



(4) Ronald MacMillan

## *Ronald George MacMillan (1910–1998)*

Ronald MacMillan, who died in June 1998, joined the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg as Professor and Head of the Department of Education in 1957, and in 1971 became Vice Principal, from which position he retired in 1975. It was a period during which government policy, hostile to liberal education, became more pervasively influential, especially as central government's administrative authority increased. Perhaps that was one reason why, as Vice Principal, he jealously defended the relative independence of the Pietermaritzburg campus from the central administration in Durban. MacMillan consistently upheld principles of education policy and practice to develop open minds, particularly by drawing on his wide-ranging knowledge of Comparative Education – a field in which he published innumerable articles in international journals. More significant for attitudes in South Africa was his response to a request from Dr E G Malherbe (then Vice-Chancellor) to organise a National Education Conference in Durban in 1960. Prominent international figures from the U.S.A., Britain and the Continent were

among the more than 200 leaders of discussion groups; and the conference was highly successful in attracting participants from the whole of South Africa. Though there were papers (published in what may seem an ironic title, *Education and Our Expanding Horizons*) by proponents of Christian National Education, the general tone was liberal, and participants were likely to be encouraged to uphold liberal principles and practice. MacMillan's own way of doing so was chiefly through public addresses and membership of numerous institutional and national committees. He became chairman of the South African Association for the Advancement of Education in 1965 and was awarded its Gold Medal in 1977. His own specialism was in tertiary education and he was awarded a Fulbright-Hays grant in 1962/63 to study admission levels to higher education in the USA, a few years later obtaining a grant to study universities in West Germany.

Professor MacMillan's own education was by no means on an easy route, for much of it was achieved by part-time. Born in 1910 in the Transvaal, he obtained his schooling and professional teachers' certificate there. He went on, while teaching, to obtain a string of degrees from the universities of the Witwatersrand and South Africa until the outbreak of war and after it – BSc (1932) in Chemistry and Geography; BA(1935) in English; MA (1939) in English; BEd (1950) and PhD (1954). From 1940 to 1946 he was in command of Army Education Services in Italy, attached to the 6th SA Division. But neither then nor later did he confine himself to scholarly interests. Athletics was his major sport; he represented South Africa in 1935 and his record for the 880 yards, created in 1937, remained unbroken until 1946. It is perhaps not surprising that in his lectures, speeches and encouragement of staff, metaphors about running a race were frequent and sometimes mixed. Moreover, he was an interested supporter of many student sporting activities.

Ronnie MacMillan is survived by his widow, Dulcie, who was throughout a staunch supporter of his work, and by their sons and grandchildren.

TONY BARRETT