

Obituaries

Denis Gower Fannin (1907–1997)

For those who have some experience of the law, and long memories, the death of the Honourable Denis Fannin in Durban in March 1997 must in some respects resemble the fall of one of those few remaining upright and mighty yellowwoods in the natural bush of the Dargle (which is where the Fannin family first settled when they came to Natal 150 years ago). For Denis Fannin was an honourable and brave man in every respect, and greatly admired.

He was educated at Hilton College (of whose board of governors he was to become chairman) and then the former Natal University College. Bent on entering the law, he practised first from 1930 as an attorney in the firm of Hathorn and Fannin in Durban. But the Bar was more suited to his talents and so from 1935 he practised as an advocate.

When the Second World War broke out he immediately joined the Umvoti Mounted Rifles and served in East Africa and the Western Desert. He was awarded the Military Cross, but his military career was cut short at Tobruk. It is said of him that his claim to fame as a prisoner-of-war, of which he was inordinately proud, rested on his stage performance as one of the ugly sisters in the Christmas pantomime.

On his return from the war he soon revived his extensive practice. He took silk in 1950 and in time became Chairman of the General Council of the Bar in South Africa. Yet he found time to serve as a provincial councillor in a council then controlled by the United Party. He had no sympathy for the policy of the National Party's central government, and was fearless in his criticism of it.

He was also deeply involved in educational and charitable work — Adams College, the University of Natal (serving as President of Convocation), an ex-servicemen's educational programme, the Heart Foundation, the Simon van der Stel Foundation, and others.

In 1958 he was elevated to the bench of the Natal Provincial Division of the Supreme Court (as it then was), where he sat for 19 years before retiring. As a judge he was respected for his reputation as a learned lawyer, for his real concern that the application of the law in his court should always be fair, and for his approachability.

For many years he was an enthusiastic and valued member of the Natal Parks Board, retiring as deputy chairman in 1980.

In his retirement his wide knowledge of affairs, his humanity and his compassion made him an ideal chairman of a number of state and provincial commissions of inquiry, which he conducted with an easy firmness and exemplary patience.

He is survived by his wife Helen, a son and a daughter, and their respective families.

SIMON ROBERTS



Mr Justice D.G. Fannin