

Jeffrey William Horton (1921–1998)

It is, I think, true that there is something to be learnt from everybody one meets in life, though this may not always be of a positive nature. There was, however, much that was positive about the life of Jeffrey William Horton for us to remember and to cherish.

Jeffrey was born on 23 January 1921 at Harrismith in the Orange Free State, near his beloved Drakensberg, but he spent most of his life on this side of the mountains. After his schooling at Cordwalles and Michaelhouse, he went on to acquire degrees at Rhodes University and Oxford and to lecture at Rhodes and the University of the Witwatersrand, his early academic career being disrupted by war-time service in the Aptitude Test Section of the South African Air Force. In 1960 he assumed duties as Senior Lecturer in the History Department at the University of Natal in Durban where he spent the rest of his working life, interspersed with brief spells as visiting lecturer at Queens University, Ontario, and as visiting researcher at Smith College, Massachusetts and at Northwestern University, Illinois, where he assisted the southern African research of Professor Gwendolin Carter.

On the Durban campus Jeffrey rose to become Head of Department, Acting Dean of his Faculty, University Orator, and on his retirement, Professor Emeritus. He did not publish extensively but had an enormous and unquantifiable impact as a teacher.

thesis supervisor and, in some cases, personal mentor. His expert knowledge and obvious enjoyment of British history in particular made for lectures which were both informative and entertaining. As a supervisor he was rigorous and encouraging, and I am only one among many who remain grateful for the demanding standards that he set.

A brief outline of Jeffrey's successful career as an academic is, of course, only part of the story. It says little about the person, the personality, whose life we celebrate today, though for some of us it is impossible to separate Jeffrey the teacher and colleague from Jeffrey the friend. There were many aspects to his life and personality, some better known to several of you than to me, and I do not presume to touch upon them all in the limited time available. We will miss his stimulating conversation, his engaging, often subtle sense of humour, his witticisms, his eloquent command of language and play on words, all of which contributed to his popularity as lecturer and University Orator. In my early years on the staff of the Durban History Department he and I undertook the annual task of organising tutorial groups. Mutt & Jeff we were, in imitation of the old cartoon strip, with Jeff mostly getting his own way in terms of times and group allocations but Mutt not really minding because the banter and repartee involved always made an entertainment of what would otherwise have been a mundane, routine task.

This example points also to another of Jeffrey's qualities: his great organisational and planning ability. The final illness aside, Jeffrey did not allow events to take what course they may; he planned and organised his life to assume more or less the shape that he wanted. Coupled with this was an enormous determination to achieve the goals he set himself. This was never more evident than during the last days of his life when he made up his mind that he was going to spend Christmas with the Shuttleworths at Nottingham Road and see the Frosts of Johannesburg. I have no doubt that he would, if necessary, have absconded from hospital but for the kindness of those dear friends in enabling him to achieve his final objectives.

This brings me to my last and perhaps most important point: Jeffrey's enormous capacity for wide-ranging, deep and abiding friendships. Many have commented on the ease and immediacy with which they were able to make his acquaintance and regard him as a friend. His friendships were not confined to his own generation or his own social background and included people who were older and very much younger than himself. Among these were former students and the children of friends. To them he was much more than an entertaining and kindly uncle; he was a friend, always tuned in to the younger generations, at heart a young man to the end of his life. Jeffrey never took his friendships for granted; he nurtured and maintained them through regular contact, a perceptive awareness of other people's feelings and moods, and a shrewd ability to diagnose the need for humour, advice or silence, where appropriate.

I suspect that, by this stage, though much has been left unsaid, Jeffrey would already have prescribed silence in my case. In conclusion then, though the eventide of his life here has fallen there is much for us to celebrate: a long and productive life fully enjoyed and filled with friendship and affection, and a life hereafter in which he firmly believed. Let us then think of his gain rather than our loss as we remember Jeffrey the brother, nephew, uncle, godfather, colleague, friend, mentor, tape aids

worker and, for many years, the ever-hospitable squire of Folly Bridge where the people of the beautiful Loteni valley, now bedecked in its summer splendour, await his final and fitting return.

BILL GUEST

(This was the Funeral Oration delivered on 9 January 1999)



Professor Jeffrey Horton
(Photograph: University of Natal)