



Cecil Rees

(Photograph: Natal Witness)

Cecil Rees 1920 – 1997

Former Natal Attorney-General Cecil Rees died in Pietermaritzburg at the beginning of 1997.

Rees, who was called to the Bar in 1954, served as Natal Attorney-General from 1976 until his retirement in 1984. By that time he had worked in the Department of Justice for 34 years.

The present Natal Attorney-General, Tim McNally, who worked with Rees on and off since 1962, remarked that he had reached the high point of his career in the law from humble beginnings. Rees was known to McNally as a man who would never shy away from a contentious prosecution. He was ‘fuelled by adversity’, McNally said. He said that although Rees had a rigid approach to law, his character as a social being was more relaxed.

Rees gained prominence among the legal fraternity through his handling of some of the country’s most sensational trials. These included the Protter trial, which followed the Fox Street shootout in Johannesburg, the Terrorism Act trial of Alexander Mombaris and John Hosey, the case arising out of the massacre of 10 policemen at Cato Manor, the trial of the South African Students’ Organisation and the Seychelles mercenaries’ trial.

Rees was also chairman of the Rees Commission of Inquiry, which was set up to investigate the affairs of the Pietermaritzburg City Council at the insistence of the Concerned Citizens’ Association in 1994.

Rees, who was born and educated in Pretoria, began his working life as a clerk in the Department of Lands. His career was interrupted by the outbreak of World War 2, during which he served as an officer in the Seventh Field Regiment.

During the war Rees was captured at Tobruk and, as a POW for three years in Italy and Germany, came into contact with leading Commonwealth barristers. During his imprisonment he attended lectures in Roman Dutch Law by Mr Justice Holmes and Sir De Villiers Graaff.

After the war, Rees returned to the Department of Lands and continued in the Active Citizen Force while furthering his law studies at the University of Pretoria. While a member of the ACF Rees was promoted to Major and was awarded the John Chard Decoration before he left the force in 1958.

Rees was transferred to the Department of Justice in Pietermaritzburg in 1950, whereafter he was appointed in 1954 to the Attorney-General’s office as the most junior of the Attorney-General’s qualified staff in Natal.

Rees served as deputy Attorney-General of the Transvaal from 1972 until his return to Pietermaritzburg as Natal Attorney-General in 1976.

Amid some controversy he was appointed acting judge of the Supreme Court in Bisho, Kimberley and Umtata after his retirement.

Asked in an interview shortly before his retirement what his thoughts might have been at the end of a day’s proceedings in a major treason or terrorism trial in which he had prosecuted, Rees said: ‘You may often have to apply a law you don’t like, but it is our function to uphold and respect the laws of the country. Counsel must not become subjectively involved’.

He leaves his wife, son, daughter and four grandchildren.

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