A Man of Natal

Adolf Joseph Wilhelm Bayer

1900-1978

Visitors to the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg often comment upon the pleasing aspects of the main campus. The beauty of the mature trees, set as they are in fairly extensive lawns, is obvious to all who walk beneath their dappled shade: not everyone, however, knows enough of their variety, their history and their intrinsic interest to appreciate them as a memorial to one of the University's most dedicated sons, Adolf Joseph Wilhelm Bayer.

Adolf Bayer occupied the Chair of Botany in the University from 1939 to 1966, a period of twenty-seven years. Before this he had been student, then lecturer in the same department. After retirement he was to return at the request of the University authorities to serve as Vice-Principal after the sudden death of his friend and colleague, Professor S. F. Bush. Those who had contact with Bayer long enough to know him well, could not have failed to sense the strong sincerity in his commitment to the University. This was not evinced merely by his contributions to his chosen subject and to the progress of his Department, aspects that might reflect directly his personal capabilities, aims and endeavours — it was something deeper, wider and much more selfless, a dedication to all that the University stands for in the community it serves. He believed that as Head of Department his duty lay as much without the University as within it. This led to involvement in numerous projects, association with many people in varied fields, travelling, lecturing, guiding. For years he was a member of the Advisory Committee of the Botanical Survey of South Africa, supervising ecological research in Natal, particularly in the coastal areas. This brought him into close contact with what is now the Botanical Research Institute of the Department of Agricultural Technical Services. Several members of the Institute staff were his contemporaries, and in time they gave place to his own postgraduate students. This ecological work in coastal and midland Natal suited his background well, for after his appointment in 1931 as lecturer-in-charge of the Botany Department, he was requested by the government Department of Forestry to undertake a survey of the Dukuduku area. This work led on to ecological studies in the rest of Zululand. Much of this country, especially the most northerly Tongaland, was then very little known floristically. His studies resulted in the award of the D.Sc. degree in 1936.

With the late Dr. J. S. Henkel, a forester of considerable experience and a keen field observer, he was commissioned by the Executive Committee of the Natal Provincial Administration to undertake studies into the prevalence of nagana in Zululand, especially in the Hluhluwe area, with the hope of markedly reducing and eventually eradicating this disease.

A. J. W. BAYER

Photograph: *The Natal Witness*, Pietermaritzburg

Their discovery that puparia laid by the flies died in dry soil led to the concept of the eradication of these insects in their restricted winter breeding grounds, which line of attack proved most successful.

In 1964 he was appointed a member of the St. Lucia Lake Commission, a body whose terms of reference included investigation into causes of the increasing salinity of this natural water system, an environmental change which endangered it as a wild life haven.

He was associated conjointly with the Natal Town and Regional Planning Commission and the Botanical Research Institute in the ecological surveys of the Tugela River Basin and the "Three Rivers Region" (the country between the Tugela and Mkomanzi river basins) undertaken by doctoral students. He was a member of many societies, holding office in some of them: he served a term as President of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science and of the Natal Section of the Botanical Society of South Africa. Before his retirement he was honoured by being elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Society of South Africa.

Professor Bayer's greatest contribution lies probably in the students whom he trained during his forty-two years as a member of the University staff. He worked in Natal, but through his students his influence became widespread, since many came to hold important posts in all parts of the country. He was much concerned with training in the art of communication, guiding his postgraduate students in the writing of theses and scientific articles. This was not always pleasant for the student, for he could be provocative and changeable and tended to pay out rope until one had almost hanged oneself, while despairing of ever producing something worthwhile!

His hobbies were mostly connected with his work: he enjoyed the field and many a seed went into his pocket as he trudged through the vegetation, later to be tended as a young potted plant before being set out as a specimen on campus, or handed over to an ardent gardener prepared to nurture it further. It is to Professor Bayer that we owe the acacias, yellow-woods, Kafir-booms, cycads and others far less familiar, that grace the campus today. He spent many years photographing in colour Natal plants and Natal vegetation, and built the basis of a collection of transparencies that has been much used within the Department.

He liked experimentation and found pleasure in trying to photograph difficult small objects like spores and tiny fruits effectively, and in attempting to devise inexpensive equipment useful to his students. Fond of the open air he enjoyed fishing and other sports, especially rugby. He followed keenly the achievements of the University rugby teams and was a member of the Pietermaritzburg Rugby Sub-Union for 20 years. In the later years of his life he gardened enthusiastically and at Kloof where he retired, created his own small forest at "the bottom of the garden".

It is fitting that Adolf Bayer be remembered in these pages, for he was essentially a man of Natal. Born at Hermannsburg in 1900, the son of W. J. Bayer of Stanger, he matriculated from Durban Boys' High School and entered Natal University in Pietermaritzburg about a decade after its inception when the first Professor of Botany, J. W. Bews, was finding for himself the fascination of research in a new hemisphere and in a country where few with ecological interest had walked before. Bews, with

his brilliant questioning mind and his enthusiasm, fired his students with his own interest, but he gave them too a philosophy of living which Bayer, young, confident and able, was to be influenced by for the rest of his life. Bayer never forgot the contribution Bews had made, not only to world ecology — for it is remarkable that he did achieve this from his new and small department in the young University — but to those who came within the spell of his teaching and his own stimulating though quiet personality. It was amongst Bayer's deepest wishes that under his own period of guidance, the department which Bews had begun so successfully, should develop further. There is no doubt that he achieved this aim despite the setback of the Second World War and the stringent financial period of rapid expansion which followed.

In 1929 Adolf Bayer married Miss Daphne Pallent of Durban, also a graduate of Natal University who herself contributed worthily to education within the Province. Their children, two daughters and a son, all married and with families, live in England and Australia.

There is a second reason why this man should be remembered in this journal. He contributed to it himself. Having grown up at a time when botany in Natal was very young, he knew personally some of the early collectors and naturalists, like Rudatis of Dumisa who would deny himself food in order to have the means to proceed with his botanical collecting and conservation, and T. R. Sim who worked prodigiously, writing and personally illustrating, while pursuing his duties in forestry, accounts of South African ferns and mosses which have not yet been superseded. Bayer had a fund of anecdotes about early Natal botanists and wrote delightfully of the history of botany in this Province. Essentially simple in his own way of life and naturally deeply reserved despite his outward confidence, Adolf Bayer appreciated the qualities of the early workers and the difficulties with which they often had to contend in pursuance of their interests.

It is fitting that he who gave so much of his life to the University of Natal and who so unobtrusively aided those of any race and colour who showed scientific promise but who were limited financially, should have been honoured soon after his retirement by the award of an Honorary Doctorate in Science from his Alma Mater. Fitting, too, that at the time of his death in early December, 1978, the two flamboyants he had planted among the University buildings wore wreaths of scarlet blossom.

K. D. GORDON-GRAY