A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM*

This is, as you will know, an appropriate time at which to discuss the history of university development in South Africa, for we are about to celebrate the centenary of the founding of this country's first degree-conferring institution, the University of the Cape of Good Hope. The University Incorporation Act of the Cape Colony — Act 16 of 1873 — came into operation on June 26 of that year and on September 1, the governing Council held its inaugural meeting in the offices of the Superintendent General of Education in Cape Town. A notable step forward had been taken by a colony which had only recently been granted responsible government.

The idea of a university was not new. Even before mid-century, there had been a measure of support for such a venture. Something, too, had been achieved in providing the essential groundwork at elementary and secondary school level without which plans for a university would have been meaningless. The appointment of James Rose Innes in 1839 as Superintendent General of a unified colonial education system represented one significant advance; another was the increase in the number of private academies, two of which the South African College of 1829 and Bishop Gray's Diocesan Collegiate School of twenty years later — would at length undertake work of university standard. In 1850, however, they provided no instruction beyond the secondary school stage, despite the professional rank of the teachers at the older institution.

What was needed to transform the university dream into a reality was an incentive to further academic endeavour. Such an incentive was found in the vast extension of written examinations in Britain as an impartial means of measuring intellectual ability. A movement which began in a small way with the introduction in the late eighteenth century of the Mathematical Tripos at the University of Cambridge had come, by the time of the Taunton Schools Inquiry Commission of 1868, to influence many aspects of education in the United Kingdom.

This growing emphasis upon written examination in the motherland made itself felt in the colonies. Of particular significance in the history of higher education was the founding in 1836 of the University of London. This institution was then, and until the end of the century, no more an examining board. It had the merit of being cheap to run and, unlike Oxford and Cambridge in the early nineteenth century, was free from denominational exclusiveness. Not only did it allow small colleges, often controlled by rival church bodies, the opportunity to introduce gradute studies, but also came to accept private students for its examinations from all parts of the British Isles and from distant colonial territories.

Its inexpensiveness and its religious neutrality made the University

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of London a popular model for export. The Cape was not alone in following the London pattern; universities of similar type were founded throughout the British world from Canada to New Zealand.

Written examinations, however, reached the Cape before the advent of the examining university. Attempts had been made in Britain to eliminate patronage in the selection of officers for the home and Indian public services from 1826 onwards and by 1848, it was generally conceded that the fitness of candidates could best be determined by written tests. Two years later, the Cape Colony appointed the Auditor General, William Hope, the Master of the Supreme Court. John Steuart, and that active committee-man and educationist, Rose Innes, as members of a Board of Examiners of Candidates for Government Service. Although the most edvanced examination set was not much above secondary school level, the board was a pioneer in the field of higher education in this country and its minute-book has its place in the archives of the University of South Africa as a record of the day of small beginnings.

Although patronage did not disappear overnight in the selection of Cape civil servants, the board's examinations attracted considerable attention and led to the creation of a larger board in 1858, into which the first one was merged. The Board of Public Eexaminers in Literature and Science, under the presidency of Mr. Justice E. B. Watermeyer and, later, of the Cape's second Superintendent General of Education, Langham Dale, was an examining university in embryo. Its three classes of certificates in literature and science were awarded on examinations based upon those set by the University of London for the Matriculation, B.A. and M.A.; its examination in civil engineering was modelled upon that of the University of Glasgow; it issued an advanced certificate in law and jurisprudence of post-graduate standard. Moreover, it numbered among its examiners some of the leading educationists of the period — the brilliant mathematican from the South African College, for example, the Rev. G. F. Childe, Dutch-born A. N. E. Changuion and the Diocesan College Principal, the Rev. Canon George Ggilvie.

The work of the older colleges was greatly stimulated by the tests of the Board of Public Examiners; so, too, was that of newer institutions, among them Graaff-Reinet College and the First-class Undenominational Public School at Stellenbosch, subsequently renamed the Victoria College. A competition for schools was also instituted, replaced later by a third-class certificate examination of Matriculation standard. Young South Africans had at last set sail upon a stormy sea of examinations which was to engulf many an aspirant to academic distinction in the years to come. And this at a time when so many in Britain were beginning to regret the dominance of the written test. As the Board of Public Examiners in Cape Town moved into the field of school examinations, Charles Kingsley was reminding the reading public of the sad condition of the citizens of the "Isle of Tomtoddies", who were "all heads and no bodies". They worshipped so slavishly at the shrine of the great idol Examination that their children could except no release from a

life a ceaseless cramming unless they fell sick from water on the brain!

Even the examining university came under fire in the land of its birth. For a university like that in the imperial capital, which asked many questions, but provided no answers, was only half a university, however eminent its examiners or searching its tests. When the examining and administrative functions of the Cape's Board of Public Examiners were at length separated in 1873 and the University of the Cape of Good Hope created in its place to confer degrees upon its successful candidates, there were many who would have preferred the reconstruction of the leading college in the colony, the South African College, as a teaching university. However, all the colleges were then very small and none was yet concerned exclusively with higher education. Financial considerations, too, weighed heavily with those who had the interests of the Cape Colony's administration at heart and it was evident that an examining board writ large would be a negligible drain upon the colonial exchequer.

The credit for converting the Board of Public Examiners into an examining university must be shared. Langham Dale as Superintendent General of Education and the members of the South African Teachers' Association of which he was President cannot be overlooked as claimants. Two leading figures in the legal world — William Porter and J. H. de Villiers — also played their part, as did T. E. Fuller, then editor of the *Argus* newspaper. In organization, the University of the Cape of Good Hope was uncomplicated. Its sexennial governing Council — initially of 20 members — was chosen in part by Convocation and in part by the colonial Governor. Convocation — consisting of the old board's major certificate holders, graduates by examination and those who were admitted o a Cape degree on the strength of university qualifications obtained elsewhere — also chose the titular head, the Chancellor. Council named the Vice-Chancellor and appointed the paid examiners. As far as possible, college professors engaged upon university teaching were then excluded from the examining panel. Nor were the colleges directly represented upon Council, although members were always chosen to safeguard their interests. The only paid official, who for many years was alone responsible for university administration, was the Registrar.

Degrees conferred were based upon English models. The B.A. was awarded in both literature and science and was later preceded by an Intermediate B.A. examination. The M.A. was granted in a number of separate departments of study and the Ll.B. was a post-graduate qualification. For many years, only degrees in arts and laws were awarded by examination, although this limited range was later extended to include other degrees in such fields as mining engineering and divinity. Entry to undergraduate courses was gained by passing a Matriculation examination. The university also introduced a wide range of certificate and diploma examinations in music, law and surveying and obtained a virtual stranglehold upon the school curriculum by adding to its higher

tests of scholastic ability special examinations for school children. With some justice, the University of the Cape of Good Hope became known as "a factory of certificates".

Like its London progenitor, it was religiously neutral; nor did it make any distinctions of sex or race. All that it asked of the candidates for its examinations was a certificate of good conduct and — until its last years — an ability to write the English language. Women were slow to come forward for degree examinations; it was long before our Victorian ancestors came to agree that advanced study was neither beyond their mental capabilities nor injurious to their health. The first girl to obtain a Cape B.A. was Agnes Ellen Lewis in 1886. Non-Europeans made an even slower start. The first African Matriculation success was gained by the future Congregationalist minister, S. P. Sihlali, in 1880, but it was in the period 1910-1930 that the earliest degrees were awarded in South Africa to Coloured, African and Indian students.

The South African and Victoria Colleges came to dominate the university teaching scene, but they held no monopoly. Several schools, in addition to the Diocesan College, Rondebosch, had university college departments for a number of years, among them Gill College, Somerset East and St. Andrew's College, Grahamstown. So, too, did the theological seminary of the Reformed Church at Burgersdorp and later at Potchefstroom. The Huguenot College for women at Wellington also moved into this field and mining courses were provided at the School of Mines in Kimberley before the Anglo-Boer War and afterwards in Johannesburg. In the first decade of the present century, higher education in the Eastern Province was concentrated at Rhodes University College in Grahamstown and university colleges were founded in Bloemfontein, Pietermaritzburg and Pretoria. Many schools throughout South Africa took students as far as the Intermediate B.A. examination of the Cape University and sometimes to B.A. level. There was also a steady trickle of private, or external candidates for the university's degree examinations. Whatever its shortcomings — and they were many — the University of the Cape of Good Hope did much to stimulate educational devolpment within the colony and, eventually, beyond its borders.

It had, however, to meet criticism on two main fronts. It was, until Union, almost exclusively an English institution. The Dutch language was for long an optional subject, placed at Matriculation level on a par with French, German and Bantu languages. This was to occasion much resentment within the colony and strong resistance in the north to its attempts to make itself a university for the whole of South Africa.

Secondly, as the university colleges grew stronger, they began to chafe under the limitations imposed upon them by an independent examining body: the rigidity of the curriculum; the restrictions imposed upon research; the dominance of external examiners. It was in its major role as examiner that the Cape University faced its greatest challenge. Every mistake it made — and it made not a few — was

given the widest press publicity; its standards were suspect; when on one occasion it brought in a new examiner, it fell victim to spurious qualifications; when it stuck to tried and tested men, they were referred to unkindly in the press as "recurring decimals"!

What South Africa needed was a teaching university, but differences between the two white groups and a shortage of money were serious obstacles in the path of reform. Cecil Rhodes promised endowment in the nineties, but his plans foundered on the rock of sectional discord; Alfred Beit, the mining magnate, provided funds for a Johannesburg university after the Anglo-Boer War, but political considerations prevented their use for that purpose. And when at last Jan Smuts secured in 1910 a bequest of one million rands from Alfred's brother, Otto, and Sir Julius Wernher, it took the Union's first Minister of Education. F. S. Malan, six weary and frustrating years of negotiation to reconstruct the nation's university system.

The result was a compromise, with which only the South African College could claim to be entirely satisfied. In the legislation of 1916, it gained the Wehrner-Beit funds and independence within a new University of Cape Town. The Victoria College, privately endowed, became the University of Stellenbosch. The remaining colleges — the Natal University College, Pietermaritzburg, Grey University College, Bloemfontein, the Transvaal University College, Pretoria, and the South African School of Mines and Technology in Johannesburg, together with Rhodes and the Huguenot College in the Cape — were grouped together as constituents of a federal University of South Africa, with administrative headquarters in Pretoria. The federal university inherited the assets, the traditions, the coat of arms and the Royal Charter of the former University of the Cape of Good Hope. The new order of things was inaugurated on April 2, 1918 and the degree pattern of the examining university was changed in such a way that it forms the basis of that currently in use today. All three universities maintained the relgious neutrality of their predecessor. Although the so-called "conscience clause" has been assailed, it has been retained by a majority of South African universities.

South Africa now had two teaching universities, bearing some resemblance to the unitary civic institutions which had by then made their appearance in England. It also had a federation of colleges within a university, a type of organization which similarly owed much to British models. There were, however. weaknesses in a federal system and the University of South Africa was destined to succumb to them, as had the English prototype, the Victoria University of Manchester in its original form.

Among the changes which occurred in 1918 were the creation of university, as opposed to collegiate Senates and the introduction of a faculty system. Matriculation was placed in the hands of a conjoint board and a Cice-Cchancellors' Committee — now a Committee of University Principals — was established as a consultative body. Another innovation which dates from this period was the introduction, pioneered by the Transvaal University College, of extra-mural classes.

The ultimate dissolution of the federal university was foreshadowed in 1922, when the old School of Mines, then University College, Johannesburg, became the independent University of the Witwatersrand. This early defection, however, had been made good the previous year, when Potchefstroom University College became a federal constituent. There was also, in the 1920's, the possibility of further additions. Technical colleges sought higher status and a link between that in Durban and the Natal University College pointed to possible further developments along these lines. University opinion, however, was opposed to technical college pretensions. This view was endorsed by the Van der Horst Commission of 1928 and the Natal association was brought to an end. The result was the establishment of a twin-campus university in that province.

One other institution at length achieved university college status, but in the complex racial composition of South Africa, was unable to gain consituent college rank. This was the South African Native College, now the University of Fort Hare, which came to enjoy a special relationship with the University of South Africa and prepared its students for its examinations.

The Transvaal University College obtained independence as the University of Pretoria in 1930. Two years later, it became an Afrikaans medium institution, a change of policy subsequently adopted by the college at Bloemfontein, then known as the University College of the Orange Free State. Language differentiation, except at the University of South Africa and, more recently, at Port Elizabeth, was to be the university norm.

By the close of World War II, the remaining federal constituents, with one exception, were ripe for independence and, with the blessing of the Brookes Commission of 1947, Natal, the Orange Free State, Rhodes and Potchefstroom achieved full university standing between 1949 and 1951. The Huguenot University College, however, had long struggled. Its enrolment was small and it had never been able to fulfil the wishes of its founders by catering exclusively for women students. It therefore ceased to exist as a university college from the end of 1950.

Loss of the constituents led to the reorganization of the University of South Africa. It had already assumed a new responsibility. In terms of the legislation of 1916, the federal university was compelled to admit external students to its examinations. To the dismay of the university, the numbers of these private students grew steadily and, with this increase, commercial correspondence colleges multiplies. Steady pressure was brought to bear upon the University of South Africa to provide tuition itself, until in 1946, a Division of External Studies was formed for that purpose, under a Director, Professor A. J. H. van der Walt.

This brought the university into open competition with firms in the private sector. The new venture proved a success, however, and was reconstituted as a teaching and examining institution exclusively for

external students when the colleges left the federal fold. At first under the close supervision of representatives of all other South African universities on both Council and Senate, it at length obtained full autonomy and the role right to provide external study courses.

In 1955, an agreement was reached with the Pius XII College at Roma, Basutoland, forerunner of the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. This brought the college into close association with the university and led to similar developments in higher education for African, Indian and Coloured students in South Africa. Following publication of the De Wet Nel Commission report in 1958, legislation was passed for the establishment of four new colleges for these race groups and the separation of the college at Fort Hare from Rhodes University, with which it had been affiliated since 1951. All five came under the tutelage of the University of South Africa. In 1970 and 1971, the Universities of Fort Hare, Zululand, the North, the Western Cape and Durban-Westville became independent. Other African, Coloured and Indian students continued to use the facilities of the University of South Africa and, in special circumstances, those of the White universities prepared to admit them.

Further expansion of facilities for White students has also taken place in recent years. In 1961, Rhodes University opened a Port Elizabeth branch, but this was superseded by a separate University of Port Elizabeth in 1964. Proposals to make the University of South Africa both an institution for external students and a residenial foundation in Johannesburg proved unacceptable and a separate Rand Afrikaans University was established in that city in 1967. There has also been, since the war, a great extension of the range of graduate fields of study, including courses in such subjects as architecture, computer science and industrial psychology. Greater emphasis, too, has been laid upon scientific investigation and many new research institutes have been founded, sometimes in conjunction with other bodies, among them the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. Certain universities have specialized in particular fields: forestry at Stellenbosch. for example, and veterinary science at Pretoria.

The universities of South Africa have, from the beginning, been state-aided, partially autonomous institutions, created in the first instance, by acts of parliament. Each has a Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, or Rector, who is in some cases the ex-officio Vice-Chancellor. The governing body is the Council and academic matters are the responsibility of Senate. The body of teachers and graduates from the Convocation. Universities for White students fall within the purview of the Minister of National Education, aided by a University Advisory Committee. Those for Africans, Indians and Coloured students are controlled by the ministers responsible for the race group in question. Councils include members appointed by the State President and by the Senates, and often representatives of public bodies and of benefactors. Senates consist of professors and heads of departments, with additional

members from other universities, in the case of the African, Indian and Coloured institutions, to guide their academic development.

Our universities have come to depend increasingly upon government financial aid to supplement thier incomes derived from fees and other sources of revenue. Before 1948, state assistance was often inadequate and the various methods adopted to determine subsidies failed in the long run to meet the needs of the various institutions. Subsidy cuts in the depression years and the subsequent imposition of a ceiling on government grants caused difficulties, particularly to the larger universities. In 1949, a new method of calculating subsidy was introduced, with a fixed sum allocated for all universities, to be divided according to needs. From 1953, however, following the publication of the Holloway Commission report, a new formula was introduced, greatly increasing state aid and making provision for periodic revision. The University of South Africa, long financed upon a different footing, was included in the general system of subsidies in 1964.

This has necessarily been a rapid survey of a long period of development and I am well aware that much has been left unsaid and much dealth with in very cursory fashion. Many of the stages along the road have been, and indeed, still are highly controversial topics. You do not need to be reminded of the sensitive areas. However, my purpose this afternoon has not been to explore contentious issues, but to record development in higher education as this nation emerged from its colonial past. And if, in so doing, I have laid greater stress upon early days, it is in the hope that I have contributed to a deeper understanding of those many influences at home and abroad which have led to the emergence of the university system of South Africa today.

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