

THE PEOPLE'S HOSPITAL: A HISTORY OF MCCORDS, DURBAN, 1890s–1970s

by JULIE PARLE AND VANESSA NOBLE

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THE AUTHORS tell us in the preface that this volume took many years to complete and enjoyed a great deal of support in the process – much like its subject, in fact. Parle and Noble have produced a highly readable account of the history of McCords Hospital from its beginnings to the 1970s, promising that the remainder of the story awaits a second volume.

This one begins with a chapter that pulls many contextual strands of the hospital's prehistory and early decades together: the settlement of the Colony of Natal, the political economy of migrant labour and segregation, indigenous and 'Western', or biomedical, approaches to illness and healing, Natal's early hospital history, James McCord's youth in Iowa and Illinois, the work of the American Board in Natal, especially its medical outreach, and the arrival of James and Margaret McCord from the United States in 1899 and their meeting with Katie Makanya, whose role as 'interpreter, translator, aide, nurse and evangelist' would be as fundamental to their achievements as they themselves were.

It then settles into a more linear, unfolding narrative, in which the authors divide the hospital's growth into three periods: the beginnings to the 1920s, the 1920s to the 1940s, and the 1940s to the 1970s. The McCords' medical missionary work began with the opening of a dispensary on Beatrice Street in Durban in 1904. To this was soon

added a small cottage hospital, whose patient numbers quickly outgrew the facilities. This led to the McCords' purchase of a plot of land on top of the Berea, outside the borough limits; it was all they could afford. Here, the hospital began life much as it was to continue, in a tussle with the authorities as to whether it was permissible or not. It finally opened in 1909 as the Mission Nursing Home. Steadily over the following decades, it expanded into a modern, well-equipped hospital. As well as providing much-needed medical care for Durban's black population, it was a pioneer in nursing education and later in training doctors, too.

From the Beatrice Street dispensary to this large and famous institution, possibly the most striking themes to emerge from Parle and Noble's study are the difficulties of survival and the extraordinary continuities in leadership. Virtually every chapter begins with an observation that the period under discussion was a turbulent, difficult or challenging time. These difficulties were part financial and part political.

The hospital had been built without any support from the American Board, which acknowledged a level of financial responsibility only in the late 1920s. This meant a good deal of time had to be spent fundraising, both locally and abroad, to supplement the income from patients' fees and the dispensary. Later, the hospital was able to depend on a state subsidy but this also, worryingly, increased the potential for state

interference. For virtually all its history, McCords operated against the grain of South African society and politics: it opened its doors to all black patients and as far as practicable observed equality amongst its multiracial staff. Yet as affluent white suburbia grew up around it, and first segregation and then apartheid became more entrenched, it faced pressures either to move or close.

Contributing greatly to its survival was an extraordinary continuity in leadership: James McCord was at the helm until 1940 when he was succeeded by Alan Taylor, who was superintendent until 1960. Both men, whose wives Margaret and Mary also contributed greatly to the life of the hospital, were cast in a determined, liberal mould – paternalistic yet principled, far-sighted yet practical. Both were committed to

faith-based medicine and adhered to the idea of a McCords ‘family’, to which all who worked or had trained there belonged. Like all families, this one gave extensive support to its members, though was also at times dysfunctional. Yet the way McCord, Taylor and their successors into the 1970s held the hospital family together played a very large part in its resolute survival on the Berea.

The book ends rather abruptly in the 1970s, with an epilogue written from the perspective of 2013, looking back over highlights of the hospital’s achievements through the final years of apartheid and into majority rule. One can only hope that the second volume is not too long in coming, as a completion of this worthy account.

HEATHER HUGHES