

A TRIBUTE TO COLIN WEBB (1930-1992)

John Benyon

*Department of Historical Studies, University of Natal,
P.O. Box 375, Pietermaritzburg, 3200*

The premature death of Professor Colin Webb on 22 March 1992 came as a shock to the community of South African historians. He was friend to many of us and known to almost all. His wise advice helped along not just his numerous postgraduate students (6 Ph.D.s and 17 M.A.s, not to mention a great number of Honours mini-thesis writers), but was also freely given to many colleagues. The tolerance and sound common sense that he brought to positions such as President of the South African Historical Society in 1983 and the bonds that his professional approach and easy humour forged between the historians of South African universities - and wider afield - will not be soon forgotten.

In view of Colin Webb's later association with the development of Natal regional history there is some irony in the fact that he was born in Pretoria and educated at Wits and Pretoria universities before taking up the 1955 Elsie Ballot Scholarship to Cambridge. But such a background made him always more than just a 'Natal historian'; for he was at home in many teaching fields, and his research interests transcended those of the region that became his chief preoccupation. The respect in which he was held more widely is evidenced by his Fellowship of the Royal Historical Society. Also, he occupied for eight years what some consider the best-known Chair of History in South Africa, the King George V Professorship at U.C.T., along with the Deanship of Arts and a seat on the Council of that university.

Nevertheless, it was in Natal that Colin Webb developed and flowered to his potential. He was first appointed to the then Department of History and Political Science on the Durban Campus of the University of Natal in 1957. In 1962 he moved to a Senior Lectureship on the Pietermaritzburg Campus. It was at this point that he began to assert himself as the coming historian of the Natal region. For the next thirty years, and even during his eight years in Cape Town, he was to take the study and research of Natal history forward until, a month or two before his death, he was literally too ill to go on. Indeed, the fact that he would continue while University Vice-Principal in Durban (1984-1988) and in Pietermaritzburg (1988-1992) to supervise Ph.D. students, to external examine third-year undergraduates, and to edit several published volumes is further testimony to his love of History and of his desire to serve the historical community to the limit of what were by then severely strained physical and mental resources.

Yet what precisely does his reputation rest upon? First, there is his pioneering work in the Natal Archives Depôt. Appreciating that both knowledge of, and finding tools for, the official historical resources for the region were pre-requisites, Colin Webb began to build up his *Guide to the Official Records of the Colony of Natal*. When this hard labour was added to the many hours of patient digging he simultaneously undertook in the unofficial sources available in the Killie Campbell Africana Library, Webb had the wherewithal to guide several generations of research students into regional history.

It was not that he did not make full use of this essential preliminary work himself. The *History of Natal* that he wrote with the redoubtable but old Senator Professor Reverend Edgar Brookes provided a new and fundamentally liberal point-of-view on the regional history. The perspectives of the Bushman (San), the black Nguni-speaker, and the Indian immigrant received an emphasis that had been under-played in earlier works, such as those by Hattersley. The University of Natal Press regarded this History as so basically sound that, in spite of being slightly dated, they decided to reprint it only a few years ago.

Historia 38(1), May 1993

As in the case of all true historians, Colin Webb retained a flexibility and capacity to move with new currents. The surge of 'Africanist' history which characterized the late 'sixties' and early 'seventies' convinced him that a shift in his own paradigm was needed. One of the first results of this new interest was *A Zulu King Speaks*. But, more important, he had long known of the treasure-trove of research material in the Killie Campbell Africana Library brought together in the notebooks of the early magistrate, James Stewart. Along with his former research student, John Wright, Webb set about editing and publishing this vast corpus of material. Before his death he and Wright had prepared four and a half of volumes of *The James Stuart Archive*. When complete at seven volumes, this collection will be one of the biggest published resources for writing regional history in Africa. Already, it has changed many perspectives communicated by earlier works such as Bryant.

Finally, Webb collaborated with his wife, Fleur, to put a translation of Adulphe Delagorgue's *Travels* before the historical community and public more generally. It was a final manifestation of his commitment to enriching the sources which his students and other Natal historians who follow after him can use. His life was one of professional commitment, unselfishness and service both as a university administrator, teacher and great regional historian. For this we, and the historians of Natal to come, need to remember him.