

Ruth Edgecombe (1944–2001)

Dorothy Ruth Edgecombe was schooled in Port Elizabeth and graduated at Rhodes University and Cambridge, where she completed her doctorate. She was temporarily employed on the Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses of the University of Natal and worked at UNISA in Pretoria before returning to Pietermaritzburg in 1979. Thereafter she rose in the academic ranks from lecturer, through senior lecturer and associate professor to full professor.

But, of course, there was much more to Ruth than a bald list of biographical information, or a conventionally polite eulogy, might suggest. She detested sanitised obituaries which reduce the dear departed to cardboard cutout figures in a nativity scene. On three occasions during the last year of her life she pointed out examples which pussyfooted around delicate issues, and once vigorously expressed the hope that she would not be subjected to such treatment. It is often said that one should never speak ill of the dead, but if that were strictly adhered to, we

historians would be even more out of a job than we are already. In deference to her own wishes it needs to be said that Ruth trod on many toes (including some very senior extremities), often inadvertently but sometimes quite deliberately; she had more than her fair share of disagreements, on and off campus, and she could be overtly possessive of shared research projects, shared teaching modules, and promising shared students. She crusaded passionately for a succession of worthy causes with a resolve that tolerated no opposition: women's rights, human rights, animal rights, the significance of the potato and of coal in human history, environmental history and environmental conservation. As colleagues and students will attest, it was easy to slide quickly out of the ice-cream category on Ruth's scale of approval down to depths unmentionable.



Ruth Edgecombe

But redemption, even rapid redemption, was also possible, and it was always clear to those perceived as Philistines in the path of one or other of her causes that her disapproval was motivated by a deep sense of conviction and total commitment. She often put those around her under stress, but never more than she did herself – perhaps, with the historian’s benefit of hindsight, to the detriment of her health. If neutrality is a vice, Ruth was never guilty of it. Her opinions, like her informal tree-loving, animal-loving lifestyle, were firm and unambiguous. The round trip between her front gate and the odd lounge chair without a canine or feline occupant must have been quite an ordeal for the very occasional non-animal lover who visited the caring home which she and Nicole shared. Her passion for cricket was developed at an early age, honing her playing skills with and against her brothers. At junior school she resented the fact that there was no girls’ team so organised one herself which, after several unsuccessful challenges, defeated the standard five boys on the very last day of term! When Mark Andrews, then a member of her Economic History class, was selected for the national rugby team, she extended her sporting interests to that code and participated in many corridor post-mortems on match performances.

As an academic and a teacher Ruth was aptly named if, as I understand it, the Biblical Ruth personifies faithfulness and devotion to duty. Her publication output was not highly prolific by comparison with some, but it was extremely thorough and conscientious. She and I co-authored several articles on aspects of the Natal coal industry, but her major literary contributions were the edited version of J.W. Colenso’s *Bringing Forth Light* (Killie Campbell Africana Reprint Series and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1982) and *The Constancy of Change – A History of Hlobane Colliery 1898–1998* (The Vryheid, Natal, Railway Coal and Iron Company, Vryheid, 1998).

She was inspired by the teaching of the late Winnie Maxwell, professor of History at Rhodes, where she was a senior student and I a junior lecturer in the mid 1960s. Professor Maxwell was at pains to emphasise the importance of teaching rather than mere lecturing. In that mould, Ruth was herself an inspiring, innovative and dedicated teacher. Highly intelligent, she was tolerant of those who were not, but not of idleness, and she had a ready sense of humour, especially if the joke was at her expense – surely the noblest form of humour. Ruth was willing to go to any lengths for students who were serious about their studies and it was appropriate that, during her term as assistant dean of the faculty, she took special responsibility for undergraduate students. Taxi fares, lunch money, and even an occasional supply of groceries to facilitate the completion of a thesis were all a reflection of her deep personal commitment to those in her academic care.

In the last few weeks of her life, though her strength was ebbing, she was heavily involved in the planning of a new teaching module, ‘Africa in the World’, which is to form part of a year-long Human Science Access Programme for promising disadvantaged students who do not qualify for automatic admission into a degree course. It was her most worthy cause and, in some respects, is a memorial to her dedication as a teacher. The Pietermaritzburg campus, and the broader world of scholarship, will be less vibrant and less caring without Ruth Edgecombe.

BILL GUEST

Note: I am indebted to C. Richardson, D. Proctor and J. Parle for items of information.