



(5) Christopher Cresswell

Christopher Cresswell (1933–1998)

Christopher Cresswell came to the University of Natal in 1988 to take up the appointment as Vice-Principal of the Durban centre with a big reputation as a scientist. He had published over 200 articles in the field of plant physiology and biochemistry. The quality and originality of his work had been recognised in the award of the South African Gold Medal for his work in photosynthetic and nitrogen metabolism, the Claude Harris Leon Award for work on the indigenous grasses of the southern African savanna regions, and in his election as a fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa.

Equally important for the contribution he was to make, he had obtained valuable insight into developments that were taking place in universities elsewhere in the world. Apart from teaching at Wits (where he became professor of botany at the age of 34), he had studied at Bristol for his PhD and had been visiting professor at California Santa Cruz, at the Ben Gurion University of Negev in Israel, and at the

John Innes Research Institute in Britain. At Wits he had been dean of science between 1983 and 1988, guiding that faculty through the many negotiations that led to the 'School' system which provided for students with an inadequate grounding in science.

His academic standing and wide experience of international trends enabled Cresswell to play a crucial role in the developments that were taking place at the University of Natal. In the year of his appointment the university adopted an important planning document for the ensuing 10 years, based on the expectation of political and other change. Cresswell identified fully with the objectives of internal reorganisation and academic change to meet the needs of a changing student population, of increasing research output and of curriculum change to bring the university more into line with international practice. His first efforts were to streamline the administration, to initiate a campus plan which envisaged among other things the relocation of the faculties of humanities and social science in the Memorial Tower Building and the creation of an educational development structure to co-ordinate the student support section with those of the faculties. To encourage research and improved teaching he was instrumental in the creation of university fellowships, teaching awards and the reorganisation of the promotions system.

At the end of 1991 Professor P. Booysen retired as Vice Chancellor. Cresswell was a candidate for the position and his supporters were upset when at the last minute three members of the selection committee who had acted as referees were forced to withdraw. He, however, accepted the appointment of Professor James Leatt with good grace, and threw himself with renewed energy into the tasks he had set himself in the Durban centre, adding to these the creation of a self-supporting Innovation Centre. When his contract expired in 1993 Cresswell was obliged to reapply for his position. This he did, once again swallowing his pride, and agreed to stay on for a further three-year period.

Leatt commenced a Vice Chancellor's Review (VCR) of the university's administration and academic activities, the first exercise of this kind attempted at a South African university. Cresswell's contribution was very considerable, especially his insistence that research be provided for in the central university-wide structures by means of the appointment of a deputy vice chancellor. He was also a strong advocate of the reorganisation of teaching programmes and the restructuring of faculties for this purpose into interdisciplinary schools, based on the strengths of each centre. During a visit to the USA he encountered the ideas of Peter Senge and persuaded the VCR to include specific reference to the ideals of systemic thinking and the creation of a Learning Organisation. Following the acceptance of the VCR's early recommendations, he developed an implementation plan for the Durban centre after protracted discussions with the faculties.

During Cresswell's term of office the university experienced an unusual degree of student unrest. The most serious occurred at the beginning of 1992 when the student Knowledge Mdlalose was refused readmission by the Faculty of Law. This led to agitation by a 'committee of ten', many of whose members were not students. While handling down-to-earth plans for campus security, Cresswell remained patient in his dealings with student leaders and, when a contingent of police fired

upon a body of protesting students while the Senate was debating Mdlalose's fate, he angrily confronted the police, disregarding personal danger. Despite the demands they made upon his time, he liked the student leaders with whom he had dealings. He understood the circumstances which had produced their anger, and the difficulties they encountered in challenging authority. He remained convinced that much of what occurred was the work of a 'third force'.

Cresswell's major contribution to the University of Natal undoubtedly lay in his commitment to change. His term as Vice-Principal, and after the VCR restructuring as Durban Principal, was an important period of readjustment. Some of these changes had been anticipated in the 1988 university report, while others emerged following the political revolution of 1993 and the sudden readmission of the South African universities to the international university scene. Others – like the need to define terms such as 'centre' and 'campus' – arose from a scientist's passion for order and definition. His overseas experience helped to create the determination to improve teaching, to promote research and to adopt practices which had already been followed at leading overseas institutions.

Despite his vision and his determination to effect change, Cresswell had the wisdom to know how to compromise, and maintained a fine sense of judgement even when pressure of work, workplace relations and time-consuming negotiations wore at his patience. Many of his proposals could not be easily grasped because practices were rooted in the existing university culture. His knowledge of systemic change and his experience as dean of science at Wits led him to expect resistance, and armed him with understanding of its many complexities. He was thus able to remain optimistic despite numerous frustrations, and could forgive the personal slights of those less farseeing than himself. His wife Evelyn provided calm support, together with insight into the importance of the humanities and social sciences. His patience wore thin only when he had to deal with the posturing of individuals whose academic record he knew to be unimpressive.

At the end of 1995 surgery revealed cancer of the thyroid. Medical advice was that he had no more than three months to live. This he refused to accept, and in the ensuing 30 months undertook two sea voyages, served as acting principal of the M.L. Sultan Technikon, and built the new family home at Mtunzini, where he died peacefully on 10 June 1998. His achievements as a botanist earned him a worldwide reputation. His immense contribution to the transformation of the University of Natal and to higher education in KwaZulu-Natal will surely also receive the recognition it deserves.