

James Mervyn (“Skonk”) Nicholson (1917–2011)

SKONK Nicholson died in Pietermaritzburg on 27 February 2011, three weeks after his 94th birthday. When people say a person was “a legend in his own lifetime” it is sometimes an exaggeration, but in relation to Skonk Nicholson it is appropriate and true. His career as a much-loved and respected schoolmaster brought him great success as a teacher of geography. With his friend and colleague Gordon Morton he was co-author of many excellent textbooks for primary and secondary schools. His contribution to the subject was later recognised by the award of the South African Geographical Society’s gold medal. He rose in his profession to become deputy headmaster of Maritzburg College. It is, however, as a uniquely successful school rugby coach that he is most widely recognised and remembered.

James Mervyn Nicholson was born on 6th February 1917, of Byrne Settler stock. He grew up on the family farm at Underberg, Natal, and always regarded himself as a “farm boy” at heart. Not surprisingly, he became a fluent Zulu linguist, and years later his encouragement of his rugby teams was spiced with colourful exhortations in that language. This fluency meant that his dealings with Zulu people were easy, and marked by mutual respect and understanding. On one occasion, teaching at Maritzburg College, he was trying unsuccessfully on a hot Friday afternoon to convey some basic knowledge about tropical cyclones to an unresponsive class. He finally dismissed them, disappointed at their apparent inability to grasp the essentials. When



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they had gone, he asked one of the school’s African employees to come into his classroom, and for a short while he gave the man, in Zulu, some key information about tropical cyclones, and asked him if he would be prepared to be questioned about it on Monday. During the Monday lesson, to the puzzlement of the class, the man was brought in, and gave confident and accurate answers to the questions that Skonk put to him. He was thanked, and left the classroom, whereupon Skonk turned despairingly to the class and said “You see, even he knows about tropical cyclones, and he hasn’t had the education you’ve had!”

From his home at Underberg, Skonk was sent to boarding school 150 km away in Durban. There, at Durban Preparatory High School (DPHS) and then at Durban High School (DHS) he distinguished himself in almost everything he did. Excelling at sport, in his matriculation year he captained not only the DHS 1st XI, 1st XV and Athletics Team, but also the Natal Schools’ XV,

and was head prefect and senior cadet officer. His sporting achievements and leadership roles clearly did not cause him to neglect his studies, and he went on to the Natal University College where he graduated BA Hons.

As quite a young boy he acquired the nickname he kept for the rest of his life. It was used by all who knew him, but as with so many nicknames, most did not know its origin and significance. His style of play on the rugby field caused the DPHS head boy, who was also a farm boy, to call him Skonkwaan (*isikhonkwane*) after a bull on his father's farm. It is the Zulu word for a stake or peg – something strong, firmly fixed, that can stand up to a hammering.

Skonk began teaching at DHS, but the Second World War broke out shortly afterwards, and he served in the South African army, rising to the rank of sergeant-major. When he was demobilised in 1944, the Natal Education Department appointed him to teach at Maritzburg College. His old school obviously wanted him to return to Durban, but he was needed in Pietermaritzburg and the Natal Education Department's staffing system enabled it simply to place him there. It seems that efforts in Durban to have him transferred back to DHS almost succeeded, but his remaining at Maritzburg College is attributed to its headmaster, the redoubtable J.W. Hudson, who was more than a match for the educational bureaucracy. Legend has it that when the department (possibly in the person of R.A. Banks himself, the Director of Education) told him that young Mr Nicholson was to be transferred to DHS, Hudson's reply was simply "I shall not let Nicholson go!" And so Nicholson stayed – for almost 40 years.

Skonk's close bonds with these two fine rival schools were a source of much pleasure to him, and no little amusement, especially when they met on the rugby or cricket field. His feelings of affection and loyalty towards "School" which had nurtured him and "College" to which he had dedicated his professional life were the same. One of his jokes was that anyone educated at DHS who joined the Maritzburg College staff (and over the years there were several) would obviously be a very valuable acquisition.

Although he became deputy headmaster of Maritzburg College, and acted very capably as head when the incumbent was on leave, or during an interregnum, he was denied the headship of the school that meant so much to him. This must have been a great disappointment to him, but it was not in his nature to show it or dwell on it. He gave total support and loyalty to the man who was given the post he himself had hoped for.

His mentorship was not confined to the boys in the school – many a young and inexperienced schoolmaster benefited from Skonk's advice, always given with kindness and diffidence. The most successful and happiest schoolmasters are often those who retain the liveliest pleasant memories of their own school-days. Even though his were in an era of inflexible and often unreasonable rules, and of severe corporal punishment, he mostly looked back on them with happy recollections. In his own teaching he maintained strict discipline, but did so with a kindness and humanity that some of his own schoolmasters seem to have lacked.

Though primarily a geographer, he had a keen interest in history, and es-

pecially the history of Natal. For some years he had the late John Clark (a former editor of *Natalia*) as a colleague on the Maritzburg College staff, and followed the latter's research into the Byrne emigration scheme with great interest and insight. In 1986 his nephew John Nicholson compiled and published a family tree and Skonk provided an introductory section entitled "History of the Nicholson Family of Underberg". When his father's Anglo-Boer War diaries were discovered after many years, he saw their historical value and arranged for them to be edited with a view to publication. (See *Natalia* 33 and 34)

His extraordinary success as a rugby coach is shown by the large number of his Maritzburg College 1st XV players who over the years went on to represent their province and their country. His knowledge of the game was such that he was sometimes co-opted to coach adult sides and individuals. During his 35 years in charge of Maritzburg College rugby, the school became, as one sports writer has said, "a vibrant ... nursery for South African rugby".

In 1941 Skonk married Dorothy Wilson, who identified herself wholeheartedly with his career and interests, and gave him every encouragement and support in all that he undertook, until her death in 2000. After his retirement in

1982 he continued to serve Maritzburg College in various capacities, and maintained his close ties with the Maritzburg College Old Boys' Association. He and his daughter Diana were for a number of years responsible for the school archives and museum. He was always in great demand to speak to gatherings of Old Boys, both during the annual Reunion Weekend in Pietermaritzburg and on other occasions and in other places all over South Africa. He enjoyed a rich family life, and was a devoted father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Hundreds of people attended his funeral service at Maritzburg College on 4th March 2011, an indication of how widely he was known and loved.

Apart from his achievements as a teacher and a rugby coach, Skonk Nicholson will also be remembered for his sense of humour, his extensive store of amusing anecdotes accumulated over a lifetime of teaching, his kindness, and his moral stature. Thousands of men, some of them now in their late seventies, are the better for having known him as a teacher, mentor, colleague, coach or friend.

Skonk Nicholson is survived by three daughters, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

JOHN DEANE