

## *Sighart St I de B Bourquin (1914–2004)*

‘SB’ Bourquin (as his friends and associates knew him) was born in Cathcart in the Eastern Cape in 1915, where his father was a missionary. He was sent to Maritzburg College where he became fascinated by Zulu history, culture and traditions and used to spend hours in the library studying the subject. Thereafter he attended Stellenbosch University where he attained a BSc degree. He learnt how to speak Zulu, which stood him in good stead when he joined the Durban Corporation’s so-called Native Affairs Department in 1950. The Nationalist Government changed the name to Bantu Affairs in 1954.

*SB Bourquin*



During his tenure, he attended the funeral of Prince Mshiyeni, son of King Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, and he and three other officials were asked at the last moment to act as pallbearers – the first white people to have participated in the funeral of Zulu royalty. SB's friendship with the Zulu royal house continued from King Nyangayezizwe Cyprian Bhekuzulu kaSolomon to the present king, HM King Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu. He was also a personal friend of Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

SB retired in 1974 from what subsequently became the Port Natal Bantu Affairs Administration Board. During his tenure in this organisation, the authority of which stretched from the Transkei to the Mozambique border, and inland for 50 kilometres, SB had to implement the removal of the shack settlements in Cato Manor, and the townships of KwaMashu and Umlazi were built under his direction. His collection of photographs and documents of this era form an integral part of the KwaMuhle Museum, now situated in what used to be his offices in Ordnance Road, Durban. SB was highly critical of the Nationalists' rigid apartheid policy and told me: 'I made it my policy to use discretion in applying legislation in the most humane, sensible and lenient way possible.'

He will, however, be best remembered for his vast knowledge of the military, social and cultural history of KwaZulu-Natal. His fluency in Zulu resulted in his being highly respected, and he became known to the Zulu people as 'Makhanda-khanda'. ('The man with many heads' or 'the man who thinks with many heads'. If asked something that he could not answer immediately, he would consult his comprehensive library, return with the answer and it would be said that he '...goes away and thinks with another head'.) His admiration for the Zulu people resulted in his being invited to many tribal functions and ceremonies.

It was a unique treat to have been able to accompany SB to some of the most remote areas of KwaZulu-Natal to undertake research or simply to visit an historical site. On one such occasion, a group of four members of the Durban branch of the South African Military History Society joined him on a journey to the grave of King Cetshwayo kaMpande near the Mome Gorge, on the fringe of the Nkandla Forest. Ironically, we were all required to have the permission of the then Commissioner for Bantu Affairs – including SB! It involved a long walk through mountainous country and when we eventually arrived at the sacred grove housing the King's grave, we were informed that we would be required to obtain the permission of the custodian first. This entailed another mountainous climb, and we were met at an *umuzi* (homestead) by the custodian, the late Mr Hambayedwa Shezi. Shezi inquired who we were and refused point blank to allow us to enter the area of the grave until SB could prove our *bona fides*. 'And who are you?', he asked him. When SB identified himself, Hambayedwa refused to believe him, saying that it was incomprehensible that the legendary 'Bourquini' would have taken the trouble to journey to such a remote place to *hlonipha* (pay respects to) the late king.

Nonetheless, we were escorted to the grave, after which Hambayedwa insisted that we return to his *umuzi* to partake in some traditional Zulu hospitality. SB, in turn, invited him to visit him at his office, which this grand old Zulu duly did a week later to satisfy himself, accompanied by a retinue of followers. He happened to be the inkosi of the influential Shezi people, and a direct descendant of the legendary Sigananda Cube.

Frequent visits by Zulu friends were made to the Bourquin's homes in Overport and Westville – something that was frowned upon by Pretoria.

SB's military career included a spell in the Natal Field Artillery, Durban North Commando (holding the rank of commandant – now lieutenant colonel) and he became second-in-command of Group 10.

SB was a founder member of the South African Military History Society and helped to establish the Durban (now the KwaZulu-Natal) branch, serving as chairman for many years. Under his guidance, it grew from an informal discussion group of a handful of members to a highly regarded and internationally respected organisation. He was also a member of the South African National Society, the Gunners' Association, the KwaZulu-Natal Heritage Foundation and many other cultural bodies. When asked for advice on military history matters, the Department of Foreign Affairs referred the inquirer to SB.

One of these was the late Donald R Morris, whose epic book, *The Washing of the Spears*, was the first comprehensive history on the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Morris wrote, in his foreword: 'Several debts are even greater. Mr Sighart Bourquin, Director of Bantu Administration in Durban, is an outstanding authority on Zulu history. Time and again he was able to track down information for me or to correct a point. His collection of photographic material on Zulu history is unparalleled.' Fortunately for KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa, this material has been lodged with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Campbell Collections for the benefit of future generations.

Similar acknowledgements, often repeated in dozens of definitive works on the history of KwaZulu-Natal, will be a lasting memorial to this great historian.

SB was married to Hilda, and had three children, Randolph, Desire and Harald.

KEN GILLINGS

*\* This obituary was first published in the Military History Journal of December, 2004 and is reproduced with permission.*