

A jubilee in a turbulent year

by Vertrees C. Malherbe

This was to have been lighthearted: “The University of Natal’s Golden Jubilee – a daughter-in-law remembers.” My father-in-law, Dr. E.G. Malherbe, was vice-chancellor of UN¹ at the time of its 50th anniversary, and I have the letters to my parents in which I describe a feast of entertainments and lectures. I soon discovered that such a way of telling is impossible. The year in question is 1960. The jubilee commemorated the founding in 1910 of Natal University College. The central event was the National Conference on Education which opened on 9th July and ended on the 21st. For those who attended it was indeed the celebration that “jubilee” denotes. Half a century has not erased its relevance. But events have a context and 1960 was a time of relentless and premonitory turbulence. However naively, the letters recall that experience also.

ON 24 January 1960, Durban was the site of a portent. In the previous year, residents of Cato Manor had vented their desperation over the police raids which came thick and fast to enforce the Beer Act of 1908. The result: loss of life, destruction of public and private property, and unassuaged anger which simmered near the surface. Months passed and the grievance was exacerbated by

forced removals, in the name of slum clearance, to KwaMashu. On a Sunday afternoon in January, the prolonged standoff erupted. Nine policemen lost their lives in Cato Manor. Then, on 21 March, the nation was rocked by the Sharpeville Massacre. It is believed that the seemingly trigger-happy actions of the police at Sharpeville, who killed 69 persons and wounded nearly 200, owed something to nervousness due to



E.G. and Janie Malherbe in 1972, seven years after he had retired as Principal, both looking very spry at the time of their Golden Wedding anniversary. The occasion was a dinner given in their honour at Malherbe Residence in Pietermaritzburg to celebrate the event.
(Photo: University Archives, Pietermaritzburg)

the police fatalities at Cato Manor just two months earlier. I wrote my parents:

As you probably know, a State of Emergency has been declared here. Not that you'd notice it in your daily comings and goings. A friend of Paul's who has been a leader in the Liberal Party was one of the three Europeans arrested in a pre-dawn swoop in Pietermaritzburg ... It's incredible that the Government can be so blind to its own shortcomings and mismanagement ... They blame it all on the Liberals, the Anglican Church, the English Press, etc., and bearing in mind their great admiration for Hitler in years gone by, one wonders just how they'll proceed from here.²

There was more. Already, on 21 January, a rockfall at the Coalbrook North Colliery, in the Orange Free State, had become South Africa's worst mining disaster. Four hundred and seventeen men – all but six African – were trapped underground in a shaft which filled with lethal methane gas. For loss of life, it was reckoned to be the third worst accident in mining's history. Johannesburg's *Golden City Post* published allegations respecting the failure of management to heed warnings received just ahead of the tragedy. At some point in that crisis-fraught month, Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd announced that the National Party was ready to act on its long-held desire to make South Africa a republic.

Amidst all of this, South Africa was visited by Britain's Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan. On 3 February he warned Parliament: "The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it." Verwoerd kept his cool but his party was outraged. Minister of External Affairs Eric Louw voiced its much-used objection to interference in a sovereign state's domestic affairs. The country would wait 30 years for another opening of Parliament which, like that one, was notable for more than fancy dress and misguided prescriptions.

Three days after Sharpeville, Britain's Royal Ballet launched the university's celebrations with "The Sleeping Beauty" at Durban's Alhambra Theatre. Already, the PAC's Robert Sobukwe and ANC's Albert Luthuli were in detention, and public meetings of more than twelve persons were forbidden:

We arrived on the early side and saw swarms of people already there, who proved to be non-European picketers – university students who were fed up because there were no seating arrangements for them.

Personally I don't think it would have mattered a bit to allow those who can afford it to attend, but I do think it is a shame that they had to behave in that way.

Had I sent this to *The Daily News* or *The Mercury*, I might have signed it "Non-racist," so convinced was I that my views were untainted by anything as nasty as racism. Google the event, as I have just done, and find the testimony of lifelong activist Abdool Kader Hassim, who must have been among the students we passed on our way into the theatre.

Hassim told South African History Online (SAHO) that the "highlight of his activities" as a member of the Durban Students' Union "was the boycott of the golden jubilee celebrations of the Natal University in 1960".³ We witnessed this example – with no discernible sense of its import for the future.

Ten days later, my husband Paul, our six-year-old son, four-year-old daughter and I left as planned on a Cape holiday. If my letters are to be believed, we were not in any way discomfited by the nation-wide State of Emergency declared on the 30th, or news of the march by 30 000 Langa residents, led by Philip Kgosana, on our destination, Cape Town. "We'll miss some nice things while we're away – especially the party at Campbell House⁴ for the ballet dancers." That party (and the gala performance itself) is described by E.G. in his memoir, *Never a Dull Moment*.⁵ The Malherbes, to a man, were smitten by Antoinette Sibley, the soon-to-be prima ballerina of the Royal Ballet. It is no surprise that she is well represented in the memoir's photos. Also at the party were 20 or so vice-chancellors who happened to be in the city for meetings of the Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth. It was unthinkable at the time that, a year later, the connection with the AUBC would be severed.

In southern Natal we picked up a hitchhiker – a policeman who had conducted a prisoner to wherever space had been found to detain him or her. After Sharpeville, and the Day of Mourning for its victims (28 March), thousands were arrested and the prisons were overflowing. With the service so stretched, our passenger had been stranded with no way back to his station. In Cape Town the most visible sign of

the national turmoil was closure of the historic Castle to visitors – no more a prime tourist attraction but a swarming military headquarters. Verwoerd was absent when we visited Parliament. On 9 April he had narrowly missed death when shot twice on the side of the head by David Pratt, invariably and incorrectly identified as “a Natal farmer”.⁶ When we returned home I reported: “All is back to normal, at least on the surface, here in Durban.”

May brought British actress Rosalinde Fuller. She contributed to the celebrations with the one-woman show she had honed to perfection. We found her “superb, and the selection of stories extremely interesting” – she “acted out

seven”. What were they, I wonder? Four years later, in British Honduras, she held her audience rapt “for two full hours” with selections by Chekhov, de Maupassant, Dickens and Gordimer. She was in her late sixties, and still very beautiful. E.G. had seen her perform in New York when he was a doctoral student at Columbia. That was in the early 1920s (when, it was later discovered, she had had an affair with the equally glamorous Scott Fitzgerald). Fuller’s appearance coincided with Sobukwe’s conviction for incitement. He was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment (at the end of which he would be interned, virtually for life, on Robben Island.)⁷ Luthuli, who had burned his passbook



1910 1960

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL
Golden Jubilee Celebrations

PIETERMARITZBURG EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
presents

ROSALINDE FULLER

DIRECTED BY RICHARD AINLEY

UNIVERSITY MAIN HALL
8.0 p.m.

Gala Night: THURSDAY, MAY 12th: Subject to Love
FRIDAY, MAY 13th: Masks and Faces
Matinee: SATURDAY, MAY 14th: Excerpts
Evening: SATURDAY, MAY 14th: Subject to Love

Programme One	Programme Two
SUBJECT TO LOVE	MASKS AND FACES
The Widow's Story <i>Charles Dickens</i> The Window Game <i>Guy de Maupassant</i> First Love <i>Fedor Dostoevsky</i> The Tweed Cap <i>Katherine Mansfield</i>	The Lady's Maid <i>Katherine Mansfield</i> The Uncompromising Spirit <i>Henry James</i> The Full River <i>Oliver Schreiner</i> The Dance Programme <i>Emile Zola</i>
INTERVAL	
The Full River <i>Oliver Schreiner</i> The Marble Heart <i>Arthur Schnitzler</i> Mr. Satecena's Plan <i>Daisy Ashford</i> , <i>aged nine years</i>	Regrets <i>Anton Chekhov</i> Moonlight <i>Guy de Maupassant</i> David Copperfield <i>Charles Dickens</i>
<p>ROSALINDE FULLER was born in Portsmouth and spent her childhood in the small market town of Sturminster-Newton in Thomas Hardy's Wessex.</p> <p>As a young girl she went with her two sisters to the United States singing English Folk Songs. They sang several times at the White House, Washington, D.C., and in forty-eight of the forty-nine states. Rosalinde Fuller began her stage career in New York as a revue singer, in two editions of the 'Greenwich Village Follies'. Then she played Ophelia opposite John Barrymore for two seasons.</p> <p>She starred on Broadway for several years, appearing as 'Patience' in Gilbert and Sullivan's Opera, 'Puss' in 'Love for Love', 'Mary Devereux' in 'Scotch Mist', 'Fiametta' in David Belasco's last production 'What Never Dies'. Returning to London she first appeared in the 'Squall' at the Globe Theatre, followed up a great success in 'The Unknown Warrior' with Maurice Browne, 'Miss Julie', 'The Three Sisters', 'Maurine' and a season of Shaw plays with Eino Peety.</p> <p>In Donald Wolfit's Shakespearean seasons she played Juliet, Lady Macbeth, Portia, Rosalind and Beatrice.</p> <p>In February, 1956, she realised a dream she had had for a long time, that of giving 'one woman' presentations of short stories and novels in dramatic form with music, setting and costumes. She has presented her programmes for two short seasons in London, and after another London season she took them on tour in the North of England, Wales, Scandinavia, and the United States.</p> <p>She has presented 'Masks and Faces' and 'Subject to Love' in London and Broadway and recently scored a considerable success in Israel. She was presented by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society last year.</p>	
	

*Vertrees Malherbe wonders what Rosalinde Fuller's stories were. The University Archives in Pietermaritzburg provide the answer where memory fails. Several copies of Fuller's programme lie in the Malherbe files.
(Photo: University Archives, Pietermaritzburg)*

as an act of defiance after Sharpeville, awaited trial in detention.

By June, coverage of NU-connected activities – notably, the “From our World” exhibition – crowded the papers. Best remembered by myself is the display of photographs by Yusuf Karsh of Canada. Karsh lived until 2002 and by then had photographed most of the 20th century’s famous and powerful. He had a great gift for capturing what made them so. Janie also made news. Union Day, on 31 May, had marked the founding of the Union of South Africa. In 1960 the Union, like the university, reached its golden anniversary. When she found that no official commemoration was planned, Janie took flowers to lay at the statue of the first prime minister (and her father’s cousin), Louis Botha.⁸ She let the press know what she discovered: a statue plastered with insulting stickers. Would this once have raised a call for action? In 1960 the waters were muddied: a republic was on the table.

9 July: Durban’s City Hall was packed when Governor-General C.R. Swart welcomed guest speakers from overseas and opened the National Conference on Education. As Cato Manor had echoed at Sharpeville, so now the “wind of change” was resonant. Swart’s central point: “Criticism of our way of life and our method of tackling our problems has in recent years become what may be termed international sport” – a clear message for those on the platform whom he regarded as fly-by-nights, no matter how distinguished they might be in the world from whence they came to visit us. He proceeded: “What they don’t understand is that a good deal of the indigenous population is still very primitive,” and he gave some examples. Coughing began

– who knew where it started? – and the audience threatened to drown out Swart, “the highest person in the land”. In his memoir, E.G. described a tense situation. How to thank the speaker? How restore the ambience? For many of us not troubled by those problems, the episode had been shocking, but was yet of a piece with familiar “white politics”. I wrote to my parents: “Paul said afterwards that he was ‘too polite to cough, but too impolite to clap’. It was an exhilarating evening, all told, and got things off to a roaring start with everyone expecting big things.”

The exhilaration came with the lecture by Dr C.W. de Kiewiet, an eminent historian who, 20 years before, had published *A History of South Africa, Social and Economic*. In it he said: “Within the British Empire can be studied most of the problems which the struggle for existence on the earth entails ... It is South Africa that is clearly the most complex and arresting of the British dominions.”⁹ By then, he had left to pursue his studies. He spent most of his life in the United States and, at the time of the lecture, was president both of Rochester University and the American Association of Universities. E.G. wrote: “Completely ignoring the remarks of the Governor General, Dr de Kiewiet very soon lifted the thoughts of the audience to great spiritual heights which markedly contrasted with what went before.”¹⁰ His relief is apparent.

The memoir names academic freedom as the subject of De Kiewiet’s talk¹¹ but I recorded it as “America’s role in Africa”:

One point he made was that America must somehow get out of its involvement with Berlin so that it can concentrate on the millions in Africa and Asia, and he got into trouble with

GREETINGS

The University of Natal, having its seat in Pietermaritzburg and Durban, sends greetings and takes pleasure in announcing its Founders' Day celebrations to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the registration of the first students in Pietermaritzburg in 1910.

These celebrations will take place in Pietermaritzburg and in Durban on April 2nd, 1960 and the following three days.

They will include a graduation ceremony, a dedication service, University lectures, and also social and musical events.

On this occasion we shall pay tribute to our Founders, to our sister Universities, and to the learned Societies which have sustained us by their friendship and stimulated us by their example.

The University will be pleased to receive formal congratulatory messages; and would be honoured by the presence of a representative of your University or Society on this happy occasion.

Chancellor

The Hon. DENIS G. SHEPSTONE, Hon. LL.D.(Natal)

Vice-Chancellor and Principal

E. G. MALHERBE, B.A.Hons.(Cape), M.A.(Stell. and Col.), Ph.D.(Col.), Hon.LL.D.(Cantab., Melb., Queen's and McGill)

Chairman of Council

G. G. CAMPBELL, M.B., Ch.B., Hon.LL.D., F.R.C.S.(Edin.)

Registrar

P. G. LEEB-DU TOIT, B.Com.(S.A.)

The announcement, sent out to sister universities and learned societies, in Latin, with English and Afrikaans translations, of the 50th anniversary Founders' Day celebrations of the University of Natal.

(Photo: University Archives, Pietermaritzburg)

the local German representatives over that. He also got into trouble with the Israelis for calling S.A. "the Israel of Africa." However, he says he managed to soothe all of these gentlemen (he told us this later).

The telling later would have occurred at one of the many social gatherings. The De Kiewiets and senior Malherbes were old acquaintances. In the strange way that things often happen, we had heard that, at a Rochester party, Mrs De Kiewiet met someone who told

her she had been "to a 'very pretty wedding in Maryland' last summer and that the bride was going to S.A. Mrs. De K. asked if the groom were Paul Malherbe".¹² On 12 July, honorary degrees were conferred on De Kiewiet and three others: biologist Sir Julian Huxley of Britain, statistician Prof. J. Idenburg of the Netherlands, and South Africa's own Harry Oppenheimer.

Monday, 11 July: the Queen's birthday and a public holiday. The City Hall was again overflowing when Sir Vivian Fuchs talked and showed slides of the achievement for which he was knighted. Fuchs had been leader of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition which in 1957-58 made the first successful land crossing of the continent – a distance of 2 158 miles.

He is one of the best looking men you can imagine, wonderful voice, commanding presence and obviously a born leader. All the ladies are in raptures, including me. The trip was the most phenomenal feat as we all know, but when you see the pictures of vehicles sagging into deep crevasses, buildings under construction which have filled up with tons of snow overnight, and howling gales, pack ice breaking away at inopportune moments and heaven knows what, then you marvel the more ...



Campbell House, scene of many of the social functions referred to in the article, built in 1954 as the residence of the Vice Chancellor of the University of Natal after E.G. Malherbe had moved from Pietermaritzburg to Durban.

(Photo: Sally Frost)

E.G. tells of resistance to inviting Fuchs and Sir Edmund Hillary – who in 1953, with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, had reached Everest’s summit – to a conference devoted to education.¹³ With their presence amongst us, objections vanished. The two were well known to each other, Hillary having accompanied Fuchs on the last 700 miles of the polar crossing.

Sir Julian Huxley was the speaker on the night when he and others were capped. His topic was “Man’s New Vision of Himself”. I reported: “He makes no bones about repudiating Christianity and talked of the necessity for new religions ... He also has very dear to his heart the subject of over-population ... He is not a polished speaker ... but packed a lot into his speech.” E.G. noted that Huxley was the “only overseas lecturer” to respond to Swart’s strictures

respecting their right to criticise¹⁴ – doing so on grounds which then, as now, were unexceptionable. Towards the end of the conference, Huxley lectured on “Human Ecology”: it was wishful thinking to imagine that, should agricultural land be exhausted, the seas will feed us. He evoked an unforgettable image: if populations were not controlled the day was coming when humans “would crawl like maggots over the dead carcass of the earth”.

The day after Huxley’s first speech, Janie entertained the overseas guests to lunch at Campbell House. A surreal moment: my conversation with Lady Huxley – a beautiful woman with the bluest eyes, all the bluer for the gorgeous hydrangea-blue hat she was wearing. Seeming in earnest for my opinion, she asked what I’d thought of Sir Julian’s lecture. Of course I was

fulsome, and not quite finished when Lady Huxley closed the subject with “I thought he went on rather long!” I remember nothing after that.

Durban was at its winter best and tables were scattered across the lawn, overlooking the city. Paul and I stood with our plates, wondering whom we dared to join, when we spied two seats at a small table.

We ended up sitting with a Dr Venables from England and Sir Edmund Hillary. It was rather overwhelming to think that Sir Edmund is the only man in the world who has been both on top of Everest and to the South Pole, but there was nothing in the least overwhelming about him personally. No one could be more unaffected or easier to talk to about anything in the world and he talks about his normal business of beekeeping with his brother, and climbing Everest with Tensing, as though each was merely a very good way of being outdoors and getting some exercise.

That evening Dr Vera Brittain spoke: “She was extremely entertaining and interesting, giving the history of the emancipation of women.” American that I am, I knew nothing of Brittain but Janie admired her and had her books. I set about reading *Testament of Youth*. She was generous with her time and also addressed Durban’s Association of University Women.

Some speakers were local, including Dr Peter Cook,

Rector of the new Bantu university in Zululand which Dad and many others have opposed so strenuously. He started by saying that he is a civil servant and therefore can’t speak freely, which brought hoots from the audience for, of course, that is one of the very things most wrong with a government-run university.

The break with Cook grieved E.G. as they had been colleagues in the 1930s at the National Bureau for Education and Social Research, and during World War II in the Army Education Services. I missed the illustrious South African, Laurens van der Post, but Paul eased my disappointment with the news that he sounded “as vague and mystical as he is in his books”.

Harsher comments followed Sir George Catlin’s lecture:

He proved a real ass with the most affected speech and mannerisms and how he can have been so in demand all his life as a political scientist I can’t imagine, though perhaps it is better when one reads his work and is not distracted by his mannerisms or baffled by his accent.

This was surely unfair, and ungrateful for his high regard (by no means universal in Britain) for the country of my birth. Vera Brittain and Catlin were the parents of Shirley Williams who became one of the century’s dynamic women in government.

The conference, climax of the jubilee, was over. For almost two weeks we had been distracted from the day-to-day state of the nation – bar some news of our city councillor:

We have a marvellous councillor, a woman named Jenny Jenkins . . . Lately she got embroiled in championing bikinis. They are not allowed on Durban beaches and she says we are losing holiday trade on this account. The opposition said they wouldn’t hear of allowing it until there is complete segregation on the beaches so there is no danger of black men seeing white women in bikinis.

There it was: “race” relations – the perennial issue. Yet despite my abiding interest in the question, my letters

carry one reference only to the presence or absence of persons not white at the conference. The University Women arranged for three speakers to sum up its impact. One, the “principal of an Indian high school”, testified to “the lack of racial feeling at the Conference, what a rare experience it is for a ‘man of colour’, and how much this meant to him personally”.

On 5 October the white electorate voted for a republic, to come into effect the next year:

Verwoerd in his speech talked about “the English” as though they were foreigners living inside S.A. borders, instead of English-speaking South Africans, and Albert Hertzog is busy rewriting history. If Mam were here she’d have a letter to the editor about what he attributed to General Louis Botha.¹⁵

Some members of the United Party – the official opposition – resigned and formed the Progressive Party. By December Paul, Janie and other Malherbes had joined the “Progs” who supported a new constitution, based on the Molteno Report. The proposals included the gradual extension of the franchise: “... it will be far too liberal for most of the voters, while perhaps far too slow to satisfy African aspirations.”

And so the year ended. But not quite: in 1961 the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded retrospectively to Luthuli, who was both banned and on a suspended sentence for burning his passbook. In December he was granted 10 days to travel to Oslo. In his speech of acceptance, Luthuli called for racial equality and condemned the National Party’s policies as a threat to peace. The Nobel Peace Prize 1960 was a first for the country, which continued to punish the winner.

In this day and age, cities pride themselves on conference centres. They host specialised gatherings which are functional, seldom inspirational. The National Conference on Education and the rest of the jubilee had the purpose of informing, uplifting and entertaining. The concept was *sui generis*. The celebrations drew on links, painstakingly established, with the talents and perspectives of the “outside world” – Britain and the Commonwealth, Europe and America. It was of its time, but forward looking.

Those intentions were compromised by the circumstances of the host country. Although not designed as an all-white occasion it was, *de facto*, close to that. The University of Natal laboured with complex arrangements respecting provision of tertiary education for “non-white” students. I had written to my parents, in February: “Dad has been much praised in local papers for his forthright speeches condemning the university apartheid measures of the government.” In *Natalia* 40¹⁶ I found a quotation from Fatima Meer, recalling her days as a student at the University of the Witwatersrand: “Upon hearing that I was fraternising with white students when I went around giving out anti-apartheid posters with members of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), my parents suggested that I return to continue my studies at the University of Natal where special classes were being offered to so-called ‘non-Europeans’.” Here is material for an ironist. Most of us conform to our time and its ethos; some stretch the boundaries; a few, like Fatima Meer, leap ahead.

In 1961, the conference papers were published with the title *Education and our Expanding Horizons* – a vision as timely now as it was then.¹⁷

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 In terms of the University of Natal Private Act No. IV of March 1948, Natal University College became an independent university, the University of Natal, on 15 March 1949.
- 2 My letter of 31 March 1960. Paul: my husband, Paul Nel Malherbe. The friend referred to was Hans Meidner, admired post-war student leader and brave activist, who became a distinguished botanist.
- 3 For more detail see Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed, "'Colours Do Not Mix': Segregated Classes at the University of Natal, 1936–1959," *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 29, 2011, pp. 94-95 and *passim*. See also Kader Hassim's obituary elsewhere in this issue of *Natalia*.
- 4 The vice-chancellor's residence, on the university's Durban campus, completed in 1954.
- 5 My parents-in-law were Mam and Dad to us, but here I call them E.G. and Janie.
- 6 The shooting happened at the Union Exhibition on the Witwatersrand. On the 8th, the ANC and PAC had been declared illegal in terms of the Unlawful Organisations Act.
- 7 He was released into house arrest in Kimberley in 1969, where he lived for another nine years until his death from lung cancer in 1978.
- 8 A 3d stamp had been issued, showing South Africa's six prime ministers in profile: Botha, Smuts, Hertzog, Malan, Strydom, Verwoerd. Smuts, who was twice PM (Botha, Smuts, Hertzog, Smuts), was shown once.
- 9 Published by Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941. See p. 178.
- 10 *Never a Dull Moment*, pp. 323 and 325.
- 11 *Never a Dull Moment*, p. 323.
- 12 Paul and I married on 2 August 1952 at my home, "Rose Hill," in Sandy Spring, Maryland.
- 13 *Never a Dull Moment*, p. 320.
- 14 *Never a Dull Moment*, p. 325.
- 15 Janie and E.G. were in Wales, for a conference on bilingualism.
- 16 *Natalia* 40, 2010, p. 152.
- 17 R.G. Macmillan, P.D. Hey & J.W. Macquarrie eds, *Education and Our Expanding Horizons, Proceedings of the National Conference ...* (University of Natal Press, 1961).