

George Deneys Lyndall Schreiner (1923–2008)

Professor Deneys Schreiner was a pivotal figure on the Pietermaritzburg campus of what was then the University of Natal from 1959 to 1987. He was a scientist of note, but he played many other significant roles, both within the University and beyond it.

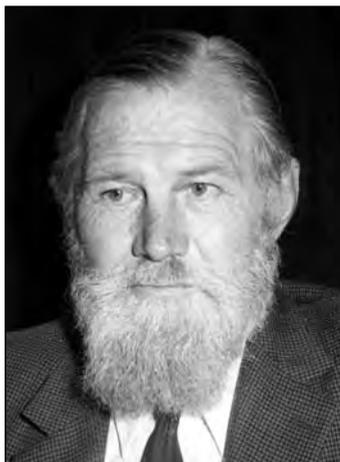
He was born in Johannesburg in 1923. His father was Oliver Schreiner, who became Chief Justice and challenged the Nationalist government on its discriminatory legislation. His grandfather was W.P. Schreiner, who had been Prime Minister of the Cape until he was forced out of office because of his disapproval of the war-mongering that led to the Anglo-Boer War and who later came to Pietermaritzburg to defend Chief Dinuzulu when he was charged with treason after the 1906 uprising. W.P. Schreiner's sister, Deneys's great-aunt, was Olive Schreiner, the distinguished author of *The Story of an African Farm* who was also an early feminist and a campaigner for justice. Schreiner grew up, then, with a strong inherited sense of social responsibility.

Shortly after he had completed his schooling at St John's College at the end of 1939, he joined the South African army, and served as a lance-bombardier in North Africa and Italy. In 1945 he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he attained a PhD in 1951. (He played for the University at rugby and for his College at cricket.) After 18 months as a Visiting Associate Professor at Pennsylvania State College, he was appointed as Senior Research Officer in the Nuffield Geochronological Unit at the Bernard Price Institute of Geophysical Research at the University of the Witwatersrand. He came to the Pietermaritzburg centre of the University of Natal as Professor of Inorganic and Analytical Chemistry in August 1959.

Much of his published research concentrated on the dating and chemical properties of igneous rocks, particularly granite. In the early days as a researcher at the University he had to make his own equipment, including a mass spectrometer. He published important papers in *Nature* and the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*. He was a member of the Royal Society of South Africa and also actively involved in the South African Association for the Advancement of Science. He was concerned about the teaching of science and was a founder of PINSSA, the Pietermaritzburg and Inland Schools' Science Association.

Deneys Schreiner's talents, interests and background pushed him beyond the important world of analytical chemical research and science teaching. He had a flair for administration and for taking the wider view. He became Deputy Dean and then Dean of the Faculty of Science and under his influence a number of significant innovations took place within the faculty. At the same time he was making an impact in a range of university committees.

He also thought deeply about society and its institutions, especially, of course, the university. He was concerned about justice, academic freedom and integrity, and social



Deneys Schreiner

and educational development. At a time when South Africa was being more and more tightly constrained by the government's apartheid policies, he was one of the fairly few academics who clearly saw the need to think against and beyond the pressures being exerted by the state. In a variety of ways he became a humanising influence in the university.

In 1975 he was appointed Vice-Principal in charge of the Pietermaritzburg campus, a post that he held until his retirement in 1987. In this capacity he had overall responsibility for much of what happened on the campus, as well as continuing to be influential within the University as a whole. He took an active interest in every aspect of life on the campus, encouraging innovations, often himself proposing different ways of doing things, and exerting his authority, when necessary, in a gentle way. One of his initiatives was the reduction of the length of a lecture on the university timetable from one hour to 45 minutes: this was done in order to allow students a greater range of subject choices.

Those were memorable years: they were the years in which, among many other things, the University of Natal was launched—was allowed to be launched—on to the non-racial path that it has of course followed ever since. Schreiner's role in the transition, and in hastening the transition, was a very significant one.

His dislike of privilege or discrimination was always admirable but at times almost quirky. For example, he disapproved of reserved parking bays and therefore at times had to walk some way to get from his car to his office.

He was also a lively influence in more relaxed circumstances. He played a role in matters as diverse as debating, drama and sport. And both members of staff and students enjoyed from time to time the hospitality of the Schreiner home, 'Highwood', at 14 Wendover Road. Professor Terry King, for example, who was grateful for Schreiner's continual support and encouragement for him when he was head of the Fine Arts Department, spoke of 'wonderful evenings at the house—witty and interesting and entertaining discussions surrounded by sculpture and other works reflecting the vibrancy of artmaking in this region.' In a letter published in *The Witness* ex-students Peter and Hilde Colenbrander, writing from Vancouver, recalled Sunday evening suppers: 'They were wonderfully relaxed and lively affairs, with much laughter, a great deal of vigorous discussion and a lot of good fellowship.' Another ex-student who paid a tribute to Schreiner was Blade Nzimande, the secretary-general of the South African Communist Party. 'I feel a sense of deep personal loss,' he wrote, 'as he was my principal when I joined the then UNP at the tender age of 20. To many of us, young black students from impoverished townships and educational backgrounds, he was like a father figure because of his passionate commitment to the transformation of the then "white" universities, his hard work to make us feel accepted at those campuses, and his total commitment to the abolition of racism and apartheid.' Nzimande also spoke of 'his incredible sense of humour, even in the face of adversity'. Those tributes are representative of many others that were received.

In Schreiner there was a fascinating combination of dignity and relaxedness, of what sometimes seemed a detached formality with great warmth and generosity of feeling. He was indeed, as many noted, full of humour: he could pull one's leg with a very straight face, and loved to play the devil's advocate, often deliberately confusing the person he was addressing, who was quite unprepared for arguments of this sort. This was a

kind of game, but it wasn't only that. He really did believe that everything should be questioned and tested, and taking the opposite view was a way of energising his own mind and challenging the person he was speaking to.

He was certainly a central figure on the campus. He and his thinking stood out firmly and visibly; there was something permanent and reassuring about him, as Blade Nzimande suggested. In fact he was, in his own very special way, an icon.

With his deep-set and alert eyes, his large beard, his often solemn (but also sometimes mock-solemn) face, he was, in his quiet and unassuming way, a figure who generated a certain awe. A cross between some of the old-fashioned depictions of God the Father and a well-known portrait of Charles Darwin, he was able to satisfy, or disturb, unbelievers and believers alike. But if he was a sort of god or a venerable hero-figure, he was an extremely friendly and kindly one.

In a farewell speech on his retirement from the University he was described as a person of 'sincerity, energy and dedication...man-in-charge, friend, arbiter, facilitator, innovator, catalyst.' In 1992 the Main Science Lecture Theatre on the campus was renamed the Deneys Schreiner Lecture Theatre.

But his interests and influence had from the first gone beyond the University, and he became a significant public figure. He was in the 1960s and '70s a leading figure in the local branch of the SA Institute of Race Relations. He participated in 1961 in the remarkable Natal Convention, which was a small and distant forerunner of CODESA which took place 30 years later. He chaired the funding committee of PADMRO (the Pietermaritzburg and District Malnutrition Relief Organisation). In 1978 he was instrumental in convening a Conference on 'Constitutional Models and Constitutional Change in South Africa'. This led to the publication of an important book and to his appointment, later, as chair of the Buthelezi Commission of 1980-1982 which looked at models of governance for Natal and KwaZulu.

In the years of his retirement he and his wife Else played the major role in the establishment of the Tembaletu Community Education Centre in Pietermaritzburg. Richard Rangiah, the executive director of the Tembaletu Trust, paid tribute to Schreiner: 'Nearly 20 years after [his] visionary idea of an educational park, Tembaletu has contributed to changing the lives of literally thousands of otherwise marginalised people across the province, sometimes in little ways and every so often in life-altering ways too.' He added: 'We shall all remember him strolling through the passageways of Tembaletu, popping into offices for a quick chat and joke with the staff.'

Schreiner had a wide range of talents. He was a skilled wood carver, for example. He and Else were very interested in the arts—music, theatre, painting, sculpture, ceramics. Their house is full of original local works of painting and sculpture. This has all been exhibited at the Tatham Gallery, and is due to end up there. One of the galleries at the Tatham is now named after the Schreiners. More broadly they have been patrons of the arts, and helped a number of black artists, particularly the late Vuminkosi Zulu and his family.

Schreiner married Else Kops in 1949. They had four children: Oliver (who died in 1978), Deneys, Jennifer and Barbara.

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