



Nixon Montgomery
(Photograph: Natal Witness)

Alexander Nixon Montgomery 1918–1995

'Monty', as he was affectionately known to many friends and colleagues, had an illustrious career in education in Natal, retiring in 1981 as Deputy Director of Education. His school education was at Highbury, where he was Dux in 1931, and at Hilton College, where he was Head Prefect and Dux five years later. During his BA course at the Natal University College in Pietermaritzburg he was awarded the History Medal each year, and graduated with a distinction in the subject. He was Student Representative Council Chairman, President of Men's Residence, and represented the university at rugby, cricket, shooting and athletics. Before he could begin the teaching career he was so admirably fitted for, the Second World War broke out, and he served in the air force as a pilot. He was for a time in the Far East, in the squadron providing air support to General Wingate's Chindits in their jungle offensive against the Japanese in Burma. Part of the training for these missions was for the aircrews to go on foot

with army units so that they would themselves experience the conditions the land forces had to cope with — the heavy equipment to be carried, hilly jungle terrain, heat, mud, insects, sickness and a hidden enemy.

The war ended and Monty began teaching in the last quarter of 1945, with short spells at Maritzburg College, Scottsville Primary School, Harward High School and Woodlands Indian High School.

During this time he married fellow teacher Gwenyth Hudson, daughter of J. W. Hudson, the headmaster of Maritzburg College. This was the beginning of a close family life in which their children and grandchildren brought them both great happiness.

In 1947 he was appointed to Voortrekker High School, where he was to remain for more than eight years. Though he was teaching mainly English, being at an Afrikaans school provided him with the opportunity of becoming fluent in that language — a somewhat rare accomplishment among English-speaking Natalians. It is probably also true that his years on the staff of Voortrekker High gave many members of the Afrikaans community in Natal insight into his sterling qualities. Despite tensions existing between the two language groups in white society, I believe that Nixon Montgomery earned the very special respect and trust of his Afrikaans colleagues, without for a moment compromising his own ideals and values. In 1955 he was promoted to the vice-principalship of the dual-medium Greytown High School. In 1963 he was appointed inspector of education, and between then and his retirement occupied the positions of academic planner, chief inspector of education, and deputy director.

Mr Montgomery was a perfect example of the Zulu saying 'Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu' ('A person is a person through people'). His interest in people, his capacity for friendship, his ability to give guidance and leadership, help and support, found full expression when he was an inspector and a chief inspector, responsible for the effective functioning of many schools. He saw his task as pastoral, and many principals and teachers looked forward to his visits with pleasurable anticipation rather than the anxiety traditionally associated with the descent of an inspector.

I think Monty regretted never having himself been the principal of a school. Certainly if his career had been different, some fortunate school would have enjoyed for a time the incomparable benefit of his headship, and bestowed on him that special kind of immortality that schools seem able to give to their outstanding heads. But his qualities and gifts were valuable in any educational setting. His wit and humour enlivened many a serious meeting in the education department. His recognition and encouragement of others' strengths and potential brought confidence and growth to many a young teacher and principal. He was not greatly concerned about rank and position. Once, at the official opening of a new school he was one of the very senior dignitaries present. When the young and inexperienced staff were obviously under pressure, he happily declined red carpet treatment and helped to move furniture and serve tea to other guests.

Some time after his retirement Mr Montgomery was persuaded to take on the chairmanship of the Natal Education Council, where his competence, fairness and humanity earned him the respect and affection of the more than thirty members, representing a wide spectrum of professions, interest-groups and political views.

The continuing keenness of Monty's mind was probably due in no small measure to his high level of physical fitness. His regime of daily jogging is

legendary. When his inspector's duties took him away from home for two or three days in the week, he always had his running kit with him, and in the late afternoon would be on the road for an hour or so, whatever part of the province he was working in. Until almost the end of his life, even when contending with serious illness, he continued this routine, though the jog had perforce become a walk.

Through the various tributes paid to Nixon Montgomery, both at the time of his retirement from the education department, and on his death, the theme of gentlemanliness runs like a golden thread. It is perhaps the tribute that includes all others.

'He was a verray parfit gentil knight.'

JOHN DEANE