

I very well remember my first glimpse of Rhodes late one afternoon in February 1947, as the Alicedale train began its leisurely descent of West Hill. I liked what I saw, and I have continued to do so ever since.

Why had I undertaken this arduous South African Railways journey a thousand kilometres and twenty-seven weary hours away from the comforts of home, a since-deceased gold mine on the East Rand? My father was a proud member of an ONF (Old Natal Family), and he had instilled this pride in his offspring, in spite of a Babylonian exile in the wastes of the Transvaal. In his view there were only two campuses fit for the son of a gentleman, Rhodes and Pietermaritzburg. Which was it to be? This was in effect decided by my St John's boarding school housemaster, who was one of several Rhodian teachers whom I greatly respected. He related an incident as he was on his way to a final examination, when he encountered a man who was having great difficulty catching his horse. He spent twenty minutes helping the man in this exacting exercise, which caused him to be late. "It didn't matter", he said, "I passed the exam." A university where horses appeared to roam the campus, and where catching one was more important than being in time for an exam, seemed to offer interesting possibilities. I was captivated.

The Grahamstown and Rhodes of 1947 were organically and recognisably the same places as they are to-day, especially the central core areas. The view from the Drostdy Arch in any direction was not much different from what it is now. There must be very few towns, and no other campus, in South Africa where this sense of continuity is so tangible. The physical environment seems to have contributed substantially to a sustained psychological climate as well. Town and gown continue to possess an



historically unbroken friendliness, intimacy and immediacy. Idiosyncracies and foibles are just as evident today, and just as tolerated. I felt that I had joined a family as well as a university, and that is still a feeling much prevalent in 1983.

Of course there were differences, very considerable ones. About 1100 students, one third of the present total, were enrolled. Prominent amongst them were the ex-servicemen, much older and prematurely matured from their recent war experiences. They upset the balance of the sexes, worked hard and played hard. For an ordinary school-leaving male they were formidable competition. What woman student would spare a glance at a mere seventeen year old when such certified and mature heroes were there in such abundance? The more immature student antics were suppressed, kindly but firmly, by the ex-service ethos.

They gave a lift to Rhodes sport, which is hard to imagine. Consider the 1947 cricket team as an example: it boasted no less than three future Springboks! I doubt if any Varsity side, before or since, could equal such a record. The Rugby team had four or five regular Eastern Province players. It was not all brawn either: in the years 1946-49 Rhodes produced sixteen Rhodes Scholars!

Student life in those days was both simpler and more formal. It was simpler both because there were fewer choices and because one was much surer of one's values and one's place in society. For most students the choice was an Arts, Science or Commerce degree, and within those degree structures not much more than half the present options were available. Notable absentees were Journalism, Pharmacy and Speech & Drama. Exotic sports and societies certainly did not exist. There was far less questioning of the ancient Verities and of the powers that be. "Inks"



and "Inkettes" knew their place. Theirs not to question the wearing of fifteen centimetre nametags or ridiculous bow-ties or ribbons for the first term. At least there was the compensation that "Down-Downs" or "Green Mambas" had not entered the Rhodes Lexicon. In The Founder's Hall no student of any ilk cared to cross swords with the Master, the formidable Major "Bolly" Walker. His voice would have intimidated a charging elephant!

Young people tend to dismiss formality as smacking too much of artificiality and convention. My generation on the whole found the greater formality to be supportive rather than restrictive. Wearing one's gown to town or lectures or formal meals defined one fairly emphatically as a student, something one sensed as being much more a privilege than a right. A black tie and dress suit indicated that a dance was a special occasion, and therefore to be savoured. To-day's absence of such detailed structure seems at least to me to have carried the process of levelling too far. Everything is now ordinary and workaday, and therefore humdrum. There is an emotional necessity for highlights in one's life: surely the "highs" which some seek in stimulants are both more artificial and certainly more dangerous than the older signalling systems of special dress and behaviour.

Very few students had much money. For example, there were exactly six cars owned by students, although one, a magnificent black 1928 Bentley Open Tourer with a large leather belt holding the bonnet down, was a thoroughbred by any standards. The university too was on the verge of bankruptcy, although this depressing fact was not apparent to students. With no private or University vehicles available transport consisted of one of Mr G A F Edge's lorries, with "cattle truck" sides and a gesture towards comfort in the form of old mattresses on the floor of the body.



Returning from a Rugby match at Somerset East or a day's outing on the beach was an unforgettable experience. All that kept one from freezing to death was a copious supply of blankets and perhaps some congenial company.

For Friday or Saturday night entertainment it was usually a choice of a "bioscope" at His Majesty's or the Odeon (neither of which seems to have changed by one iota), or else a student dance. Either way it cost five shillings for two. The balls were strictly formal ballroom dancing with music provided by the redoubtable Rollo Scott (of SABC fame) and his quartet. We were mercifully spared the "benefits" of amplification and so conversation was perfectly possible. A combination of TV and professional dramatists had not killed off student theatricals, which often attained a surprisingly high standard, especially in the competent hands of Leon Gluckman.

Lack of mobility, smaller numbers, and a paucity of outside entertainment lead to greater versatility and less specialisation. The tennis champion, for example, was quite capable of re-appearing as the concert pianist. The term "rugger-bugger" was unknown: rugby players did not lose status by doubling up as serious scholars, and vice-versa. A sense of noblesse oblige often compelled one to attempt strange exploits for one's Hall. I once had to uphold the honour of Founder's Hall by stepping into the boxing ring with a two-metre giant from Drostdy Hall. Fortunately his knowledge of the noble art was even more rudimentary than mine, but his reach was a lot longer. I survived the three rounds largely by keeping out of his way, and so lost the bout on points.



Contact with the farming community was a feature of those days. I vividly recall a cricket encounter at Coombs with a team which seemed to consist entirely of Dixons and Emslies. The wives played a crucial role by sabotaging the visitors with the quality (and quantity) of the lunches. In the Coombs encounter the strategy backfired. I was batting for Rhodes very uncertainly before the lunch break. Whatever the good ladies had provided caused me to lose all inhibitions, and by three o'clock I had completed a whirlwind century, the first of my career.

By the time I had reached Rhodes the horses of my housemaster's day had shrunk to donkeys, but these too had their role to play. Quite frequently the less formidable of the Housewardens would find uninvited quadrupeds in their quarters on returning home. The College House Warden, Jeff Butler, brother of Professor Guy Butler, was far too dāunting a figure for such pranks to be attempted on him. Lesser livestock, such as goats and fowls were sometimes in evidence. "Scope Nite" was a great institution, at which student vaudeville was interspersed with the film offerings. A magnificent white rooster, on one such occasion, was launched from His Majesty's gallery, and did a perfect three-point landing on the stage.

In summary, Rhodes was just as happy, zany and purposeful a place thirty-five years ago as it is to-day. When I left in June 1949 to continue my studies in Mathematics at Oxford I took with me a varied kaleidoscope of happy memories. I felt in my bones that some day I should be back in some capacity. It is said that every private has a field-marshal's baton in his knapsack. In those days I should not have dared to speculate, even to myself, that there might, just might, have been a ghostly Vice-Chancellor's mortar board in my departing luggage.



This peculiar Rhodian mix of versatility and generalism has produced a high percentage of students who have risen to the top of their professions. Whether it be in business, the Church or education the Rhodes formula seems to make for good managers. The College House of my day seemed to specialise in education. At least ten of my immediate vintage, either are, or have been, headmasters. The success of earlier generations leaves one with the greatest confidence that present-day Rhodes students will also make a significant contribution to their countries and to the world. I wish them at least as much fun and sense of accomplishment as I have enjoyed, both as a student and in my professional life.

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