

## *Philip Rudolf Theodorus Nel (1915–1997)*

Philip Nel was born in Vryheid on 1 December 1915. His parents were of farming stock. He was educated at Greytown Primary and Vryheid High schools. He trained as a teacher at the Natal Training College and later obtained a BA degree at the Natal University College in Pietermaritzburg.

He taught at schools as diverse as Charlestown on the Natal border and Voortrekker, the oldest Afrikaans-medium school in Natal. His first post as a school principal was at Mtunzini and he followed this with postings to the Umkomaas and Sezela Primary schools and the Oliver Lea School in Pietermaritzburg. The last-named school was unusual as it was specifically set up for children convalescing from tuberculosis and similar long-term diseases. After leaving Oliver Lea, he joined the staff of the Natal Training College as a lecturer in Afrikaans before returning to the position of principal at Port Natal Senior Primary. He was the founding headmaster of Dirkie Uys High School on the Bluff in Durban.

In 1961 he was promoted to the post of inspector of education. In 1964 he rose further to the position of Chief Planner for Indian Education, and when this was separated from the Natal Education Department he became the first director of the newly-created Indian Education Department. This last post gave him seniority over his previous colleagues, and in 1967 he was appointed Director of the Natal Education Department, a post he held until 1977.

There can be little doubt that Nel's appointment as director was part of a plan to exert Broederbond control over education in Natal. An earlier attempt to position Stander to take over as director had led to a great deal of negative publicity in the press. Nel's move into the top educational post went much more smoothly as he was clearly the senior candidate. This said, Nel brought to his position as director tremendous energy and drive and his positive personality and genuine concern for education in Natal soon converted to his side the great majority of those who had seen him as little more than a political appointment.

It was during his term that the 1967 education acts were implemented. Nel is particularly gratefully remembered by the colleges of education. The establishment of college councils and the development of a system whereby colleges were enabled to team up with universities in order to offer degree courses owe much to his initiative. Another lasting achievement of the Nel era was the great number of new

schools built and the extensive renovations and construction carried out at a number of the established schools. These were indeed the fat years for white education.

Ill health persuaded Nel to retire from his position as director in 1977 but he continued to lead an extremely active life, serving as Chairman of the Drakensberg Administration Board in the years immediately following his retirement from the Natal Education Department. During a not undistinguished career, he served on numerous boards and councils, including the advisory board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. He continued to play an active role in the field of education for several years after his retirement, serving on the main committee of the De Lange Commission as well as serving as chairman of the Working Committee for Languages and Language Instruction. His considerable contribution to education was recognised by the award of an honorary doctorate of education by the University of Durban-Westville.

He spent his retirement in Somerset West in a house with a commanding view of the mountain-girt blue waters of False Bay. It was here where he died peacefully on 8 September 1997. He leaves his wife Engela (born Cloete) two sons, a daughter, eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

SIMON HAW

*Obituaries*



Mr P.R.T. Nel