

John McGregor Niven (1921–1991)

Jack Niven, as he was known to his many professional colleagues, his friends and his family, died suddenly in his office at the Natal College of Education on the morning of Wednesday 31 July.

All who knew him were stunned by the sudden end to his distinguished professional and academic career. He will be remembered for his highly



Professor J. M. Niven

(Photograph: Natal Witness)

successful life's work devoted to teacher education and as a man who was a very good friend to his colleagues and a proud and loving husband, father and grandfather to his family. This is a tribute not only to a man of rare intellect, insight and organizing ability, but to a warm and caring person who made the people around him feel that what they were doing was important. He never made anyone feel that he had more important things to do than to attend to their concerns. In any company he was able to add the perceptive observation, wry comment or apt joke which gave purpose to the work at hand, or in relaxation made everyone feel that they belonged and enjoyed being in his company.

Although he retired as Professor Emeritus from the University of Natal in March 1985, at the time of his death he was working on contract for the KwaZulu Department of Education and Culture writing study material for a further Diploma in Education (Educational Administration and Management) to be offered by distance education to selected black teachers in promotion posts. This task was nearing completion and it was one which Jack greatly enjoyed. He loved having an office and being able to work in it each day. He took great pleasure in spending tea times with College staff, where his infectious enthusiasm and his lively comment on the affairs of the day made for highly entertaining moments. He was able to enjoy just such a tea time on the morning he died. He worked energetically and with a clear-headed sense of purpose and direction right to the end of his life.

The start of Jack's very distinguished academic and professional career was delayed by going straight into war service when he left university with a B.A. degree and his teacher's diploma in the first class. He did military service in the South African Air Force and then on secondment to the Royal Air Force, operating in South Africa, the Sudan, Egypt, Italy and Yugoslavia. On his return from the war in 1946 he returned to university to complete an Honours Degree in Geography with distinction, and then went to teach at the Estcourt High School. In 1950 he was awarded an M.A. degree in Geography, again with distinction.

Shortly thereafter he took his family to Bulawayo and in 1956 his long association with teacher education began. In that year he was appointed to a part-time post at the Teachers' College, Bulawayo, then to a full-time lectureship and by 1962 he had advanced to the Vice Principalship of the College.

As a member of the College staff he became a contributor to courses offered by the Institute of Education and accredited by the University of London.

In 1965 he returned to the University of Natal as a Senior Lecturer, and there followed an M.Ed. degree with distinction and a Ph.D. for a thesis entitled 'Teacher Education in South Africa'. In 1970 he was appointed to the second Chair in Education at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, and in 1971 he became Head of the Department of Education. He held the headship for eleven years until in 1982 he became the Director of the University of Natal Herman Ohlthaver Trust Project which aimed at improving the quality of teachers in primary schools in the Natal KwaZulu region, while continuing as a professor in the Department of Education.

This outline of his career advancement does not do justice to the quality of his work, the depth of his critical insight, the breadth of his interests or the personal qualities he brought to bear on whatever he did. The list of his membership of committees and councils also does not properly convey the qualities of the man, but it does attest to his remarkable energy and to the many claims made on his time, expertise and wise counsel. Jack was an excellent

organizer, a facilitator and a skilled diplomat who could make committees work, and hence the list of committees on which he sat is a very lengthy one.

When he was in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) he was elected to a committee responsible for the formation of a National Council for Teacher Training in that country. On returning to South Africa he served on the University Committee which prepared evidence for the Gericke Commission of Enquiry into Universities. In addition to serving on numerous University Committees he was a member of the National Education Council (1975–84) and its Executive Committee (1978), and the Council of the Institute of Educational Research of the Human Sciences Research Committee. In 1981 he was seconded to that Committee to participate in the de Lange Commission Report on Education, the most wide-ranging official investigation into education ever to be conducted in this country. His contribution was to the sections of the report on curriculum development and education systems management. He was a member of the Joint Matriculation Board (1977–82), the Examinations Board of the then Department of Indian Education and a consultant to the Transkeian Matriculation Examination Board. He served on the Standing Committee on Education of the English Academy of Southern Africa and on the Board of Governors of Hilton College (1968–87) and of Wykeham School (from 1974) which later became the Wykeham Collegiate School. From 1965 until 1982 he was a member of the South African Association for the Advancement of Education in South Africa and was awarded their highest honour of a gold medal for his service to education.

In reciting this list of Jack's contributions to national and regional bodies outside the University, one may overlook that his main energies were devoted towards educational research and the maintenance of academic and professional standards in the preparation of teachers within the University. His main teaching contribution was in the area of comparative education and educational administration. He supervised many higher degree students, including the supervision of the first black candidate to achieve a Ph.D. in the Faculty of Education.

In 1973 he was awarded the Oppenheimer Travelling Fellowship to study education in the United Kingdom and a follow-up study was undertaken in 1977/1978. He wrote numerous research reports and articles published in educational journals.

After his retirement he became Chairman of the Council of the Natal Training College, now the Natal College of Education, a member of the Board of Governors of the Transkei Teachers' In-Service College and Chairman of the Springfield College of Education. Jack was chairman of the Education Committee of the KwaZulu Natal Indaba. In 1987 he conducted an evaluation of the pre-service curriculum for teacher education in Bophuthatswana. In 1988 he was appointed a consultant to the Development Bank of Southern Africa on the matter of the development of teacher education in KwaZulu.

What still needs to be added to this account of a life-time of creative and productive work is that Jack's work was done in a time when the policies of the ruling party were inimical to his own philosophies. The policy of apartheid was quite contrary to Jack's vision of a future for South Africa. Some academics who found themselves in opposition to official Government policy tried to distance themselves from official bodies. Jack believed that change required involvement: his professed policy was to make his views known wherever he could. He reasoned that if he did not join in the debate fully, then opposition

would not be expressed in places where it mattered most. Jack's educational philosophy and goals are well expressed in his words, taken from his inaugural address to the University of Natal delivered on 1 June 1972, as follows:

Education must reflect the mores of the cultural groups which constitute the society and not merely sectional interest within them. Education itself must provide greater opportunities for the mingling of the cultures . . . Education should not attempt unnecessarily to straitjacket the youth of the nation in an ideological mould and thus create a static society . . . These conditions to be met by education, require well trained and dedicated teachers who are . . . supported in the schools by a professional status which is considerably greater than it has been in the past.

Jack's contribution to raising the professional status of teachers was immense. It was the main focus of his professional and academic life.

In conclusion, his role as a family man must be mentioned. For Jack his family was very important and the support they gave him was measured in his work. His wife Cynthia, who was herself involved in a busy teaching career, gave him unwavering support, but had to deal with the fact that Jack was always busy and that he had innumerable friends and colleagues calling for his time. Jack was also very proud of his three daughters, Frances, Joan and Sheila. Frances and Joan followed their father into education, while Sheila, who received the first Rhodes Scholarship awarded to a woman, went into corporate banking. His own home and those of his daughters, their husbands and his grandchildren were a joy in his life and the basis from which his very considerable contributions to education in South Africa, and especially on the south-east seaboard, were made.