

# *George Selwyn Moberly*

Selwyn, as he was always called, first saw the light of day on 15 February 1897, the eldest child of George and Florence Moberly. His father was junior partner in a medical practice in Ladysmith. He was named after the renowned pioneer Bishop of New Zealand, whom he came to hold in the highest esteem. This undoubtedly influenced his whole life and helped to make him a committed Christian. A volume on Bishop Selwyn's life and work given him as a boy was one of his cherished possessions.

Due to the unsettled conditions in Natal before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899, Dr Moberly decided to take his family to England. With the raising of the Siege of Ladysmith, the three year old Selwyn, having been born there, became something of a patriotic mascot to the inhabitants of Stow-on-the-Wold where the family was then living.

Soon after the conclusion of hostilities, Dr Moberly accepted an appointment as district surgeon of Eshowe. In the still tiny capital of Zululand, Selwyn spent some years of his young boyhood, mostly confined to holidays, for in 1905, just before his eighth birthday he was sent to St David's preparatory school in Greytown, then a three-day journey from his Eshowe home. Under Mr Owen, St David's was considered one of the best preparatory schools in Natal: a large number of Rhodes Scholarships were won by former pupils, while in the Great War more military distinctions were won by its old boys than by those of any other similar school. Selwyn's memories of his time at St David's included his first snow storm and a minstrel show and bioscope. His most vivid recollection, however, was of an alarm, given in the small hours of the morning, of an impending attack by Zulu rebels. A half mile tramp followed, first to a packed town hall which was being prepared as a laager, and then on to the already fortified courthouse. No attack materialised, but these events heralded the start of the Bambata Rebellion.

At the end of his second year at St David's Mr Owen recommended that Selwyn should move on to some other school where he could get more advanced teaching. In 1907 he entered Hilton preparatory school, and the following year was sent back to England to be prepared for entry to Winchester College.



Mr G.S. Moberly,  
photographed on a commemorative steam train excursion on the Greytown line,  
familiar to him from his schooldays at St David's.

(Photograph: *Natal Mercury*)

It had become a tradition for successive generations of Moberly boys to receive their schooling at this famous ancient seat of learning, but Selwyn's years there were not altogether easy. The young colonial found it difficult to adjust to the habits and customs of the society from which the other boys came; he was much happier after he was excused games because of a minor health problem and thus free to spend his afternoons exploring the English countryside on a bicycle.

Then came the first World War. Leaving Winchester, Selwyn was accepted as an officer cadet at the Military Academy at Woolwich. After a six months' concentrated course he was commissioned into the Royal Artillery, and in due course was commanding one of the newly formed anti-aircraft batteries in France. After the Armistice in November, 1918 and until peace was signed the following year, he served in the army of occupation on the Rhine. But his homeland was calling, so he resigned his commission and returned to his family, now residing in Empangeni.

He soon found work in the laboratory of the Umfolosi Cane Planters Co-operative. Sugar chemistry fascinated him and he decided to study the subject in depth at the Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge which was recognised in the 1920s as being the leading institution in the world in this field.

After obtaining his B.Sc., he was appointed chief chemist at the Tongaat Sugar Company. Within two years he successfully applied for the newly-created post of Supervising Technologist of the Cane Growers Association, and it was for his work in establishing and developing the cane testing service that he is best remembered in the sugar industry. In 1943 he produced the *Cane Testers' Handbook*, long regarded as an authoritative work on the subject. He became a foundation member of the S.A. Sugar Technologists Association, served as its President on three occasions, and on retirement was made an Honorary Life Member. He left the sugar world officially in 1948, but retained a keen interest in it.

For many years he had made his home in Kloof, but in 1951, he returned to live in Eshowe where he interested himself in local affairs and particularly in those of the parish church. Here he is still remembered for composing and producing 'The Forest Noel' — a nativity pageant — in which the local churches all took part. It was performed in a clearing in the Dlinza Forest known as the Bishop's Seat. The pageant made such an impression that it continued to be presented at three-yearly intervals sponsored by local Round Tablers.

In 1955, he was invited to use his skills again as a chemist at the Natal Chemical Syndicate wattle extract factory in Vryheid, which position he held for fourteen years. Here again he took a keen interest in church affairs serving at times as churchwarden and synod representative. He was also encouraged by Bishop Trapp of Zululand to write a history of that Diocese, and after much painstaking research the task was completed and given the title *The Bamboo Cross* — a reference to the simple cross placed over the grave of Bishop Charles Mackenzie in Central Africa, and in whose memory the Zululand Diocese was founded and endowed in 1870. Unfortunately no publisher could be found to bring out this work, but a typed copy has been deposited in the Killie Campbell Library in Durban. This was not Selwyn Moberly's only literary effort. In 1961, he had written his autobiography entitled *Half a life*, of some 470 closely typewritten pages, giving a detailed account of the first 32 years of his life. This provides a fascinating insight into the thoughts and feelings of a young man who had lived through and experienced many of the traumatic events of the first quarter of the twentieth century and his reactions to them.

Then in 1970, he wrote a history of Eshowe with the title *A city set on a hill*. In the foreword, Harry C. Lugg, former Chief Native Commissioner of Natal and Zululand writes 'an interesting and most absorbing story . . . a valuable work by an able pen'. This book was sponsored and published by the Rotary Club of Eshowe.

In 1969 Selwyn and his wife, Eirene, left Vryheid to make their home in Pietermaritzburg. Here they were able to live to enjoy a quiet, peaceful retirement finding pleasure in reading, in friends and family and in their small garden; for both had always enjoyed flowers. Selwyn contributed humorous verses regularly to the *Natal Witness*.

In 1979 they celebrated their Golden Wedding, a great occasion on which they received warm congratulations from family and friends, many of long standing. They had made their vows as man and wife on 3 April 1929 in St Mary Magdalene's, Isipingo Beach. They were blessed with three daughters, Gillian (known as Biddy), Helen and Margery to whom they were devoted, and who returned that devotion. So they built a truly Christian home, and many were enriched by the kindly hospitality they offered to so many in their wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

Selwyn became increasingly frail during the last year of his life, so it was a happy release when his earthly pilgrimage came to its end and he quietly passed on through the valley of the shadows into the Greater Light on 22 July 1985. He was in his 89th year.

He will be remembered by all who knew him as a fine, honest, trustworthy Christian gentleman. He was Godfearing in the true meaning of the word, giving due honour to his Lord, and using his God-given talents in the service of his fellow-men, regardless of creed or colour. Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

F.A. FUGGLE

