



Col. Jack Vincent MBE
(Photograph: The Natal Witness)



Hubert von Klemperer

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Jack Vincent (1904–1999)

Jack Vincent was born in London in 1904. He went to school at Willington, before earning a scholarship to Christ's Hospital at Horsham, Sussex, where he went at the tender age of 10. He left school at 16 and worked as a farm pupil in Sussex.

At the age of 21 he emigrated to South Africa on the 1820 Settlers' Association scheme and worked on two farms in the Richmond area of Natal before returning to England to work for the British Museum, to pursue his interest in birds, which had been with him since childhood. He was sent on a number of bird-collecting expeditions in Africa, some on his own and one in the company of Admiral Hubert Lynes of the Battle of Jutland fame.

His expeditions took him to most parts of Africa in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and earned him an honorary Life Fellowship of the Royal Geographic Society. On his return from his last trip, in 1934, he met a Scottish girl, Mary Russell, in Cape Town, proposed to and married her within a week. They travelled together to London where they lived for the next year. He then took a post with Jardine Mathieson Co., who sent him to Zanzibar to start the first clove distillery on that most famous of 'clove isles'. There he spent three years building up the industry before being transferred to a sisal plantation in Tanganyika. The health situation there was too much for a wife and tiny child, so Jack moved to South Africa again, where in 1937 he bought a farm in the Mooi River district, which he named Firlie after the farm he worked on in Sussex.

The Second World War intervened, and Mary was left to run the farm while Jack served with the Royal Natal Carbineers in East and North Africa. Whilst on active service he was seconded to the British army as an officer at the Staff

College in Haifa, Palestine. He was awarded the MBE for his service, and also the PSC Dagger — the only South African ever to have received the latter.

On his return to South Africa he was unable to get the farm back on its feet, and had to find other work. After working in Johannesburg for a few months, he was asked by Douglas Mitchell (q.v. in *Natalia* 19, obituaries, 1989 *Ed.*), to take over the fledgling Natal Parks Board. This he did in 1949, and the rest is history. Under his guidance the Board became one of the most famous of the world's nature conservation authorities, particularly for its role in saving the white rhino from extinction.

In 1963 he accepted a post with the International Council for Bird Preservation and moved with Mary to Morges in Switzerland, where he worked in international conservation for four years. During this time he was awarded the World Wildlife Fund Gold Medal, the Rolex Award for Enterprise, and the Order of the Golden Ark, from Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands.

He returned to rejoin the Natal Parks Board in 1967, before finally retiring in 1974, to live first in Howick and later again on Firlie. It was while there that he wrote an autobiography, *Web of Experience*, which was privately published.

On Mary's death in 1989, after 55 years of marriage, he moved to Pietermaritzburg where he lived with his son John until his death on 3rd July 1999, at the age of 95.

One final accolade for Colonel Vincent was the conferring of an honorary doctorate by the University of Natal in 1993, for his services to conservation in the province.

True to his spirit of determination and independence he continued to drive around town, and became a familiar sight in his little green 1950 model Ford Anglia. It was his own decision to part with it at the age of 93.

Throughout his life Jack Vincent earned the respect of all those with whom he worked and lived. He had a very simple philosophy of life, which was that there were no grey areas. Everything had its place. His axiom was always that if something he was about to do was morally right and justifiable, then he pressed on regardless. His achievements bear testimony to this, for they were not done for himself, but always in the interests of others. In this he showed he was a leader who had the ability to gain the confidence and love of his staff.

Jack Vincent is survived by his son John and daughter Thamar, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, and an elder brother Alfred, who lives in England.