

Reginald Oliver Pearse (1900–1995)

Reg Pearse was born in Pietermaritzburg on 9 March 1900, at 345 Prince Alfred Street. His parents were living in Ladysmith, but it was felt that with the clouds of war banking up, and Ladysmith possibly in for a long siege, it was wise to be in Maritzburg for the birth. They got out of Ladysmith by the skin of their teeth, on the very last train to leave the town before the Boers closed in. Also on board were Colonel French and his aide Major Douglas Haig, later to become famous generals in the First World War. (General White felt they would be more use outside Ladysmith than being locked in.)

Reg matriculated at Ladysmith Secondary School in 1917, and at the beginning of 1918 went to Maritzburg to attend the Natal University College where he spent five years — obtaining the BA in 1920, teaching certificate (the ‘Union T.1’) in June 1922, and MA in December of that year. He had originally decided on law, but halfway through the BA course changed horses and decided on teaching.

His first posting in the Natal Education Department was to Dundee High School in January 1923, where he had eleven happy years, rising eventually to the positions of vice-principal and sportsmaster. He and Edith were married on 18 December 1928, while he was still at Dundee. They had three children: Muriel, Joan and Malcolm. After a short spell at Maritzburg College in the early 1930s, Reg was promoted to headmaster of Newcastle High School, where he spent 5 years, and in June 1941 was appointed headmaster of Estcourt High School where he spent 24 years, until his retirement at the end of 1965. In 1961 Reg and Edith bought a 15-acre property in the Drakensberg, near Champagne Castle Hotel, and here they built their home Emkhizweni — ‘the place of misty rain.’

We depart from the usual pattern of Natalia obituaries to publish two separate tributes to Reg Pearse, from two men who were associated with different aspects of his life and work. Denis Slaney, himself to become a headmaster, was a member of the Estcourt High School staff under Pearse; and James Byrom, a former pupil of Pearse, became a journalist and editor, and collaborated with him in various writing projects.

R.O. Pearse the educator

In a lifetime of 95 years it is not granted to many to serve most of it in the active service of one's fellow man. This was Reg Pearse's achievement, especially in the field of education. Being a person of high ideals and vision, he pursued his aims with dedication. He was, however, realistic in outlook and, having once evaluated a goal as attainable, he pursued it with the utmost determination and perseverance to ensure its ultimate success.

As headmaster of Estcourt High School he made 'a desire for perfection' the guiding tenet of his quest to develop the school into a leading position in Natal and, indeed, the whole of South Africa. His predecessor and founder of the High School, Col. A.C. Martin, had already laid the foundations of an excellent school, and the 'Boss' — as he became known in the school community — realised that it would be no easy task to improve on that.

He was sustained in this endeavour by reliance on his high Christian ideals and the devoted loyalty and support of his wife Edith. As he encountered difficulties, he must have remembered Sir John Hunt of Everest fame, who urged one 'to go out and look for tough things to do, and do them with your friends.' Reg Pearse was a firm and positive leader, of both staff and pupils, by example.

Plato is reputed to have said that the young need to be surrounded by orderliness and beauty. R.O. Pearse's school was organised on a policy of firm but not harsh discipline, applied both in and out of the classroom. The rules were not oppressive, and very seldom was a pupil considered beyond redemption. Mr Pearse maintained contact with the classroom by teaching English to the Std 10 class until a few years before he retired. Academic standards were maintained and consolidated by means of the tri-weekly testing system, which was controlled and supervised by the headmaster. This organisation of the school paid handsome dividends in producing public examination results which placed it well among the top schools in the province. During his time at the helm, Estcourt High School also gained an excellent reputation as a co-educational high school. This was due not only to the headmaster's firm belief in the value and benefits of co-education, but also to his successful application of the principle, which required much sustained effort on his part.

Initially the school consisted of about equal numbers of day scholars and boarders. Largely through Mr Pearse's efforts a third hostel was opened. The increase of the boarder numbers to nearly 250 coincided with a boom period for the town of Estcourt, and by 1965 the total enrolment of the school had virtually doubled to almost 600. Mr Pearse made full use of the large number of boarders to provide a sound core from which to develop the excellent school spirit for which it became renowned. The presence of this large number of boarders at the school entailed a tremendous personal effort on the part of the head, in responsibility and supervision. This he maintained to the extent of seldom being away from home during term time.

The development of school spirit received further impetus in 1957 with the opening of the War Memorial Hall. This was a culmination of the efforts of a committee led by Mr Pearse, which included Mr M.H. Lindsay (who would later succeed him as headmaster) and prominent members of the Estcourt community. They persevered for 12 years to overcome administrative obstacles and raise the necessary funds. Successful fund raising events developed strong ties with both the farming and town communities. By the time he retired, Estcourt had conferred Civic Honours on R.O. Pearse.

Pearse actively encouraged cultural activities: Shakespearean plays found a suitable venue in the new hall, the head himself chaired the fortnightly meetings of the Senior Debating Society for many years, and he personally encouraged the Chess Club. Shortly after his arrival at the school he wrote *Sable and Murrey*, which recorded the history of education in Estcourt, including the High School's first years. From that time he controlled the production and development of the school magazine.

Reg Pearse gave freely of his time and effort in support of sporting activities. There were few home fixtures that he and Mrs Pearse did not attend, and he travelled frequently to inter-school events. He always encouraged the highest standards of sportsmanship, both on and off the field. He was an active participant in the construction of the main cricket and athletics field, which was named in his honour when he retired. He was a strong supporter of the Old Scholars' Association, and he and his wife always received a warm welcome at its functions and meetings. Mrs Pearse, from her years of running the school tuck shop, sometimes remembered names better than her husband.

R.O.Pearse once said, 'To the true headmaster, it is the character of his boys and girls that is all-important. They cannot all be brilliant scholars or excellent players of games, but all, if the school is doing its job properly, can possess the basic decencies of human life.' There can be no greater tribute to the memory of Reg Pearse than to say that he fulfilled these principles to the utmost. His contribution to the education of so many has been immense.

DENIS E. SLANEY

Reg Pearse the author

As one looks back on the life of an achiever, one recognises qualities that were the engine of success, the motor drive of the personality. In the long life of Reg Pearse, who died on 19 May 1995, aged 95, the qualities which fuelled his two careers were simple. He led a Spartan existence. Well into his autumn years he continued to take his morning plunge in the swimming pool at his mountain home, even in winter when the birds were pecking at the ice in the birdbath! He set standards for himself that he would not compromise. As researcher for him on a couple of books, and co-author with him of another, I knew that a fact had to be checked, cross-checked — and then checked again, before Reg would consider using it.

When he sat down to write, the words came quickly. He did not struggle, as I frequently do, to find that special word, that turn of phrase that captures the soul of what one is trying to convey. There is no copyright on facts, and the stories are there for every writer of non-fiction. Reg's major work, *Barrier of Spears*, has endured not so much for the stories it contains, as for the manner in which they were written. His was a clear, uncluttered prose which carried his readers to infinite pleasure with simple, uncomplicated words. More than 20 years after its first appearance, it is still a good seller in South African bookshops.

His powers of concentration were supreme, and remained so for all but the last couple of months of his life. I sent him a copy of the manuscript of my book *Fields of Air*. A couple of days later he left his home in the Drakensberg to travel to Johannesburg where he underwent surgery. While he was away, his neighbour and fellow author Alex Willcox (*The Drakensberg Bushmen and their Art*, *Footprints in a Southern Land*, *Great River*, *The Rock Art of Africa*,

Shipwreck and Survival, etc.) was shot and killed, and it was felt that Reg should not return to live alone in the mountains. About three months later I called on him in Johannesburg, and he apologised that he had left my manuscript in the Berg. He then proceeded to give me a detailed and incisive critique of a manuscript he hadn't seen for nearly four months. He was then 93!

Reg had an everlasting love affair with his wife, Edith, in a marriage which lasted more than 60 years. It was filled with humour and warmth, and when she died two years before him, the spark seemed to go out of his life. He never wrote again, but spent time revising *Mountain Splendour*, his wonderful book on the flowers of the Drakensberg, first published in 1979. The new manuscript is on my desk now, and a publisher is being sought who will give it life again. In 1935 Reg and Edith motored from South Africa to Central Africa in a Model T Ford. During the trip he wrote long, descriptive letters home to his family. Later he submitted these, with a handful of photographs, to a publisher in England, with a letter asking if there was any merit in trying to write a book based on them. He heard nothing for several months, until one day a parcel arrived. It contained the author's complimentary copies of the book *Empty Highways*. His letters were that good!

During his headmastership of Estcourt High School he wrote a little book on the history of the school. After retiring from the education department, Reg wrote *Barrier of Spears* (1973), *Mountain Splendour* (1979), *Joseph Baynes, Pioneer* (1983) and *Dragon's Wrath* (1986, in collaboration with James Byrom). Then, again with some assistance from me, a new edition of *Barrier of Spears* was published in 1990.

R.O. Pearse, educationist. R.O. Pearse, author. Two remarkable careers.

JAMES BYROM