

Colin de Berri Webb (1930–1992)

I

An historian's tribute

With the death of Professor Colin Webb on 22 March 1992, both *Natalia* and the Natal Society have lost a much esteemed and longstanding associate. He played a prominent role in the founding of *Natalia* and was the first chairman of its editorial board (1971–75), as well as a council member of the Natal Society (1965–75, 1988–92), and one of its vice-presidents (1988–92).

His was a presence that loomed. Yet it was much more than his sheer physical stature that indelibly impressed Colin Webb's persona on the consciousness of all who knew him. For he was many things: teacher, scholar, administrator and public figure; but also husband and father of two sons, and valued friend and colleague. Authority emanated from him, but always tempered by his approachability, obvious integrity and fine sense of humour. Who can forget his beam of delight and high-pitched, trilling laugh? His company was always stimulating and could be enormous fun, for he was a man of wit and dramatic flair, with wide interests besides history and education. He could talk with real knowledge and insight on subjects ranging from politics, drama, music and fine art to veld types and domestic gardens. And though he could be formidable at times, it was with the short intensity of a summer storm, soon to pass. For he was a man of passion, who believed passionately in what he did and in the firm liberal principles which guided his actions.

Colin de Berri Webb was born in Pretoria on 24 October 1930. He attended Pretoria Boys' High School, and in 1948 went on to the University of the Witwatersrand on a Barclay's Bank Scholarship. In 1955, as a holder of the prestigious Elsie Ballot Scholarship, he proceeded to Clare College, Cambridge, to read history. In 1957 he took up his first university appointment as a temporary lecturer in the Department of History and Political Science at the University of Natal, Durban. There he met Fleur Gower, who was on the staff teaching Introductory French. They married in 1960. In 1962 Colin came as a senior lecturer to the Department of History and Political Science in Pietermaritzburg, the same year his eldest son, Jonathan, was born. Nicholas followed in 1964. Colin's promotion in 1971 to associate professor was only his due. Then in 1976 he moved to the University of Cape Town as the King George V Professor of History, filling this, the premier history chair in South Africa, until he returned to Natal in 1984 as Vice-Principal of the University of

Natal, Durban. In 1988, at the strong urging of senior academics on the Pietermaritzburg campus, he made himself available to succeed Professor Deneys Schreiner as Vice-Principal at this centre. Duly appointed, he held the post until mounting illness, so courageously borne, forced him to relinquish it a week before his death.

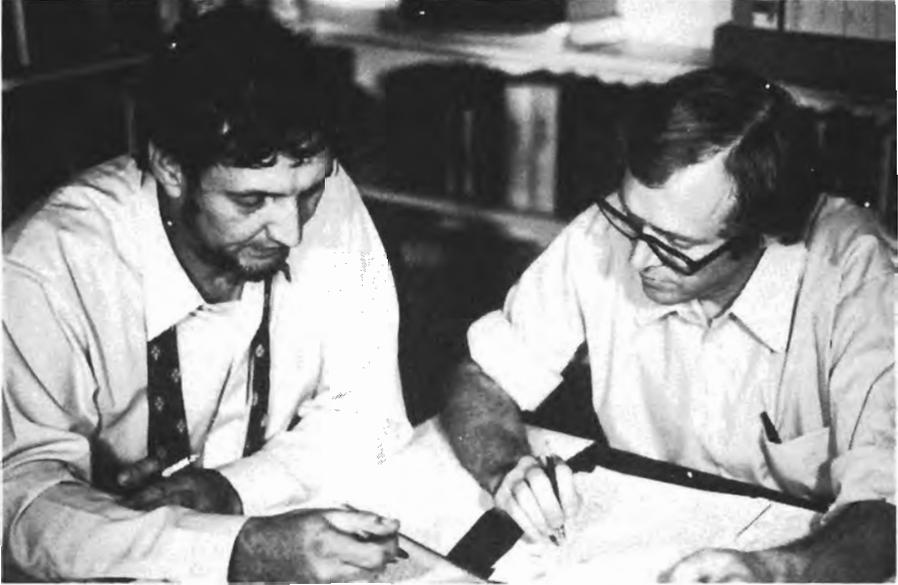
Students who were fortunate enough to have been taught by Colin Webb remember him as undoubtedly the most inspiring lecturer they ever encountered. For he was able to impart both his zest for history and the intellectual integrity with which he pursued it. Because he was constantly revising his thinking on the basis of fresh evidence from his reading and research, his lectures came across with a sense of immediacy and excitement, heightened by his consummate oratorical style. He spoke in his fine, clear voice with a thrill of suppressed passion, giving even the most complex issues an extraordinary clarity and relevance. As a supervisor of postgraduate theses (and in his time he supervised over 50 Honours research essays, 17 Masters theses and 6 Ph.D. dissertations), he was both demanding and meticulous, extracting a high level of research from his students.

Besides being a teacher of rare talent, Colin Webb was also an innovative scholar, and through his example and inspiration moulded a school of Natal and Zululand studies in which many of his students and colleagues are still prominently active today. In recognition of his distinction as an historian, in 1979 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

Webb's *Guide to the Official Records of the Colony of Natal* (1965), which provided a detailed analysis of the historical source materials available in Natal, opened up the region's records to all subsequent researchers. After going through two editions, the *Guide* was updated in 1984 in a compilation by J. Verbeek, M. Nathanson and E. Peel. Colin complemented this pioneering work with *A History of Natal* (1965), written jointly with Edgar Brookes. As a synthesis of research to date, this book provided Natal and Zululand with its first modern historical treatment. It remains a standard authority and went into a second edition in 1987. In it, Brookes and Webb began to swing the emphasis away from the traditional Eurocentric perspective of earlier white historians, and set the trend for a more comprehensive approach encompassing all who lived in Natal and Zululand, whether Khoisan, Nguni-speakers, white settlers or Indian immigrants.

Colin Webb's especial contribution was in the field of Zulu history, and it is there that his influence has been most felt. His encyclopaedic knowledge of Zululand and its affairs in the nineteenth century was demonstrated in *A Zulu King Speaks* (1978; 2nd edition 1987), co-edited with John Wright. The two of them went on to translate and edit four volumes of *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence* (1976, 1979, 1982, 1987), and were working on the fifth volume at the time of Colin's death. *The James Stuart Archive* is surely his monument. For, through their detailed notes and indexes, Webb and Wright have presented in coherent form and made accessible a mass of African oral testimony which, despite its unique importance, had lain obscure and little used. It is no exaggeration to state that *The James Stuart Archive* has opened a path to Natal and Zululand's pre-colonial and colonial past along which all future historians of the field must pass.

His field-work on environmental factors in Zulu history was but another facet of his deep feeling for the region in all its aspects, and this understanding was exhibited for the last time in published form in his historical introduction and index to volume 1 of Adulphe Delegorgue's *Travels in Southern Africa*



Colin Webb and John Wright working on the *James Stuart Archive*

(Photograph: University of Natal Archives)

(1990), which Fleur translated from the French, and to which Stephanie Alexander contributed a zoological and botanical introduction and index.

Nor, in considering Colin's contribution as a scholar, must one forget a further two dozen learned articles and chapters in books on subjects ranging from the origins of the Franco-Prussian War to the life of Dabulamanzi. He delivered besides some thirty conference papers and public addresses to academic audiences. He was also active as an editor, for in addition to his services to *Natalia*, he was also co-editor of *Theoria* (1962–75) and an editorial adviser from 1978. No wonder his was a presence of such influence wherever professional historians met.

Yet Colin was also an administrator of much experience, holding great responsibilities. He never shirked his duty to serve the university community, and a list of the committees of which he was a member, or which he chaired, would cover several pages. Some might regret that these administrative obligations took him away too frequently from his scholarly pursuits, and he also felt this deprivation. Nevertheless, he was an administrator of imagination and vision, deeply conscious of the challenges facing the universities in South Africa. He saw the urgency of addressing the problems of the educationally disadvantaged while maintaining high educational standards. Furthermore, he also insisted on the importance of academic freedom for a free and open society. It accords with this principled position that he initiated the establishment on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the Alan Paton Centre for the Study of the Literature and Politics of Inter-group Conciliation.

His wide experience and well-known commitment to the goal of a free and just society in South Africa led to his being called to serve on over two dozen professional and public bodies outside the university. At one time he was a member of the Natal executive of the Progressive Party, though he resisted the lure of standing for parliament. Besides sitting on the executives of various

historical societies, museum boards and heritage and conservation trusts, he also served his turn as vice-president and president of the South African Historical Society, as a member of the Education Specialist Group of the Buthelezi Commission, as chairman of the Natal Education Board and as a member of the Academic Planning Committee of the Committee of University Principals. He was also frequently called upon to deliver public addresses on occasions ranging from public meetings protesting at threats to academic freedom, to prize-giving days at schools. Always, though, his listeners savoured his magnificent, often impassioned, delivery and learned by his wisdom.

When a man of multifarious talents and enormous vitality dies before his time, he inevitably leaves incomplete the many projects he had on hand. And for his family, friends and colleagues, who miss him so deeply, this can be another cause for sadness. Yet Colin Webb's full and significant life could scarcely be described as unfulfilled, despite its premature end. For he made his indelible mark on all who knew him, and through his teaching, scholarship and example, defined the path and set the goal for those who would follow where he led.

JOHN LABAND

II

Speech at the naming of the Colin Webb Hall

27 August 1992

It is a very great pleasure and privilege to have been asked to speak at this naming ceremony, this university community function at which the Old Main Hall is to become the Colin Webb Hall.

Let me speak first about the hall. The University of Natal (the Natal University College as it then was, the NUC) came into being in 1910. This means, if we bear in mind the amazing expansion of university education in the twentieth century, particularly since the Second World War — this means that the University of Natal is one of the world's older universities. And this building, the original university building, completed in 1912, is indeed quite venerable. The hall itself has served many purposes over the years: it has been a library, a theatre, a hospital ward (during the First World War), a venue for

such varied events as opening ceremonies, dances, musical concerts, and examinations. This is one of the reasons for its being well known and well loved by many generations of students.

The other reason for its being known and remembered with affection is that it is strikingly handsome. Like the rest of the building, it was designed by the Pietermaritzburg architect J. Collingwood Tully and it was described in the building contracts — rather vaguely — as being in the ‘English Renaissance style’; but there is nothing vague or uncertain about the elegant shapes and patterns, the verticals and semi-circles, that we see around us. The hall is probably looking more attractive today than it has ever looked before. That is because of the thoughtfulness and imagination of Colin Webb.

The hall had grown a bit shabby and tired-looking. The reason for this was partly that, having long since become incapable of housing the whole or most of the Maritzburg student body, it had lost many of its previous purposes. It was partly also because the university seemed not to have enough money to renovate the hall. (If there is one consistent thread that runs through the history of the university, incidentally, it is a strong tendency towards drought in the matter of what is nowadays called ‘cashflow’.) But Colin Webb, with the eye of a sensitive and aesthetically-refined historian, decided that the look and the atmosphere of the hall should be restored and enhanced. What is more, with the astuteness of an experienced vice-principal, he realised that he could do what needed to be done within the limits of funds available from annual maintenance budgets. In other words, at a time of great financial stringency, he managed to perform an act that was historical conservation, cultural enrichment, labour of love and practical common-sense, all rolled into one — without getting in the way of any of the university’s other projects or activities. He directed and supervised the renovations himself, enthusiastically and yet patiently. As a result of all this we have a freshly painted and newly curtained hall, with a novel, slightly enigmatical charm — a subtle mixture (I would say) of Natal colonial and Bavarian baroque.

It is particularly appropriate, then, that the hall should be given Colin Webb’s name. It is, as it were, one of the extensions of his personality, a part of himself. Future generations of staff and students, who have not known the man himself, will be able to learn something about him by standing here and looking around.

But there is, of course, a great deal that they will *not* be able to learn about him by looking at this hall. The tasteful reanimation of a piece of 1912 colonial architecture suggests the ability to get into, and perhaps to outstrip, the mind of the person and the culture that produced it. But Colin Webb as an historian was distinguished precisely by his capacity to understand and penetrate other viewpoints besides the colonial and European one, the one that had in general dominated the writing of our history until his time. His crucial pioneering work in South African history, particularly the history of Natal and Zululand, involved conjuring up the perspective of the victims of white aggression, and consequently putting into context the ideals, pretensions and self-deceptions of some of the sorts of people who were behind the founding of this university and the building of this hall. It is worth remembering, and Colin Webb would never have been unaware, that a mere six years before the construction of this hall there had occurred the Bambatha uprising, an event which both in its underlying causes and in the way in which it was dealt with can now be seen to have highlighted the injustice and the general inadequacy of Natal colonial rule. Besides being a handsome place well worth restoring and preserving,

then, this Old Main Hall can be seen, paradoxically, as a symbol of that past of the old South Africa that we hope the new South Africa will be able to understand, forgive and transcend.

Speaking of the old and the new, the past and the present and the future, I can't help briefly breaking the solemnity of this occasion by recounting a wild but humorous thought that drifted into my mind as I was preparing these words. The humorousness was of a kind that I'm sure Colin Webb would have appreciated. I suddenly thought: 'Maybe the University of Natal is going through a sort of Conservative Party phase, a conservative panic, and, seeing the speed with which things are changing both within the university and beyond it, has decided to go on a naming spree, and is with unseemly rapidity naming everything in sight after white administrators, living or dead.' The thought seemed worth recording (it may have occurred to other people), but fortunately for me it didn't last long: quite apart from the fact that none of the people after whom places have been named are CP types, and that all of them richly deserve the recognition they have been given, there is the additional consideration that there are many places left within the university — and we trust that others will be built too — which may be named after university leaders of the future.

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So then, and as I've said, very appropriately, the past and dead administrator after whom this hall is being named is Colin Webb. It is with very great sadness that one says these words, because of course Colin was so very recently active here among us. He retired from the post of Deputy Vice-Chancellor of this university in February of this year, and he died on March 22nd. The wound of his parting is still fresh for all of us, but above all for Fleur, whom we are honoured to have at this assembly and to whom we offer our continuing sympathy.

I could talk about Colin Webb, whom I knew well, for far longer than would be proper or sensible on an occasion such as this one. I have decided to focus on four aspects of his personality, four aspects of his achievement as a person and as an academic. Colin Webb was a remarkably integrated person, and for this reason the four characteristics that I single out all run into one another and reinforce one another.

Here then are my four points of emphasis. He was a profoundly humane person. He was an imaginative and original historian. He was an intellectual and social leader. He was marvellously eloquent. As I say, these four points of focus can't easily be separated.

His humanity, his humaneness, permeated everything. It was there in his family life, with Fleur and with his two sons, with his more immediate extended family and with a widely ramifying network of cousins and second cousins. It was there with his friends and colleagues and students, in his seriousness, his concern for others, his good humour, his hospitality, his sheer decency and pleasantness.

One of the manifestations of his humaneness was to be found in his quest for social justice. He was one of the early members of the Progressive Party in Maritzburg, in the days when Helen Suzman (whom he knew) was fighting her lone battle in the House of Assembly, long before she began to become

accepted and admired by the average white citizen. He was also regarded by liberal colleagues and students as a person to be called on, to speak in public and to write, at some of those many moments when the Government placed further restrictions upon universities and upon society.

And of course his yearning for justice, for empathy and for human truth was one of the powerful impulses behind the remarkable work that he did as an historian. Many students of history used to come to the University with a sense that European and North American history was relatively interesting, but that South African history was a bore. With Colin Webb standing tall in front of them, his rich deep voice sounding vibrantly (and often echoing along the corridors of this building), they discovered to their amazement that the history of our country, properly approached, is breathtakingly exciting and momentous. All over South Africa and in several other countries there are historians who were drawn into the profession by the magic of Colin's teaching. And in the higher years he was an inspiring and enabling supervisor; he has been the midwife for numerous mini-theses and theses at the Honours, Masters and PhD levels. But he couldn't have been such a good teacher and supervisor if he wasn't producing new material himself. This is no place to offer a list of his publications (books, chapters, articles, conference papers), but it would be wrong not to mention his by now famous and recently updated *Guide to the Official Records of the Colony of Natal*, the *History of Natal* which he wrote with Edgar Brookes, and the volumes of *The James Stuart Archive* which he co-edited with John Wright.

As a lecturer and supervisor, a speaker at public meetings, and a person dedicated to the creation of social and political justice, he showed himself to be an intellectual and social leader. But this aspect of him expressed itself in many other ways. He found himself being elected to many committees, both within the universities that he served and in the larger society. Within the Arts Faculties of this university and of the University of Cape Town he moved to the top with a sort of naturalness or inevitability, for he wasn't in the normal sense of the word a particularly ambitious person. He simply believed that tasks were important and needed to be carried out intelligently and honestly; other people decided that he was the person to perform crucial functions. As far as I remember it was friends (and I think I was one of them) who persuaded him to apply for the Vice-Principal's post in Durban. It probably wouldn't have occurred to him to do so because he didn't spend much time plotting his next career move. But once he was in a post he made it his own and indeed recreated it. He took a lead with his own sincere version of that nonchalance which was so admired in the Italian Renaissance.

The fourth of the points that I emphasized in my brief summary of Colin Webb's characteristics was his eloquence. Some people may find this a surprising point to stress, let alone to end on. But in fact Colin's eloquence, his extraordinary articulateness and his capacity to take another person or a large audience along with him, was no merely superficial technical skill. It was an expression of his whole exploratory, generous and complex being. The other characteristics that I have underlined — his humaneness, his quality as a teacher and an historian, his intellectual and social leadership — all these were distilled in the words and sentences that he devised and often most memorably spoke aloud.

This hall and this person, then: as we perform the act of naming, they come to belong to each other. There is something fitting about such a procedure, as I have tried to suggest.

But at the same time (if I may return to an earlier theme) there is something very sad and very inadequate about it too. Colin Webb richly deserves to have this fine hall named after him; but there is so much more to him than these walls and this roof could ever hope to indicate.

This naming confers a particular kind of immortality upon him. We must look to other modes of remembrance, of immortality, if we are to do any full justice to him. Or perhaps we might say that the point of the naming of this hall after him is that it symbolizes the other kinds of respect, gratitude and love that his friends offer and constantly re-create.

COLIN GARDNER