

STELLA AURORAE: THE HISTORY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY. VOLUME 1: NATAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE (1909–1949)

by BILL GUEST

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391 pages, illustrations, index, list of graduates from inception to 1949

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IT is exactly fifty years since Edgar Brookes published his history of the University of Natal (as it was then known). His history covered the years up to 1965, and Brookes ended his final chapter wishing the new principal, Owen Horwood, “a long and successful period of office”. Little did Brookes, a liberal, know at the time that Horwood would be a reactionary, divisive principal and would later go on to become minister of finance in the National Party government and an ardent proponent of apartheid – a story still to be told by Bill Guest. Guest has now published the first volume of a trilogy covering the history of an institution that has gone under three different names over the past 106 years – Natal University College (NUC), the University of Natal, the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is well-positioned to undertake this project, having been associated with the university for over fifty-five years, first as a student, then as a member of the university’s history department (initially on the Durban campus and then in Pietermaritzburg), and in recent years as an emeritus professor.

This is a demanding endeavour, given that for some of the period covered in this volume the institution comprised four campuses – the Pietermaritzburg campus from 1910, the main Durban campus from 1922, the City Buildings in Durban’s Warwick Avenue from 1936, and the “Non-European” section, also in Durban, from 1936. Undaunted, Guest has produced a detailed, thoroughly

researched account of the university’s history in its first four decades, up till its attainment of independence in 1949. NUC had started out as an affiliate of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, which was merely an examining body, and then from 1918 became one of the six constituent colleges of the newly established University of South Africa (UNISA).

Natal University College, as it was known until 1949, developed from small beginnings in Pietermaritzburg in 1910 – an initial enrolment of thirty students, six Maritzburg College teachers giving lectures; operating from a two-roomed wood-and-iron building (which later became the school laundry). In those days the teaching loads were heavy – at least twenty classes a week. But the first academics were resourceful and hard-working, and a few even made their names as researchers – none more so than Alexander Petrie, the classicist, who published extensively – even though the necessary research resources, library holdings, equipment and laboratories were minimal. One early Pietermaritzburg student was Alan Paton. It may come as a surprise to know that he majored in physics and mathematics, and for a while taught as a leave replacement in the physics department.

The main focus of the book is on the academic life of the university. So nearly all the academics who taught at NUC during this time are given a mention, albeit brief in most cases. Some are

portrayed more fully – such as Frank Burchell, who taught law from 1920 until his death in 1960, with ten of his students going on to become judges. There was, too, Alan Hattersley, who taught history from 1916 to 1953, during which time he published more than twenty books.

Guest goes on to narrate the establishment of a campus in Durban in 1922, when the Natal Technical College was recognised as a centre of higher learning, at which NUC established departments of engineering and commerce. A key figure behind this development was Sam Campbell (father of Roy, the writer). He obtained little initial support from the Durban City Council, which was more focused on building a war memorial in the city centre. The construction of Howard College followed, forming the heart of the Durban campus. The building was made possible by a donation from T.B.F. Davis, and it was named after his son, Howard, who had been killed at the Somme in 1916.

Guest gives plenty of attention to student life. Cultural activity centred on the debating society and student theatre (Alan Paton had been active in both in the early 1920s). Recreation was mostly simple, genteel and inexpensive. There were regular dances in the early years, but the holding of these required senate's permission (!). On occasion extramural activities could become more boisterous. In later years there were inter-campus raids, with Durban students once arriving in Pietermaritzburg late at night armed with fire hoses.

Student politics at NUC was generally conservative. There was little support for the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) after it was formed in the 1920s. In the 1930s NUC students opposed Fort Hare's membership of NUSAS, which was accused of

being "socialistic, negrophilistic and Englishistic".

The issue of racial segregation is a constant theme in the book. NUC's founding legislation did not contain an explicit colour bar, but it did empower the council to refuse admission to any student applicant should council "consider it to be in the interests of the university". This was, in effect, a colour bar. So in 1916 and 1921 applications from two Indian students were rejected. This exclusionary policy was maintained until the early 1930s when Mabel Palmer, a lecturer in economics and economic history, initiated debate on the issue. It was eventually agreed that a separate "Non-European" section would be established from 1936, with classes being held over the weekend at Sastri College. Mabel Palmer ran the section from 1936 to 1956, cajoling staff to assist her. By 1948 there were 327 black students, mostly Indian, registered for courses – among the section's graduates were Absalom Vilakazi and Fatima Meer, who would both become renowned scholars.

In 1945 E.G. Malherbe took up the position of NUC principal, and would remain at the helm for twenty years. As one writer has put it, Malherbe went to Natal as "an Afrikaner in a very English setting, a liberal in a very conservative institution, and an educationist in a province where education was not highly regarded". But his liberalism stopped short of any push for racial integration at the university – he favoured what he called separate but equal education. It was Malherbe who campaigned for a black medical school at the university, gaining government approval for this in 1947, with the school being formally opened in Durban in 1951.

This book will be of interest to a wide readership, particularly for those

who have had some kind of association with the university. There are colourful word-portraits of many individuals involved in the institution during these four decades. There is critical treatment of NUC's conservative stance on racial matters. There is a picture of student life, flavoured with humorous touches and reminiscences. Any descendant of an NUC graduate up to 1949 will find that person's name in an appendix listing all graduates from 1910 to 1949, and running to almost forty pages. Descendants of academic staff members will most likely find in the main text at least a mention of their parent/grandparent/great-grandparent.

I detected only two minor errors: R.F. Currey (not Currie), pp. 179, 376; Robin (not Robert) McKerron, pp. 258, 301, 380. The book has been superbly produced and presented by the Natal Society Foundation. The next two volumes can be eagerly awaited.

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