

## *A Note on the Centenary of a Famous Natal School*

THERE are four schools whose names have become the proverbial household words in the comparatively short history of education in Natal. In anticipation of the criticism such a bold statement must inevitably incur, we hasten to add that there were and are several other schools, both for boys and for girls, which are remembered and are still well known for this particular reason or for that. The best known, however, whether justifiably or not, are undoubtedly, in order of seniority: Maritzburg College (originally The Pietermaritzburg High School); Durban High School; Hilton College; and Michaelhouse.

'College', as it is universally and affectionately called in Natal, was founded under Government Notice No. 30 of 1863. D.H.S.— or simply 'The School' to thousands of boys — was founded in 1866. Hilton College — plain Hilton-and-no-nonsense to all its boys and masters and friends — was founded in 1872. Michaelhouse began its life in Pietermaritzburg as Bishop's College in 1872.

*College*, a history of Maritzburg College written by R. W. Kent, was published to mark that school's centenary in 1963. *The D.H.S. Story*, by H. D. Jennings, was similarly published in 1966. *Michaelhouse*, by A. M. Barrett, appeared in 1969 when the school was seventy-three years old. Hilton was exactly a hundred years old in January 1972. The title of its centenary history is *Lift Up Your Hearts* — the words traditionally used in its grace after meals. A shorter history, *Hilton Portrait* by Professor A. F. Hattersley, was published in 1945.

Of these four, the two oldest are state-owned or government schools. Hilton and Michaelhouse are what are called public schools in England and private or independent schools in South Africa. Michaelhouse belongs to the Anglican Church. Hilton belongs to The Hiltonian Society whose members are former pupils or masters of the school.

Superficially the histories of all our notable boys' schools are very similar: the influence, the strength or the weakness, of this headmaster and that; a changing curriculum to meet changing times; old buildings giving place to new and better buildings; achievements in scholarship and games,— lists of Rhodes Scholars and of Springboks; the fortunes and misfortunes of war — a V.C. or two, and a Roll of Honour; prominent Old Boys distinguished in various fields of public service — and the Public Service; the main body of ordinary, comparatively insignificant, loyal members of the school community.

But each of these schools has also something peculiarly its own; its own personality developed by its own unique heredity and environment. 'It is', to quote from *Lift up Your Hearts*, 'a quality which leads a man to choose this school, or that, for his son and his grandson, forsaking all others, in sickness and in health, because he knows in his heart, though not necessarily in his judgment, that for him and his descendants this school is the best of all'.

Hilton is unique among the famous Natal schools we have mentioned in that it is the only one of the four that remains on the site of its foundation. When

William Orde Newnham established his Collegiate Institution on 29 January 1872 with fifty boys on the roll and £50 in his pocket, he opened such doors as he had in a farmhouse and some stables on 'Upper Hilton'. This was part of an original Voortrekker farm called 'Ongegund' which had been bought as a sort of hunting lodge, certainly unworked and undeveloped, by Newnham's friend Gould Arthur Lucas. Lucas was a survivor of the *Birkenhead* disaster, who had subsequently been appointed adjutant to the garrison in the fledgling town of Pietermaritzburg. Lucas leased his property to Newnham at a purely nominal rental, and the lease was taken over and the whole place eventually bought outright by Henry Vaughan Ellis, the second headmaster. So Hilton College still stands where it began, on the hilltop of a magnificent estate of over 3 000 acres overlooking the Umgeni river.

Hilton is also unique in its ownership. Committed to neither church nor state, it was originally the personal property of its first two headmasters. Then it was bought from Ellis by 140 of its prominent Old Boys, led by Ernest Acutt, mayor of Durban, who formed a limited liability company named Hilton College Ltd. On 31 March 1928 a 'Solemn Covenant of Dedication' was signed by a strong group of Old Hiltonians, led by Dr. Archibald McKenzie as chairman of the board, by which all the shares in Hilton College Ltd. were transferred to The Hiltonian Society. This was, and is, a non-profit-sharing association which assumed complete control of the school and 'the title to all its assets present and future'. The original shareholders in the company magnanimously made a gift of their shares to the Society.

Hilton College has had nine headmasters during its first hundred years, from W. O. Newnham to R. G. Slater who was appointed in 1967. One of them, G. E. Weeks, M.A., B.D., lasted for only a year before returning to parochial duties in the Church of England. Two, H. V. Ellis and William Falcon, between them controlled the school for fifty-four years of that hundred. One, E. L. Harison, died on duty after ten years' service. Another, J. W. Hudson, came to the magnificent rescue of the school in trouble after he had reached the departmental age of retirement as headmaster of Maritzburg College. Of the nine, seven have been Englishmen by birth. Only Ellis (who had no academic or paper-pedagogic qualifications whatever), Hudson, and Slater have not held Cambridge degrees. T. W. Mansergh, one of Hilton's 'great', qualified professionally as an engineer. J. A. Pateman, with a degree in Classics, was appointed after a distinguished military career in World War II. Slater is the second South African and the first non-Anglican to hold the post.

The régime of both Newnham and Ellis — until he ceded his crown to Hilton College Ltd. towards the end of his reign — was an absolute monarchy. The Headmaster not only controlled Hilton College: he owned it. Since then the monarchy has become constitutional, subject to the parliament of The Hiltonian Society and the cabinet of a Board of Governors; but a virtual monarchy it remains. Unlike his colleagues in government schools who are subject to and controlled by multitudinous departmental regulations, the headmaster of Hilton has great power in and over his school. He selects and, subject to the benevolent approval of his Board of Governors, appoints his staff without even minimal reference to a staffing clerk in a distant head office. Again, subject to the same benevolent approval, he admits, or rejects, applicants for admission to his school in terms of broad and Board policy and with a complete disregard for the mysteries of 'Zoning'. He carries a tremendous load of responsibility. The

magnitude of his task reminds one of Ian Hay's famous dictum that the man who can run a great public school can run an empire. Although there have been troubles too well known to be glossed over (if the glossing over of troubles were ever desirable), Hilton has been fortunate indeed in the men who have guided its development and inspired its achievement since 1872.

Immediately following the British military disaster at Isandhlwana in 1879, Hilton College was regarded as one of the look-out outposts in the probably necessary defence of Pietermaritzburg against hypothetical invading impis. Members of the Hilton College Guard, an armed and mounted cadet corps only seven years old, went out on patrol to the top of the Town Hill. The first name on the school's Roll of Honour is that of James Whitelaw, killed at Isandhlwana.

During the second South African — or Boer — War, several Hilton boys were called up to join their commandos in the Republican forces. It is on record that their contemporaries, keenly awaiting their own chances to join the British forces, gave these young burghers a very cordial send-off at the school gates and urged them to 'fight like hell', which, from the account of his experiences on commando sent to the school magazine by Thys Uys, they certainly did.

There have been some dramatic episodes in Hilton's history, and some tragedies as well as triumphs. Perhaps because triumphs are fairly commonplace, the former tend to loom larger than the latter.

What its greatest headmaster, William Falcon, described as a disaster hit Hilton late in 1920. This was an outbreak of enteric fever, a direct consequence of the primitive sanitary arrangements which had apparently escaped the attention of public health authorities for forty-eight years. Five boys died, and for three months the school, closed during the first term of 1921, became a hospital camp with a resident doctor and nurses in attendance. Hilton College faced its darkest hour. The devotion of its members and friends and the dedication of its Headmaster and Dr. McKenzie, Chairman of the Board of Governors, alone saved the school from extinction before its fiftieth birthday. But survive it did. At the Jubilee Celebrations in 1922 Falcon was able to say to the most representative gathering of Hiltonians the school had yet seen: 'It was as though Hilton had been purified in some way by the trial through which it had passed.'

A sad affair which brought the school unwelcome publicity in noisy headlines throughout the country was the so-called BRUSHING INCIDENT and its sequel in 1950: a minnow among the Tritons. As a result of his son having been hit by a prefect on the buttocks with the back of a hairbrush, an indignant father brought an action against the Hiltonian Society. The charge was dismissed in the magistrate's court, upheld on appeal in the Natal Supreme Court, and finally dismissed again on final appeal to the Supreme Court of South Africa some two years later. A Pyrrhic victory, if ever there was one. During the centenary celebrations at the school in 1972 THE BRUSH itself was once again on display as 'Exhibit Number One' — a rather moth-eaten relic of

... old, unhappy, far-off things,  
and battles long ago.

Most damaging of all, perhaps, in the eyes of its enemies — and what venerable foundation has no enemies? — was Hilton's notorious 'Walk Out' in 1953, when some 200 boys staged a mutiny by blatantly defying authority and spending a very cold August night in the plantations beyond the school gates. Critics of Hilton College, and other schools like it, had the time of their lives.

But, as a famous headmaster at another place has aptly remarked, a great school can stand criticism equally with praise.

The criticism has probably had more than a reasonable share of attention outside the school because it is more dramatically 'news' than the steady progress and quiet achievements of a century. Like its contemporaries, Hilton can justly claim much that is worthy of praise. But little good purpose would be served by listing such achievements as academic distinctions and sports-field triumphs reckoned statistically by the number of names on its honours boards. All good schools can do that. Hilton has had its fair share of notable Old Boys in parliament and provincial council,\* with an exceptionally high proportion, perhaps, on the judiciary; it has probably more Springbok cricketers to its credit than most other South African schools. On the other hand, in contrast to the more sophisticated city schools, Hilton from its rural environment has as yet produced no significant figure in the world of literature or art. Unlike D.H.S., it has suckled no Roy Campbell or Fernando Pessoa. Unlike Maritzburg College, it can claim no Alan Paton.

But essentially its virtues, outweighing its more spectacular vices of the past, are to be seen in its quietly strong identification with the growth and development of the Colony of Natal towards its adult status as an integral part of the Republic of South Africa; in the fact that it has provided and continues to provide its quota of decently — dare we say liberally? — educated citizens to the country of its birth one hundred years ago.

Natal's debt to all its schools is obviously very great; not least to what it is irresistibly tempting to describe as its Big Four.

In 1867 the man who founded Hilton College five years later unsuccessfully applied for the vacant headmastership of the (then) Pietermaritzburg High School.

There is a very beautiful stained-glass window in the Hiltonian College chapel which was donated by Michaelhouse. There is a Hilton window in the Michaelhouse chapel.

All three of its friendly rivals presented gifts to Hilton on the occasion of its centenary.

The inter-relationship between Hilton and other schools performing a similar function in Natal and beyond the provincial borders could hardly be more neatly illustrated than it is in the fact that Hilton's present Headmaster, its Second Master (who would be called the Vice-Principal elsewhere), two of its Housemasters, and even the author of its centenary History — all matriculated at D.H.S.

NEVILLE NUTTALL

\* Newnham himself accepted nomination to the Legislative Council in 1875, 'to set a conservative example', at the invitation of Sir Garnet Wolseley. He used to walk the twelve miles from Hilton and back, to attend its 'often tedious sessions'.