



Mr N.A. Steele

Nicholas Arthur Steele (1933–1997)

The last nine months of Nick Steele's life were a time of terrible, racking pain and sometimes deep despair, yet out of the fire of this agony Nick emerged with undaunted spirit and renewed faith. In the last month he had spiritual experiences and dream revelations that undeniably confirmed what he already knew: that God and a life hereafter existed. The birth of his spiritual belief began in the wilderness of the Mfolosi Game Reserve, where he was able to identify with the experience of Jesus Christ and the forty days and forty nights He spent in the wilderness.

I found the following passage in Nick Steele's book *Game Ranger on Horseback*:

'When I first found a spring in the depths of the Mfolosi bush on a foot patrol one searing day, I thought the heat had played tricks on my mind. An old African game guard called Nkomo, who really knew his bushlore, showed me at least ten places throughout the area where the water never failed in droughts.'

I think these lines serve as a metaphor for the life of Nicholas Arthur Steele. He lived through many serious personal drought periods, but he was always able to find a spring inside himself that inspired him. As a young boy at school in the Transvaal there were those who tried to bully him because he was short. The same thing happened at Weston Agricultural College, well known in those days for its extraordinarily tough initiations. These experiences were a preparation for his conservation career of 41 years, in which he refused to be cowed when he knew he was right.

In 1956 he applied to the Natal Parks Board for a job, and was interviewed by Colonel Vincent, who recognised Nick's strength of character. This was the kind of man he needed in those very difficult years.

Nick served a year at Hluhluwe Game Reserve under Norman Deane, a tough taskmaster, who admired him tremendously because of his untiring capacity for hard work. They formed a deep and abiding friendship. Nick was then transferred to Ogame outpost to guard the southern crown lands of Mfolosi. It was here that he encountered the ancient spirit of Africa, the sense of wilderness he strove all his life to preserve. He writes in *Game Ranger on Horseback* of his arrival at Ogame: 'No droning engines broke the night out here, for Ogame was the heart of the wilderness, and the call of the reeduck was answered only by the lonely wail of the jackal or the sombre hoot of the owl.'

It was at Ogame that Nick forged a lifelong friendship with Masuku Mzwabantu, Aaron Sithole, and other men who defended the land and the game.

In 1958 we travelled with Hugh Dent and Norman Deane to the home of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi at Mahlabatini. A friendship began that day which eventually led to an unequalled partnership of achievement in conservation. Dr Buthelezi as Chief Minister of KwaZulu and Nick Steele as Director of the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources, broke the racial barriers and became men — instead of black and white. The value of the traditional field ranger was recognised, and local communities became part of, and shared in, the conservation benefits.

No matter how far up the administration ladder Nick advanced, he was always guided by the wilderness ethic. It was one of the springs within himself that he drew upon constantly. His defence of wilderness areas was unwavering, and he became angry with people in our profession who related the value of wild animals to meat, hides and biltong. He had a deep respect for the spirit of animals, and their right to a place in the sun.

Nick never hesitated to speak out when his inner feeling told him something was wrong. His opposition to the proposed mining on the eastern shores of St Lucia was more difficult for him than for other senior officials. It could have affected his career adversely, but that did not prevent him from speaking out forcefully against

mining. He tirelessly encouraged his staff and lobbied political leaders, and certainly had the support of Dr Buthelezi. The two of them stood firm on a matter of principle that triumphed in the end. What a wonderful partnership.

Nick was also a practical person. He initiated the conservancy movement, which has now spread to all of southern Africa. He introduced horses for patrol work and proved conclusively how effective they could be, not only as an anti-poaching method, but to bring the ranger into a close relationship with the earth.

Nick's knowledge and appreciation of horses wove like Ariadne's thread throughout his life. The horses were of immense value in the early days of Operation Rhino. We could never have achieved what we did without the horsemen and the tracking skills of Magqubu Ntombela.

There was a philosophical part of Nick that brought out the poet in him, enabling him to describe dawns and sunsets, and what Africa meant to him when he heard the long lyrical cry of the fish eagle, the call of a cisticola, the howl of a hyena in the night, the lion roaring with the sound echoing against the kranzes of his beloved White Mfolosi River.

We are told in the Bible that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend. I know this was true of Nick in the camaraderie and friendships that were established in the battles for the Zululand game reserves in the 1950s and 1960s. His companions would not have hesitated to lay down their lives for each other, either. Many game guards, indeed, did give their lives.

Nick had read widely about the American West and was a great admirer of the American Indians. On a visit to America in 1987 when Drummond Densham accompanied us, we spent days at the River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho, where horses are a religion. The rapport between Nick and the ranging staff on the subject of wilderness and horses was instant and deep.

All who knew Nick appreciated his many striking qualities: his courage, hard work, optimism, dedication, sensitivity and quiet sense of humour. But Nick, like us all, had his shadow side. He could be unbelievably stubborn, yet in times of serious adversity this could be an asset.

When he was a ranger in Mfolosi and Hluhluwe, he rode horses because that was a practical way of doing what game rangers should do — patrol and get to know the country. Later on in life, when he became a director, he rode horses for relaxation and contemplation. Not ten days before he died, Nick, with the encouragement of his wife Nola, mounted his horse and rode — for what was to be the last time in his life — to the White Mfolosi River. He crossed it to sleep for a while under an mdoni tree.

Psalm 20 speaks of 'Some who put their trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will trust in the name of the Lord our God.' On that last ride Nick knew he was near death, and he wanted to speak with the Great Spirit in the wilderness of the upper White Mfolosi. You can imagine how he went over his life as he rode, giving thanks for being allowed to serve the world in the wilderness. He always said it was the most noble and important cause in our world today. For 41 years he had served it with untiring passion.

We are entering a new era with the amalgamation of the Natal Parks Board and the KwaZulu Department of Nature Conservation. Conservation in this province

has never been easy. When I saw Nick as he lay dying, but conscious and coherent, he asked me to say that in this testing time people should not take packages and quit. He knew that everyone with experience is needed for the future organisation.

Some of the last sounds that Nick carried with him into the next world were the songs sung by the Zulu nurses at Eshowe Hospital, and I am sure that Magqubu Ntombela, Masuku Mzwabantu and many others will be waiting for him on the other side of the great river, to say thanks for all he has done to keep the wilderness flame alight.

Go well, Nick Steele, go well.

Hamba kahle, Malamba, hamba kahle.

You have done your duty.

IAN PLAYER

(This was the eulogy delivered at Nick Steele's funeral on 4 June 1997)