

## *Obituaries*

### *William George McConkey (1898-1987)*

Natal was fortunate in William George McConkey, especially — but not only — in his strengthening of the professional traditions of the Natal Education Department. To this his incisive intellect, respected from the first by his colleagues, contributed much; but his determination to identify with South Africa in general and Natal in particular ensured that he was well placed to use that intellect. And his abilities and experience were needed in the late forties and early fifties when lesser men might have vacillated in the face of educational and political challenges.

When he began his career in Natal in the twenties (at the Natal Training College), Natal's education, though embracing 'Native', Indian, Afrikaans and English schools, was essentially English in outlook, to the extent that few thought it necessary to learn Afrikaans effectively and Zulu was regarded as a specialised field. McConkey set out to learn Afrikaans



Dr William George McConkey (1898-1987)

(Photograph: *Natal Witness*)

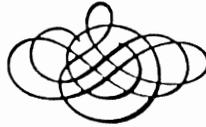
immediately, and to do so thoroughly, through a master's degree and doctorate from Stellenbosch. His career advanced rapidly partly because of this, through schools in Northern Natal and the midlands and as an inspector in Durban, where, in addition to the general inspectorial duties, he took on those for all the Afrikaans in the district. He was, moreover, fluent in German (one of his subjects at Queen's, Belfast). He consequently knew Natal and its people better than most, and used this knowledge — and perhaps his awareness of the destructiveness of divisions in Ireland — to work for a cohesive school system. The story is told that later in his career he was able to reconcile two German factions in Paulpietersburg when their differences threatened to undermine education in the area. He could speak their language in more ways than one — and convince them of educational requirements.

After the war (in which he served with Dr E.G. Malherbe in Army Education and in the Directorate of Information), his planning and administrative talents became more fully used as he rose through Chief Inspector, Secretary (roughly Deputy Director today) and Director. Though in some ways a traditionalist (he sharply defended the claims of Latin in the curriculum), he faced the fact that a full secondary education was no longer the privilege of a few preparing for university and the professions, and he initiated a differentiated curriculum with 'practical' courses — a significant step at the time. He was equally concerned to improve the quality and numbers of teachers. In the depression of the thirties teaching attracted many able men and women; by the late forties an enquiry in which he played a major role, showed declining numbers and academic quality, especially among men. He was sent overseas and successfully recruited over a hundred.

Though Director for only a relatively short time (1954-59), he firmed up the independence of Natal's education system. This did not enable it to resist all centralising tendencies of the government (there was a political controversy over the appointment of his successor) but did provide some important ways of sustaining professional autonomy. Most notable, perhaps, were the establishment of the Natal Examinations Board (some twenty years after the Transvaal separated from the Joint Matriculation Board), and the Planning Board of senior officials. The latter established a mechanism for concerted forward planning. Moreover, McConkey himself had a remarkable capacity to analyse rapidly and perceptively reports and proposals with widely differing perspectives and to bring the significant points together.

There was a rigour, perhaps even an austerity about Dr McConkey's career in and contribution to education. But the rigour came from a sense of professional justice and equity, and it was tempered by a sense of humour — sometimes so swift and fleeting that only a slight movement of the lips gave notice of its presence, but there nevertheless. Subsequently he was to widen his involvement to active political issues of justice, especially as they affected education, but in his first career he exemplified the best characteristics of the British Civil Service, even-handedly, knowledgeably and very ably developing the Department and those whom it was designed specifically to serve.

A.M. BARRETT



I came to know Dr William George McConkey in the evening of his long life. Shortly after my arrival in Pietermaritzburg to take up the editorship of *The Natal Witness*, he was recommended to me as someone whose expertise in education and politics would be an asset to the newspaper. It is generally assumed that an editor writes every one of his leading articles, but this is not so, especially on smaller newspapers. The editor sets policy and vets everything that appears in his name, but he often draws on a panel of experts — preferably retired people with special skills and time on their hands — to help him comment more sensibly on the various issues of the day. Here Dr ‘Mac’ was invaluable, writing on educational matters, on politics, on local government and contributing the occasional book review.

His was a quite remarkable performance for a man then past his seventy fifth birthday. He wrote for us for almost ten years and regretted very much that illness prevented him from achieving a decade of service as an editorial writer. There were interruptions caused by infirmity from time to time, and he would ring me up and say, ‘you know I think I’m getting too old for this; it’s time for me to put down my pen.’ And I would say, ‘No it isn’t; take a break and when you feel well enough, let me know.’ In time that call would come, because he realised, as I did, that writing provided him with both an interest and a stimulus that few enjoy in old age. So it was a relationship from which both sides benefited.

Of the many issues dear to Dr ‘Mac’s’ heart, he felt most deeply about education and, like Dr Ernie Malherbe, was dismayed at the rapid deterioration in black education during and after the years of Verwoerd. A staunch supporter of the Afrikaner — I am told that he became so fluent in the language that after giving a speech in Afrikaans during the war, he was mistaken for Gen. Smuts — he became deeply indignant when political and language credentials began to supersede merit as a qualification for civil service promotion. His anger at this state of affairs, and at the Broederbond’s malign influence on education generally, ran very deep and did not abate in old age. He detested apartheid and discriminatory spending on education and never hesitated to say so. If it is true that men generally become less outspoken in their old age, Dr ‘Mac’ was an exception to that rule.

Apart from our regular telephonic contact, we saw each other at SA Institute of International Affairs meetings. He was our oldest member by far, yet the most faithful supporter of functions right up until the year before his death. His interest in the affairs of the world and his clarity of mind at such a great age were truly remarkable and they kept him going as he grew more frail physically. Many was the time I thought to myself that if I had to live to be nearly ninety, he would be my exemplar.

Dr ‘Mac’ will live on in the memory of those fortunate enough to have known him. In mourning his passing, let us be grateful for a long life, well lived in the service of others.

RICHARD STEYN