

A brief account of
The J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial
Trust in Natal 1949–2000

This account was written in June 2000, consulting the minute books and other records of the Trust, which are now kept in the Alan Paton Centre at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. Thirty copies of the booklet were printed.

Who was Jan Hofmeyr?

When Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr died in 1948 at the relatively young age of 54, South Africa lost a very exceptional man. His academic career was breathtaking – a BA from the University of Cape Town at the age of 15, followed by a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford; he was a professor of Classics at 22 and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand at 26!

Then came his entry into public administration and politics. The Prime Minister, General Smuts, appointed Hofmeyr, then aged 29, Administrator of the Transvaal, one of the four provinces of the Union of South Africa. Later he was elected to Parliament, and was appointed Minister of Finance and Minister of Education during World War II, and eventually became Smuts's Deputy Prime Minister.

All the details of Hofmeyr's life, thought and work can be read in the great biography *Hofmeyr*, written in 1964 by his friend, the famous writer and liberal politician Alan Paton. What emerges very clearly is that during his political career Hofmeyr became convinced that prevailing South African racial attitudes and policies could not be reconciled with either his Christian principles or his understanding of liberal democracy. In his time, J.H. Hofmeyr was one of the few white politicians in South Africa prepared to question the status quo and point the way to political and social change.

He died in 1948 – the very year that General Smuts's United Party, in which Hofmeyr had worked, without much success, for liberal change, was defeated by the Afrikaner Nationalists of Dr D.F. Malan. South Africa would have to endure almost 50 years of enforced racial separation and repression – apartheid. Hofmeyr was dead, and in the years of Nationalist rule that followed, those who stood for liberal ideas and policies became the enemies of the apartheid government. They were insulted, denounced, persecuted and banned.

In memory of Jan Hofmeyr

After his death, many people who had been Hofmeyr's friends or who had accepted his leadership of the liberal movement in South Africa felt that his name and his ideals should be remembered in some special way. It was decided to set up a J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Fund, with branches in each of the provinces.

On 10th September 1940, ten months after his death, eight people met together in Pietermaritzburg to form the Natal branch of the Fund. They were Mr C.J. Armitage, Mr C.K. Bolton, Senator E.H. Brookes, Professor G.H. Durrant, Lt-Col B.W. Martin, Professor O.J.P. Oxley, Mr R.F. Sansbury and Dr L.M. Young. Four other people – Messrs I. Allen, K. Kirkwood, R. Hughes Mason and B. Notcutt – though not present, had obviously indicated their interest. These twelve constituted themselves into the Natal Committee of the Jan Hofmeyr Memorial Fund, electing as their chairman The Hon. Edgar Brookes, an academic liberal thinker, friend of Hofmeyr's, and at the time a Senator in the South African Parliament representing the interests of African people.¹

The names of various other possible members were listed, and they would be approached. By the second meeting later in the same month, a further twelve had agreed to serve on the Committee: Dr W.J. O'Brien, Messrs Alan Paton, R.O. Pearse, G.C. Scully, T.O. Williams, S.R. Dent, H. Jones, E.V. Evans, Revd W.R.P. Evans, Mr D. Mtimkulu, Dr L. Steenkamp and Mr C.M. Booysen.

At the third meeting, on the last day of September 1949, it was noted that three prominent Natal churchmen were willing to become patrons of the Fund: Rt Revd L.N. Fisher, Anglican Bishop of Natal; Rt Revd D.E. Hurley, Roman Catholic Vicar Apostolic of Natal; and Revd H.T. Young, Chairman of the Natal District of the Methodist Church of South Africa.

Various people and organisations were approached to donate money to the Fund, and when a reasonable capital sum had been raised it was decided to award a number of bursaries each year, for university studies. Later, there was a proposal to run an annual essay competition for schools, but the Natal Director of Education considered that there were enough essay competitions, and that teachers would not welcome yet another. He suggested, instead, an annual high schools' public speaking competition, and this was accepted by the committee. His other suggestion, also accepted, was that instead of conventional silver cups as floating trophies, the committee should purchase paintings by South African artists, to be displayed in places of honour at the winners' schools. The first Jan Hofmeyr Memorial Speech Contest was held in August 1951.

From the outset, at each round of the Contest, and at every venue, the chairperson or a guest speaker was required to address the audience briefly about Jan Hofmeyr's life, work and ideals. And among the 'prepared speech' topics from which speakers could choose there was always one relating to Hofmeyr himself, requiring knowledge of those ideals, and their application in present circumstances.

For the next 45 years the J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Bursaries and the annual Speech Contest would be a part of the Natal educational scene. Hundreds of young people would be helped to finance their studies, or be encouraged to think and speak publicly about important social and political issues. In this way the memory of Jan Hofmeyr would be kept alive.

Only in Natal

Although it was hoped to form branches of the Memorial Fund in all the provinces, only in Natal did that happen. and the ‘Natal branch’ became (as far as we know) the only J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Trust in the country. (Until 1967 its minutes and other correspondence are headed ‘The J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Fund’, but from 1968 it became known as ‘The J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Trust’.)

After its unsuccessful attempts to set up other viable branches, the central committee seems to have disbanded in 1956 and an amount of £428 from its funds was transferred to the Natal committee. In 1957 the Natal committee donated £100 to the Jan Hofmeyr Library at the South African Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg.

A very educational flavour

In looking through the records of the Trust, one notices that most of the people involved were in education, either at schools or the university. Professors, officials in the Natal Education Department, school principals and teachers were in the majority among the office-bearers, probably because Hofmeyr himself had been an academic, minister of education, and an active member of the Students’ Christian Association, many of whose members became teachers.

The Speech Contest itself simply could not have taken place without the enthusiastic assistance of very many teachers in the schools. Its organiser was either a teacher or an education department official, and for years the Natal Education Department took care of the printing and distribution of notices, and other secretarial work connected with the Speech Contest, at no cost to the Trust. But it was the scores of teachers in the schools who sustained the Contest year after year, by encouraging pupils to enter, selecting the candidates to represent their schools, and volunteering to act as organisers, chairpersons or adjudicators at the preliminary, semi-final and final rounds.

Separation and integration

The Speech Contest began at a time when the Natal Education Department controlled school education for all races in the province; but it ran the schools for Whites, Africans, Indians and Coloureds in separate sub-divisions. Even before the word apartheid was known, there was segregation in education, often justified on the grounds that competition in an integrated system would be unfair to those (meaning chiefly the Africans) who were at the greatest disadvantage in ‘official-language competence’ and socio-economic development.

The unfortunate result of this separation was that the Speech Contest had to be run in two parts, the so-called ‘European’ and ‘Non-European’ contests. This arrangement became less and less acceptable to the Trust, and despite increased educational separatism during the apartheid years, the Hofmeyr Speech Contest became integrated, with all pupils able to enter the same contest.

The Speech Contest had always welcomed Afrikaans-speaking contestants, and had a number of Afrikaans or superbly bilingual speakers among the winners over the years. But the ethos of the contest and the ideals it sought to uphold were clearly not acceptable to many in the Afrikaans community, and in Natal the E.G. Jansen Redenaarswedstryd was established, to provide a purely Afrikaans speech competition for high schools.

Nevertheless, the Hofmeyr Speech Contest continued to be well supported by the parallel medium high schools in country towns.

The Speech Contest had become integrated but there was concern about the almost total lack of participation by African schools. Various remedies for this were explored, but without much success. African schools – and the attitudes of African teachers and pupils – had been profoundly damaged by the government’s policies, and it was perhaps unduly optimistic to think that the Hofmeyr Speech Contest could do much to change them.

The paintings

In 1952, with £100 donated by Alan Paton, two paintings were bought, to become floating trophies for the two sections of the Hofmeyr Speech Contest. Amazing as it seems now, that sum was enough for the Trust to acquire a landscape by Pierneef and a still life by Preller. A further £5 was spent on engraved silver plates to be affixed to the frames, and these two art works were ready to be handed over to each year’s winners, to be displayed at their schools until the following year.

In 1958 it was reported that one of the paintings had been returned in a dirty state, as though it had been splashed with mud. It had to be taken to an art dealer for expert cleaning. In 1960 the committee realised that the paintings were not insured, and this was attended to, but for an amount which later proved to be quite unrealistic. Over the years there was some concern that they were not being properly cared for by the schools. Sometimes they were hung in the principal’s office, but as often as not they spent the year in more vulnerable places like the wall of a foyer, passageway or school hall.

In 1988 the committee suspected that the value of its floating trophies had appreciated enormously in 35 years, and that the insurance cover would have to be increased. An art dealer was consulted, and what he told them was quite astounding. The Pierneef was now worth R27 000 and the Preller R12 500. An all-risks policy on these values would cost about R200 a year, and special travelling cases would have to be made to reduce the risk of damage in transit.

To spend this amount every year would reduce what was available for running the speech contest and awarding bursaries, and the Trust, with the concurrence of the original donor Alan Paton (shortly before his death, as it turned out) sold the two paintings to Pietermaritzburg’s Tatham Gallery, where they would be properly cared for and exhibited. There they can be seen, still with the silver plaques on the frames, preserving the Hofmeyr connection.

The sale brought almost R40 000 into the Trust’s funds, which enabled it to increase the amount allocated to bursaries each year, and to increase the value of the individual book prizes for the Speech Contest winners.

Two prints of landscapes by the South African artists Richard Rennie and Christopher Haw were bought and framed, and these became the new floating trophies. The framing actually cost more than the prints themselves!

The bursary awards

For some years after the Trust was founded, its members were personally involved each year in advertising the bursaries, interviewing applicants, deciding who the recipients

would be and receiving reports on their progress at university. Later this became too much to be done part-time by committee members, and for a number of years the South African Institute of Race Relations acted as the Trust's agent in awarding and administering the bursaries. The Institute had experience in this field, and had the staff and expertise to select suitable candidates for the Hofmeyr Memorial bursaries. The Trust continued to receive reports on the progress of those it was assisting, and in the files there are many letters from appreciative students.

In more recent years the same function was performed by a voluntary worker in Pietermaritzburg who acted as agent for a number of bursary-awarding bodies, including the J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Trust.

Consolidation of committees

When members of the main Trust committee retired or died, it became difficult to recruit new members. For this reason, in 1976 the following resolution was adopted: 'That the distinction between the School Committee [which ran the Speech Contest] and the Main Committee should fall away, and that all those serving on both committees should form one committee – the J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Trust Committee.' From then on both aspects of the Trust's work – the allocation of money for bursaries and the organising of the Speech Contest – were the responsibility of one committee.

Changing circumstances

The establishment of a democratic order in South Africa in 1994 meant the realisation of most of Hofmeyr's liberal ideals. In education, the previously separate 'racial' departments were unified, though to undo the effects of 40 years of unequal provision and increasing divergence would be the task of many years.

In the past the Speech Contest had relied on the goodwill of the different education departments in the province to support (or at least not forbid) the Contest in their schools. The number of participating schools had increased over the years, and the logistics of organising an increasing number of preliminary and semi-final rounds, with suitable venues and dependable chairpersons and adjudicators for each, was becoming a formidable task. Although the reluctance of African schools to enter candidates was regrettable, their absence did mean that it was still possible for two volunteers to organise the contest, which was drawing entries from White, Indian and Coloured schools.

It was obvious that in the new united education department, all high schools would have to be given equal encouragement and opportunity to participate. The previous reluctance of the African schools would probably disappear. Under the new dispensation there was the very real possibility of now having to accommodate not scores but hundreds of speakers in the preliminary rounds. The committee had to take urgent stock of the situation.

Appeals for more teachers to volunteer for organisational and administrative roles had been unsuccessful. Could the Trust afford to employ someone as a full-time organiser of the Speech Contest, possibly for six months each year? The answer was clear: to do that would eat into the limited capital and the Trust would be bankrupt in a very short time.

A possible alternative was to persuade the new unified KwaZulu-Natal Education Department to take over the running of the contest. This possibility was not pursued for

two reasons. Firstly, it seemed unlikely that the department would be willing or able to do so as it had other far more pressing priorities; and secondly, the committee was not in favour of handing over control of the Hofmeyr Speech Contest, with no guarantee that its ethos and purpose would be retained.

It was therefore resolved to discontinue the Speech Contest. The step was taken with great regret by the members of the Trust, and the news was received with similar regret in many schools for whom competing in and often hosting ‘the Hofmeyr’ was an important event in their annual programme. The last Hofmeyr Speech Contest was held in 1995.

The end of the Trust

In the following few years, for reasons not fully understood – but partly related to changed circumstances in South African universities – applications for bursaries, both to the Trust and to other bursary-awarding bodies, decreased considerably. At the end of 1999 the Trust was again faced with uncertainty about its role and capabilities. It was decided to dissolve and dispose of the funds in donations of approximately R12 000 to each of four deserving institutions² whose ethos and endeavours could readily be associated with Hofmeyr’s ideals. The donations were conditional upon the money’s being used for durable and educationally valuable things, specifically linked with Hofmeyr’s name as further memorials to him. The procedure was concluded and the donations were made in June 2000.

From the 1950s until the late 1980s, the liberal and democratic ideals now enshrined in the South African Constitution of 1996 seemed almost unattainable. It was important, however, in the stifling atmosphere of the dominant ideology, to hold them up before the younger generations as sources of freshness, inspiration and hope. In this task the J.H. Hofmeyr Memorial Trust played a valuable role. It reached out and touched many thousands of young South Africans, as recipients of its bursaries and as participants and audiences at its speech contests.

When good and powerful ideas are sown, as with bread cast upon the waters, the results are neither predictable nor measurable, but there is every reason to believe that they are real and significant.

NOTES

1. Details of those early meetings, and indeed of all subsequent meetings during fifty years, can be found in the minute books, of the Trust, in the Alan Paton Centre at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
2. Kings School, Nottingham Road; St Nicholas Diocesan School, Pietermaritzburg; The Brookby Learning Centre, Pietermaritzburg; the Alan Paton Centre, University of Natal.

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