

Obituaries

Noel Desmond Clarence (1921–1995)

Desmond Clarence was a scholar, a scientific leader, a distinguished vice-chancellor of the University of Natal, and a public figure who made a massive contribution to higher education and to KwaZulu-Natal. Yet it is not for these qualities that those who knew him remember him best. It is for his warmth and his humanity, and for the personal qualities which illuminated their lives. They remember the intensely human personality as well as the qualities which made him a significant public figure.

He was a product of Natal. He was brought up between the two world wars and schooled in Pietermaritzburg at Merchiston and Maritzburg College. Like all young men of his generation, he found his career interrupted by military service. Immediately after completing his first degree at the University of Natal, he joined the armed services and served with the Special Signals Service until the end of the war. He then resumed his academic career where his performance was rewarded by an MSc and an Elsie Ballot Scholarship which took him to Selwyn College, Cambridge. There he read Physics for two years, returning to South Africa with a BA (Cantab) which in the natural course of events, matured into an MA. It was then, in the Department of Physics at the University of Natal, that he began the research on lightning which led to the establishment of an important research group studying atmospheric, radio propagation, and magnetospheric and space physics.

Marriage, a family, a PhD, an academic appointment at the University of Natal: the foundations for his life and a distinguished career had been laid. He progressed rapidly through the ranks of academia and was appointed professor of Physics in Durban and then head of the joint Department of Physics. He was a distinguished dean of Science and his service to the university in innumerable ways resulted in his appointment as vice principal on the Durban campus. His ability in this role made it inevitable that he would become vice chancellor, a post he filled with distinction until his retirement. His career did not end there. After retirement he served for several years as chairman of the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba and on the councils of the University of Zululand and the Mangosuthu Technikon.

With that brief account of his life and career in mind we can consider in more detail both the public and the private figure, the scientist and teacher, the administrator and leader, the family man and friend.

His work as a scientist developed out of Basil Schonland's early South African work on lightning. His first work on the nature of the lightning stroke itself led to the study of the radio noise produced by it. As a result he made important contributions to the understanding of whistlers, those radio atmos-

pherics which are important for understanding the nature of the region of space round earth and which were of great interest as the investigation of space began. Apart from his individual work he made an even greater contribution by his leadership. It was his vision that saw the necessity of creating large and viable groups of scientists, concentrating on a few carefully chosen and complementary themes which could be vigorously pursued because of the synergy generated by having, close at hand, colleagues with whom one could interact. The consequence is that there is a clearly traceable line of coherent research activity leading to the current strength of the Department of Physics nearly thirty years later. The foundations he laid are solid. The tradition he created has endured. As Walter Lippmann wrote: 'The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on'.

His scientific wisdom was widely recognised, both nationally and internationally. He served at various times on the Prime Minister's Scientific Advisory Committee as well as the advisory committees of the Hermanus Magnetic Observatory, the National Institute for Telecommunications Research and the National Physics Laboratory. He was a member of the council of the South African Institute of Physics and, for a period, its vice chairman. On the international front he was scientific editor of Commission IV of the International Scientific Radio Union (URSI), then vice chairman and chairman of the Commission VII of the same large international scientific organisation. There is no doubt that, had he not moved into university administration, he would have participated with distinction in further international scientific activity.

What were his qualities as an administrator? He saw the university in its traditional role as a community of scholars, but was fully prepared to innovate to meet the challenges of the times. His vision was of educational excellence. He valued those subjects which stand at the root of western culture. He once said to me that, no matter what the financial difficulties, he could not conceive of a university that did not offer the important basic subjects like Classics as part of its curriculum. His public persona can best be described by three Latin words: the qualities *dignitas*, *gravitas*, *benignitas*, that is to say dignity which commands respect, weight of character and utterance, and, above all, kindness. He was the last vice chancellor able to maintain, with reasonable success, an open door policy for all the members of the university. Under his leadership it grew to a size where this was not possible for his successors. Those who needed to talk to him would find they immediately became the focus of his undivided attention, no matter what the other distractions. While he was talking to you, your problems were the only thing that mattered. He listened, he heard and he gave his opinion.

Again, he was much in demand by other institutions. He served a term as chairman of the Committee of University Principals. For many years he was on the enlarged senate of the University of Zululand. Later he was appointed to its council and served on it until long after his retirement. When he retired the Mangosuthu Technikon seized the opportunity to appoint him to its council.

Outside the academic environment he was a sociable, gregarious ambassador for the university, doing much to bring town and gown together. When the Buthelezi Commission was set up, although he was too engaged in the affairs of the university to contribute to it directly, he encouraged the full participation of many members of the university in it. When he retired, he served for three years as chairman of the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba. While these activities may

have been overtaken by events, history will show that the report of the commission was one of the first serious academic attempts to elucidate the problems of the region as a whole and that the Indaba was the first serious formal attempt by black and white South Africans to negotiate their future and hammer out a programme by which the region could be governed.

But what of Desmond Clarence the man? I was fortunate to have had a long conversation with him shortly before his death. His wife was seriously ill at the time and he was clearly very concerned. Nevertheless, as usual, his interest in his companions was complete. He wanted to know about the progress of their families. He wanted to know, in detail, what was going on in the university. The charm was the charm of a man to whom all people are deeply interesting.

Students and younger colleagues in the Physics Department respected him but did not find him intimidating – unless they deserved to be intimidated. Colleagues knew that, on the rare occasions that the moustache bristled, it was time to take cover. He had high standards of behaviour but could adapt to circumstances. One long lasting war of attrition, in which he finished on the wrong side, was in the late sixties and early seventies, over student dress. He felt that a collar and tie was appropriate. When that skirmish had been lost – long trousers. Another defeat. At least socks? Shoes? *O tempora, o mores!* But he was able to accept that times had changed and, indeed, he was often in the vanguard of change.

He revelled in his family and his home. When he retired he was able to enter enthusiastically into activities for which he had previously only been able to snatch small intervals of time. He was a skilled woodworker. He developed elaborate systems for growing vegetables hydroponically. His property in the depths of the country absorbed his attention. He was prepared to tackle anything from roof mending to plumbing. His attitude was ‘if someone else can do it then, short of major surgery, so can I’. His wife, Constance, gave me a new insight into his character by pointing out the paradox that, while he was so intensely gregarious, such a ‘people person’, he was, nevertheless completely self-sufficient. He was a man of great integrity. All whose lives have been touched by his remember him with fondness and with gratitude.

He left his wife, Constance, and his children, Sue, Jenny and Peter and their families. Tragically Constance died only a month after his death.

A. D. M. WALKER

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(Photograph: Natal University Archives)