

## G.H. Calpin and the Centenary of Pietermaritzburg

It has long been a feature of books or pamphlets on Pietermaritzburg, and especially of publicity brochures which would attract whites to invest or settle in the city, that they have been over-complimentary, if not complacent, in extolling its charms.

This is why the article by G.H. Calpin, 'History of Pietermaritzburg', in *Pietermaritzburg Centenary 1838-1938, Souvenir Hand-Book* (Pietermaritzburg, 1938), comes as such a refreshing surprise, especially when the occasion for its publication is taken into account. For instead of beating the drum of civic pride and self-congratulation, and playing the usual variations on the theme of the enterprise and success of the white community, Calpin struck more the note of the recessional. For this was his way.

George Harold Calpin was born in 1897, and was educated at the Friends' School at Great Ayton in the North Riding, and at Queen's College, Cambridge, where he read Natural Science. After a period as science master at Durham School, he came to Pietermaritzburg as headmaster of Uplands School, Blackridge. Thereafter he followed a career as journalist and broadcaster. He was also the author of a number of books on the problems of integrating the various streams of South African society, a theme most clearly developed in *The South African Way of Life: Values and Ideals of a Multi-Racial Society* (Melbourne, 1953).

As he himself wrote in the introduction to his collection of essays, *At Last We Have Got Our Country Back* (Cape Town, 196-?), no writer can rid himself of the attitudes he develops in his early years. This was certainly true of Calpin, who was a product not only of England's industrial north, a lower-middle class family and a Quaker upbringing, but also of the world of the establishment, of Cambridge and the public school where he once taught. The two elements, he liked to believe, fused in him to form a solid deposit of common decency, a feeling for justice, a sense of tradition, and an abiding sympathy for the underdog. Certainly, his was a broader outlook than that of many of his fellow-citizens of Pietermaritzburg, and his opinions, especially on matters of race, were usually in advance of those of the white community at large, though he could never rid himself of an avowed streak of instinctive racial prejudice which, in his old age, was to harden into political conservatism.

Nevertheless, when in 1938 he wrote his 'History of Pietermaritzburg', he was still essentially a liberal, was then the editor of *The Natal Witness* (a post he held from 1935 to 1943) and possessed confirmed attitudes which he brought to bear. Writing when Pietermaritzburg had barely recovered from the years of the Great Depression, and when it was still feeling the consequences of the loss of its status as the capital of a British colony, he exposed it for what it really was — and to an extent still is: a charming but isolated provincial city, conservative and somewhat self-conscious, rather envious of the more dynamic Durban which had surged ahead, though priding itself on its cultural superiority over its brash (if economically more successful) coastal neighbour.

He did not use the opportunity to air his progressive views on the 'native question', which were in any case centred on the Indian community and its struggle for recognition in South Africa, and which he was later to express in his books *Indians in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1949), and *A.I. Kajeje: His Work for the South African Indian Community* (Durban, 194-?). Rather, his article shared with all other works on Pietermaritzburg up to very recent times a bland, if almost absolute disregard of any inhabitants of the city other than the whites. What did come out strongly, though, was his centrally-held conviction that bridges should be formed between the Afrikaans and English-speaking white communities of South Africa, which were developing as resolutely apart from each other as were the whites as a

whole from the blacks. He subsequently developed this idea at length in *There Are No South Africans* (London, 1941). To his mind Pietermaritzburg, the erstwhile British colonial capital, was in 1938 a particular case in point, for though Afrikaners might be socially tolerated there, they were hardly accepted. Thus, by strongly emphasising the Voortrekker origins of the city (1938 was, after all, also the centenary of the Great Trek), Calpin was trying to forge connections between the past and his present, between the original Afrikaner inhabitants and their descendants, and the more recent relicts of the British Empire. For although Calpin entertained no extravagant hopes for Pietermaritzburg's future, he still wished that it might continue to be the pleasant place it already was to live in.

J.P.C. LABAND

## *History of Pietermaritzburg*

The economy of a city hangs upon its geography. Its inhabitants are half creatures of that geography and half creatures of previous background, in fact, of aforesaid geographic influence.

You can approach Voortrekker City, a name to which Pietermaritzburg has some substantial claims, from the sea board by a road; the safety of it owes much to macadam and more to the white traffic line. A better way is to descend upon it suddenly from the North and North West. For here the high veld rolls and piles itself up into immense thrusts with massive fissures, and then as if weary of its labour it falls gently, sprawling in its fatigue, finally to settle down in sweeping curves round the three arcs of a bowl, the fourth merely a lip that stretches and edges towards the Valley of a Thousand Hills and the wave-washed coast.

This was the way of the Voortrekkers! It was the manner of it too! With a fierce urge akin to that of the irresistible earth, men, women, and children, inspanned and outspanned their ox wagons. Their women gave birth and lived, gave birth and died, their men roared and rode, coaxing, groaning; until the axles of their wagons creaked over and through the tall grass, and brought them to the panorama of the vast bowl, but not so vast that some of them failed to see in it the end of a journey.

In that hope Pietermaritzburg was born! It is well named, for Piet Retief was among those, the leader indeed, that looked upon the gentle plain from the foothills between the Tugela and Bushman; his chief lieutenant was Gert Maritz. Piet was, in the words of the Rev. Owen, 'a man all mildness,' intrepid, courageous; Gert, daring and shrewd withal. Neither lived to see their endeavours crystallised in the creation of a town. It was left for others to honour them in name and concrete achievement, in the concentration of their forces into the laager encampment on the Bushmansrand, in the decision to rid themselves once and for all from threat of Zulu impis and in final victory at Blood River. Settled occupation was only then possible. Some five hundred land sites were marked out; water was led from the Dorp Spruit and signs of civic life hung about waiting shape and crystallisation. The Trekkers had now exchanged Old Testament wanderings for the Promised Land. The transition was not easy. The dangers of the Trek were substituted by the greater dangers of settlement. A common enemy in man found them for the most part united, strong in faith. A common enemy in disease of cattle, sickness among themselves, occasional fires in their single roomed houses were to test their endurance.

Life was no easier despite the rich harvest of mealies and vegetables. There was too much to do to be at ease. Lest, however, the stern character of the Trekker, demonstrated in his religious fervour, leads to the opinion that these people were embittered, morose, and unsociable, it is worth while to note that, particularly among their women, there was a gaiety of spirit that showed itself in dance and song and enlivened the community with colour in dress and ornament. The settlement was as yet isolated, an independent unit, governing itself, educating itself, establishing a way of life, working out a civic plan, educating itself and its young, around its pivot, 'the Church of the Vow.' The place took shape. There were rich and poor in a relative sense; there was differentiation in houses and a reaching out to cultural divergences. Life began to take on settled purpose, that of an independent and sturdy republic.

It was at this stage and the date 1843 that the Volksraad admitted British authority. Pietermaritzburg became a seat of government, a 'district' of Cape Colony, with a few officials under the authority of Martin West who rejoiced in the title of Lieutenant Governor. On his staff was Theophilus Shepstone. Fort Napier was erected; a burgher defence force was formed.<sup>1</sup> The government of this outpost was directed from Whitehall via the Cape — an incentive to the demand granted in 1848 for local self government. Among the 'commissioners', the forerunners of our present city fathers, were P. Ferreira, W. van Aardt, A.J. Caldecott, P.J. Jung, Dr B. Poortman. A town crier conveyed their decisions to the growing populace of 1 500 Europeans and 400 houses. The ubiquitous galvanised iron arrived as the 'great blessing to become the greatest curse of Natal building construction.' Glimmerings of the outside world pierced the isolated township. Local trade began to flourish with the entry into the town of farmers from over the Berg for supplies. Roads, somewhat primitive, were at any rate discernible, and one great day in 1858, schools were closed and the place took high holiday to view the opening by the Mayor of the iron bridge, the Victoria Bridge, the first of its kind in the whole sub-continent.<sup>2</sup>

A few years before this a change had taken place in the constitution of the town. The place remained essentially a Dutch community until 1850 or so when the first batches of the Byrne emigrants arrived from England. About the same time there was a considerable exodus of Dutch and it was followed by a further withdrawal when news of gold came from Australia. The new community became as irked by the Cape authority as was the old, and it was not long, with the aid of the local Press, set up by David Dale Buchanan, and the representation of Sir George Grey, whose name is given to the hospital of his foundation, before Natal was granted a charter. February of 1857 was a great month! Pietermaritzburg went to the polls after welcoming Governor Scott. The hustings provided James Arbuthnot, a Byrne emigrant, and John Moreland with seats in the new Legislative Council.

And so, by Royal Charter, Pietermaritzburg was announced the capital of the Colony of Natal and the seat of government. Twenty guns barked a salute to the Lieutenant Governor, and lacking the 'biscop' the citizenry made its way regularly of an evening to the House for entertainment and, we have reason to believe, edification. But outside it the streets were dark, water ran down them, and on the near circumference grass grew tall and untidily. Dr Colenso had his native church in Longmarket Street, however,

and there were such places as St. Peter's Cathedral, the Wesleyan Church, Church Street and Chapel Street, and there were such institutions as the Natal Society, to be addressed by the learned of those days, Dr Mann and Dr Sutherland, modern counterparts of whom are Dr Bews and Mr Hugo. There was the Atheneum library and reading room. And long before and long after there was, of course, dust in August and mud in February!

In 1854 Pietermaritzburg was created a constituted borough and its seal, an elephant and five stars, Umgungunhlovu, conqueror of the elephant, stamped its new dignity on every subsequent page of its history. Before the sixties, and while the Dutch were predominant, the economy of the town was the economy of a 12th century English village, well knit, independent, a nineteenth century autarky, forced upon it by geography and distance. Its politics were similar, irksome at times, but more from fear of the external world than from fact of it. With the rise to maturity the economy changed, the politics changed. It was the change that the 12th century English village made as it became industrialised. Politically, it was the change to fretting against itself. The advent of the Mayor and Council was accompanied by class distinction. The great folk of Fort Napier and the small folk, tradesmen, did what their English counterparts did — despised one another. The suits, however, remained to vex and engage the Mayor and his Council. If they did nothing else they watered the trees and foliage of the streets and turned them into a veritable garden.

About this time, 1860, Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria's son, a midshipman, arrived with Sir George Grey. He was sixteen, wore an Eton suit, danced with one or two belles, laid the foundation stone of the Town Hall. Pietermaritzburg revelled in its own importance. 'Our City' said the council, 'promises at no distant date to be the chief city of Central Africa.' It accommodated 3 000 Europeans and failed in its first attempt to raise £2,000 for city offices! Cetewayo was just over the border of Natal, in Zululand. Reports of frontier attacks came to Governor West. The city felt its first economic reverse. Governor West inspected troops and moved out.<sup>3</sup> A trade boom was moving uncertainly. Easy borrowing drove it to climax and crash. Bankruptcy spread from trader to trader, and then to local banks. The city revenue dropped by two thirds. Public works were abandoned.

Perhaps the only thing that lent hope to the mass of population was the introduction of the omnibus service to Durban. John Dare was the pioneer. He was, perhaps, more daring than businesslike. For twenty, and then for thirty shillings apiece he not only carried his passengers to Durban, he fed them at Halfway House. He went bankrupt in a year. It was a year or so after that Mr J.W. Welch ran a bus three times a week to Durban. The journey took 11 hours. He and Mr Jessup went into fighting competition. The latter gave it up as a bad job. A weekly postal service had been inaugurated as early as 1846 by the *Natal Witness*. They used a native runner who went up and down in a week. The official postal service was later run by the military.

Economic depression was not the only threat to civic life in the middle of the century. The Episcopal See of Natal was held by Bishop Colenso and during his period of office a great schism arose in the body of Anglicans which caused social distress in the colony, much heart burning overseas, and considerable expense in the ecclesiastical courts. The See of

Pietermaritzburg was eventually separated from that of Natal.<sup>4</sup> The advent of urgent projects served to turn the public mind. The discovery of coal fields and the idea of railroads emerged as the chief subject of business, and in the middle of the seventies the colony started on railway construction. The depression which had become so acute as to necessitate the sale of municipal robes to help the poor lifted steadily as the discovery of gold and diamonds enriched the country.

The Zulus still threatened the tranquillity of the capital, and the manner in which the captured chief Langalibalele was punished brought serious despatches from London and a sudden recall for Sir Benjamin Pine, the Lieutenant Governor. The reaction was immediate. The demand for home rule and responsible government was countered by the succeeding Governor, Sir Garnet Wolseley, who asked the legislature to grant the executive greater powers. These were signs of political growth, a desire for self determination, which in latter days were to emerge in political conflicts and final self government through union. The Zulu War, bringing with it the bloody field of Isandhlwana and the death of a score of the city's young volunteers threw the community into mourning. Hard upon this outbreak which cut off the Prince Imperial, the annexed Transvaal rose in revolt, an occasion that in its consequences aggravated anti-Imperial feeling and found its expression in a refusal to make a contribution to the cost of the Zulu war.

The last two decades of the century witnessed remarkable changes in the city. Rising prosperity gave impetus to civic development. The Railway appeared in 1880 and water flowed through pipes from Zwartkop Valley — making the year a veritable '*annus mirabilis*.' Macadamised roads were now within planning distance and the tempo quickened as well as the temper of political thought. In 1893 Natal entered full maturity and parliamentary status. There were great men in those days, stalwarts of the stature of Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Sir Thomas Murray, Mr John Bird, Mayor Macfarlane, Bishop Baynes, Harry Escombe, the number could be increased indefinitely. When the twentieth century opened modern Maritzburg was ready for it, in new Colonial Offices, a General Post Office, a new Town Hall, paved sidewalks, electric light, tramcars, motor cars, waterworks, and the whole gamut of improvements that lent speed and power to civic endeavour. No longer isolated but epitomising the Colony of Natal, if leaning towards a conservatism it has not yet cast off, the city projected its thought towards the ideas that found substance later in close co-operation with other political units and in final union.

Geography pressed upon it once more. The gold of the Rand, a severe local economic collapse, made it and the colony seek the aid of the rest of South Africa. The growing port of Durban demanded it. Changed circumstances, the departure of the military, more rapid transport, served to call down upon it such adjustments as have been witnessed in this generation. Its social life also changed, gradually attuning itself to a new conservatism, envious, perhaps, of younger and more prosperous neighbours on the coast but proud, too, of its belief in a certain intellectual superiority. Growing up about it was an academic atmosphere, the Natal University College, a variety of schools with the English tradition established themselves. It exchanged much for a newer isolation. Economically it suffered a reverse as inevitable as the dawn. Its modern

adjustments are painful. It is seeking its destiny. Meanwhile into the valleys creep its residences. On all sides of the bowl its trees and gardens give sign of its shy self-conscious hospitality. It has been well served in the past by men who have come to it and by men born in it. It will never reach that high pinnacle a visionary council declared was its happy fate. It is not the chief city of Central South Africa. It is not even a city of Central Africa!

It is what its name implies, the Voortrekker City — the end of a journey for many. Its ways are set in pleasant paths. May they remain to give the inspiration to succeeding men and women for whom its founders mean so much in high endeavour, self respect, and a fine sense of public and private duty.

G.H. CALPIN

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Calpin's style sometimes seems calculated to obscure his lack of precise historical knowledge. Although Fort Napier was begun, as he implied, in 1843, Martin West only arrived in Natal in December 1845.
- <sup>2</sup> Although the contract for the erection of the Victoria Bridge was awarded in July 1858, it was opened only in January 1860.
- <sup>3</sup> Martin West died in 1849. Calpin presumably was referring to Lieutenant Governor John Scott.
- <sup>4</sup> It was the See of Maritzburg, not Pietermaritzburg, and was not separated from the See of Natal, but rather superimposed on it. Both Sees covered the whole of the Colony of Natal.

