

Obituaries

Ruth Gordon (1910–2002)

Ruth Gordon (*nee* Ralls) (91) who died in Kendal in the English Lake District after a brief illness, was well known in Pietermaritzburg as an historian, author, lecturer and populariser of history and as a pillar of amateur music-making.

Indeed, so closely was Gordon associated with Pietermaritzburg until she left in 1998 to join her daughters in England and so authoritative was she on its history that it comes as a mild shock to realise that she was born in East London of 1820 Settler stock and spent her infant years in Durban and a considerable portion of her childhood in various small Free State dorps. It was only in her student days at Natal Training College and the then Natal University College that she first became a permanent resident of the city.

Overseas study – she won the A.B. Webb scholarship – took her to London, her first teaching post to Vryheid and marriage to Ixopo and later Durban before, with her family life disrupted by divorce, she returned to Pietermaritzburg. After two years teaching at what was then known as the Oribi Government School she was appointed to Girls' High School where she ran the history department for 10 years. Promotion to a lectureship and later head of department at Natal Training College followed, from where she very reluctantly departed in 1975 only because of reaching the mandatory age of retirement. Twelve years later, in her 77th year, she cheerfully returned to do a locum for a term to allow her successor to take long leave. And the loss of a formal lecturing post did not prevent her continuing to deliver numerous talks on a wide variety of historical subjects, often related to her travels, to many different organisations, notably the Minerva Club.

While at Training College, Gordon completed her doctorate in 1966 with a thesis



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on the Shepstone family, later published as *Shepstone*, the first of her many books. Research on the Byrne settlers and the discovery of unpublished letters by one Ellen McLeod resulted in the publication of *Dear Louisa* which proved so popular that it had to be reprinted several times. Other books included *From Dias to Vorster*, a source book of South African history (produced in collaboration with Clive Talbot), *Honour without Riches*, a narrative based on the letters and diaries of the Archibald family of Umzinto, *The Place of the Elephant*, a history of Pietermaritzburg and *Natal's Royal Show*, a history of the 125-year history of the Royal Agricultural Society. She also wrote her autobiography, *Alive, Alive-O*.

In 1968 Gordon started a recorder group in her home in Deanery Lane which met regularly for the next 30 years until she left the city. It came to include flute, violins and pianos. Gordon taught herself the flute and in her eighties donned military uniform to become an improbable member of the Carbineers' Band. In her last three years in England she continued a similar pattern of life, setting up musical groups and giving lectures and teaching English to immigrants.

Gordon was able to achieve as much as she did because of her highly organised and disciplined lifestyle. Teachers were required to keep a 'daily forecast' indicating what work they intended to cover with each class in each period of the day. In retirement Gordon maintained this practice, dividing each day into half-hour periods and indicating what she intended to achieve in each. She maintained this organisation and control to the very end of her life, finally telling her caregivers when to switch off the oxygen!

Dr Sylvia Vietzen, former head of Pietermaritzburg Girls' High School, said of Gordon: 'She had a great gift for inspiring enthusiasm. Whether teaching history to the young or recorder-playing to the elderly, or as a travel companion or as a friend, she left one feeling enriched and energised. Her contribution to a love of local and popular history among the general reading public was incalculable.'

Gordon leaves her two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, and several grandchildren.

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