

## Obituaries

### *John Clark (1909–1987)*

John Clark was my English master at Maritzburg College 35 years ago, and I can still recall his reciting *Tam o'Shanter's Mare*, or reading about Bathsheba Everdene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which says something not only about the attractive Scots accent, but also about the personality of this remarkable man.

John grew up in Paisley, Scotland. His father, a marine engineer, was often away from home, and at an early age John had to care for his mother and sister. He was only 14 years old when his father died. That he had a high regard for his mother was obvious from the anecdotes about her which I remember from those far-off classroom days.

He was educated in Glasgow, and after obtaining a BA (Hons) degree, worked as a journalist on the *Glasgow Herald*. Writing, and especially journalism, was to remain his lifelong passion, and he used to say that there was printer's ink in his blood. Three years of teaching followed, and then the Second World War intervened. John was in the British Army for five and a half years, three of them being spent in Italy. Starting in the ranks, he ended up a major. He told us boys stories of the war and its hardships, but only many years later was he to tell me that the hardest thing of all was getting to know his wife again after not seeing her for four years.

In 1948 John brought his family to Pietermaritzburg. First he taught at Woodlands Indian High School, then at Maritzburg College. Later he became senior lecturer in English at the Natal Training College, and on his retirement, remained in the service of the Natal Education Department as editor of its journal *NEON*.

Wherever John went he made friends and kept them, because he was interesting and interested. He had, incidentally, a special and deep appreciation for the music of Mozart. He was sensitive, shy, had a fine sense of humour, and gave of his knowledge and time generously.

The Natal Society benefited greatly in this last regard, as John Clark served on its Council from 1964 until 1978, and was a Vice-President of the Society from then until his death. He was a member of the editorial board of *Natalia* from its inception in 1971 until 1977, and was editor of volumes 6 and 7.

Over a period of many years John's series of articles in the *Natal Witness* made a valuable contribution to the study of local history. They were often illustrated by photographs he had taken, photography being one of his interests. In 1972 the University of Natal conferred a doctorate for his thesis on John Moreland, immigration agent to J.C. Byrne. It was later published as a book, under the title *Natal Settler Agent*.

John was always good for a leg-pull, and, for example, never failed to blanch when told of a fictitious fall in the Stock Exchange. As a new Doctor of Philosophy he apparently lost his composure when asked over the telephone by an anonymous friend to assist with the delivery of a baby — but that was the sort of joke he loved to tell against himself.

Much of the success of the Ancient Africa Club was due to John and his participation in the meetings and outings of this amateur history society. The Natal branch of the Simon van der Stel Foundation was also richer by his being a member, and this must surely be true for other associations beyond my ken.

John would often introduce a statement with the words ‘I’ve an idea . . .’, which in itself is a clue to his personality — unassuming and undogmatic. I have an idea — and John had it too — that one of his most precious possessions was the constant support and devotion of his wife, Jenny.

BRIAN SPENCER



John Clark — enjoying a ride on the engine of the Weenen narrow gauge train.

(*Photograph: T.B. Frost*)