coast Junction was present-day Rossburgh.
19 Technical College, Council Minutes, 18 March 1921.
20 Technical College, Council Minutes, 18 August 1922.
21 Technical College, Council Minutes, Principal’s Annual Report, 1922, Appendix VIII.
23 See, for example, her article ‘The Organisation of Adult Education in South Africa’ in Voorslag, Vol. 1, No. 7, December 1926.
24 Allan Atkinson was Mabel’s brother and joined the Technical College staff in November 1921. His death by suicide a few years later caused Mabel severe anguish.
26 N.U. Durban, Box 31, University of South Africa, Senate Minutes, 2-5 April 1929.
27 N.U. Durban, Mabel Palmer Personal File, Mabel Palmer to Bews, 10 February 1934.
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29 U.C.T., Ballinger Papers, Mabel Palmer to Ethelreda Lewis, 2 February 1928.
30 Killie Campbell Africana Library, Mabel Palmer Papers, KCM 18099, KCM 18100.
31 N.U. Durban, Box 31, University of South Africa, Senate Minutes, 1929-1944, passim.

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