

Dulcie May Somers Vine (1916–1991)

Adapted from an address given by Professor Deneys Schreiner at a Memorial Service at the Congregational Church, Pietermaritzburg on 25 November 1991.

There will be those who knew Dulcie Somers Vine longer than I; there will be those who had far greater knowledge of particular facets of her life; but I had the privilege of working in the same institution; of learning considerably from her and benefiting muchly from the association, both as her working colleague and as her friend. I do not intend to separate Dulcie the ‘Secretary to the University and Registrar’s Representative’, which she was for 20 years, from Dulcie the friend; for those attributes which made her the sensitive and fine person that she was, the loyal and caring friend, the kindly encourager of those in trouble, the generous giver of her time and love to others, were largely the same as those attributes which determined her very real and significant contribution to the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal.



Mrs D.M. Somers Vine

(Photograph: Public Relations Section, University of Natal)

People, speaking of their own experience of her, use common terminology. They speak of her integrity; of her courtesy; of her kindness and helpfulness; of her strong belief in discipline, both for herself, and in what she expected from others. Perhaps, most frequently, they speak of her loyalty: to her own high standards; to her work; to the university; and to her friends.

Dulcie Somers Vine joined the university in 1950, very shortly after the death of her husband. It cannot have been an easy time for her, for she was now in a new environment, and was also faced with bringing up her two young sons. When she moved from being Accounts Clerk in the Library to a clerical post in the Administration, in 1954, the boys were eleven and nine. It is a reflection of the security of her personality, her serenity and her strong personal discipline, that they remained, despite wide geographical separation, a tight-knit family — so much so that Dulcie became, in her retirement years, a frequently travelled grandmother, both to Benoni and to Tasmania.

A brief three years after entering the University Administration, Dulcie was appointed 'Secretary and Registrar's Representative'. This despite the fact that in 1952 she had, after careful thought, refused the offer of transfer to Durban, when, in a major reorganisation of the University, the Principal, the Registrar, and most of the Administration left for the younger campus. The centrality of the position she reached so quickly is reflected by the many students on the Pietermaritzburg campus who, despite the presence of other administrative heads in the University, thought of her as 'The Administration', and asked the question 'Is Mrs S-V still running the show?'

Only Dulcie would have divided the professors into 'good' professors and 'naughty' professors! The good were those who obeyed the rules; the others were those who attempted to evade them. But even the 'naughty' ones were

forgiven if the evasions were not for their own benefit. What stirred in Dulcie a long and lasting indignation was when she encountered duplicity, hypocrisy or a lack of mercy. The high standards she expected from herself she expected from others, and she was fearless in expressing her views when things were done that she considered to be wrong.

After 1957, further promotions followed in the expanding University and Dulcie ended her service to the University twenty years later as Principal Administrative Officer. But the highest compliment was, perhaps, that although she reached the compulsory and final age of retirement in 1976, she was appointed for a further 3 years post superannuation. Fortunately for Dulcie's principles, this was within the 'rules'. Unfortunately for the University she decided halfway through this period to retire, which she did at the end of June 1977.

Her 27 years saw the University grow fourfold, and yet she remained the person who knew most about it and its inhabitants — their peccadillos and their serious offences — and she exercised a wise, yet merciful, discretion about what needed further action or what was better not noticed.

But there was another side to Dulcie Somers Vine. She had a wonderful property of quietly and positively enjoying life, of appreciating the beautiful things around her, of remaining serene when troubles abounded. One of her close friends said of her 'Everything she did, she did well'. Thus, as a foundation member of Mrs Allison's Embroidery School, she did beautiful embroidery all her life; she cooked well; collected stones discriminantly; she gardened not only with enthusiasm, but with delicate skill and perception. She suffered from that common insanity that all orchid enthusiasts are prone to, but she knew her plants well, and intended at one stage to become a formal judge of them. She won prizes for her plants at orchid shows, and awards for best on show, but she appreciated them for their beauty, as she did many of the beautiful parts of this country. I have delightful memories of her striding through the grass of the foothills of the Drakensberg and joining those strange worshipping groups of kneeling orchidists who had just found some small ground orchid almost totally hidden in the grass; of Dulcie on the top of a mountain south of Caltizdorp, moving through the montane fynbos to enjoy flower after flower, and enthusing not just at the floral beauty but the whole of the surroundings.

Flowers were not only to be enjoyed outside. Dulcie's room at the University was well known for her African violets, tended with the same intense care that she gave to those less fortunate than herself, to whom she read when their sight weakened, or whom she encouraged when they were depressed by undergoing experiences which she herself had already conquered. But Dulcie's love of her African violets was strong enough to postpone for six months a sensible re-shuffling of administrative functions in the Administration building. This would have involved her moving to another room, in which the sunlight and temperature would have been unsuitable, not for herself, but for her African violets. The proposal was met with an obstinate refusal.

She was a most gifted puppet-maker, deriving much pleasure from the act of creating them, but far more pleasure from the delighted enjoyment of the young people to whom she gave them.

'Not for herself' might prove a suitable title for a future biography of this remarkable and lovable woman. We have all been the richer for knowing her.

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