

John William Bews *a commemorative note*

A South African academic might pinch himself today to read of the 1931 centenary meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, a meeting which drew delegates, in the phrase of the time, from 'the whole civilised world.' Not only was the large South African delegation led by the Principal of the Natal University College, Prof. J.W. Bews, but none other than General Smuts was appointed to the presidential chair of the meeting. Such easy prominence of South African men of letters must occasion some nostalgia, but shouldn't obscure the fact that these two men, Smuts and Bews, were linked intellectually by more than a passing burst of fame: the 1920s saw Smuts develop his 'holistic' philosophy, and Bews's *Life as a Whole* of 1937 was the summation of many papers and books directed to a similar view. As such it was warmly welcomed by Smuts, who claimed in the preface that it provided the sort of corroboration that his theory needed.

These heady heights to a botanist's career were probably far from the mind of the quiet scholar from the Orkneys who, in George Gale's portrait, was seen in the early twenties, 'riding his bicycle down Longmarket Street from Thanet House almost every afternoon, on his way to the Natal Society Library, his coat open, his pipe in his mouth, and his hat well back on his head.'

Yet it was this young professor of the Natal University College who had swept away such expectations of 'Botany' as were entertained for instance by one freshman of 1917 — 'a kind of misgiving that botany might prove to be a somewhat effeminate pursuit: the collecting and labelling of flowers'. Bews instilled in his students an exciting sense of occasion as he taught them that they were audience here in Natal to some of the most complex and climactic stages of world ecology, especially as 'geographically, southern Africa was a cul-de-sac of the great tropical reservoirs of plant life.' (The charge of 'effeminacy' listed above reminds one of the nice point that the first chair in botany in South Africa was held by a woman, Dr Bertha Stoneman, at that amazing feminine institution, the Huguenot College at Wellington.)

Bews's originality was to subsume Botany into the larger context of the 'ecological viewpoint', and he is generally credited with the introduction into our academic life of the embracing study of ecology, the perspective defined in his dictum that 'Environment, function and organism constitute the fundamental biological triad.' Dr R. Allen Dyer, who studied under Bews in the early 1920s, insists that the ecological perspective was no mere addendum to his lectures: it was the spirit that breathed through all his



Professor J.W. Bews.

(Photograph: Natal University College Magazine 1934)

dynamic teaching. Dr Dyer speaks of his ability to inspire his students without in any way speaking above their heads, so much did he exude confidence that he was on top of his subject. The 'fundamental biological triad' might sound a little dry, but what it did was to make every veld excursion the occasion for those 'grand hypotheses, ranging over continents in space and epochs in time, which Bews now began to formulate from the facts revealing themselves from his analysis . . .' Of course these facts were the result of a thoroughly scrupulous groundwork, but his students never felt they were mere classifiers, as can be guessed from some of Bews's papers:

One of the most important things is to be always on the outlook for cases of plant suppression, that is, examples of one type of plant being killed out by another. For instance, as one walks along the margin of a forest one can often discover the dead remains of light-demanding shrubs just within the outside belt of trees. This means that the forest is progressive and is gaining ground at the expense of the surrounding grassland . . . Everywhere, as I have expressed it elsewhere, a dead or dying plant should act as a 'flag signal' to the ecologist.

Thus the excitement and dedication Bews instilled in his students, even when they had to penetrate the Orcadian brogue to learn such secrets (to the end they never knew whether the Professor's Indian assistant was 'Rajah' or 'Roger'!) Much walking must have gone into this expert acquaintance with Natal of the professor with a limp — Bews suffered from a hip complaint all his life. Depending how far he went from Pietermaritzburg, the first stage of his exploration might be by train or by bicycle, but as often as not it was by one of 'the four clanging trams which lined up outside the City Hall at regular intervals and started off simultaneously in the four directions of the compass.' And as Dr Dyer reminds us, these excursions were doing nothing less than taking Academia into the veld: it was one of Bews's contributions (in terms of the prevailing academic climate) to make the 'field-trip' become an essential part of academic study.

What his students had every reason to fear was that his presence in Natal was too good to last. The university that Bews came to in 1910 had, by 1920, not entirely won over the public or established its viability as an institution. Of course these were abnormal times, but at the end of the 1914-18 war, with the brand new buildings commandeered by the military for a convalescent home, student numbers were down to 39, and it was a matter for debate whether the province should continue to carry the College.

Now let it immediately be said that in both the demeanour of his personality and the importance of what he had to say, Bews reached well beyond the university environment. Professor John Phillips recalls that

My first, admittedly nervous, approach to Bews was at the time of the appearance of his *Grasses and Grasslands of South Africa* (Davis, Pietermaritzburg, 1918). I was then a young 'learner' forester in the Pirie Forests in the Eastern Cape, anxious to know more about the implied ecological interrelations touched upon by Bews. His reply was in his own hand . . . kindly, encouraging, and indicating that even I might be able to add to the still-too-restricted information available on this subject. He presented me with several reprints of his papers on the ecology of Natal. These stimulated me to observe and to think: they generated in my young mind the essentials of an ecological approach.

Thus was a learner-forester put on the path to becoming one of South Africa's foremost professors of Botany.



Giants of South African Botany — Bews and H.W.R. Marloth (1855-1931, perhaps the country's most outstanding botanist) taking time off in the Little Karoo during a conference at Oudtshoorn. Bews looks something like a veld Napoleon thinking out a campaign, but Prof. Olive Hilliard of the local University Botany Department points out that any Orkney man has the 'trawler captain' in his blood.

(Photograph: Botany Department, University of Natal)

But it would be on purely academic grounds that his students might fear for the length of Bews's stay in Natal. It was becoming clear that works such as *Plant forms and their evolution in South Africa* of 1925 were winning their author an international reputation, and it seemed inevitable that he would find an appointment of greater eminence elsewhere. Invitations were certainly forthcoming, and Bews experimented with such a move in 1927, when he became for twenty months Professor of Botany at the University of Durham in its Newcastle centre. Nevertheless the experiment served to convince him that Natal was where he wanted to be, and it was back here in 1929 that he published his most considerable and best-received work, *The World's Grasses — their differentiation, distribution, economics and ecology*.

By now Bews was the *de facto* Principal of the University — a unanimous choice, though the post would only be formalised in 1930 — and was thus more and more taken up with affairs outside his academic interest. Students noted that one got from him now certainly some of the best, but also some of the worst lectures at the college, so little time did he have for lecture preparation. ('He never lectured' says Dr Dyer, remembering him in action in 1923, 'he discoursed'!) If he hadn't time now for such fluent teaching, posterity must certainly forgive him! — for the University of Natal owes quite as much to his administration in the key year 1928 as did botany to his writings.

What was going to be the shape of tertiary education in Natal? In this year a government commission reported that the attempt to run University classes at the Technical College in Durban had not been a success, and recommended that Durban be the home for technical education only, and that all University education should be conducted in Pietermaritzburg.

Now Bews was uniquely positioned to know that a single university running two campuses was a viable proposition. He had had first-hand experience of such foundations at St Andrews in Scotland and at Durham in England, both of which provided academic facilities at more than one centre. Small wonder that when a crucial meeting was called in response to the government commission, his influence proved decisive. This meeting, which virtually decided the fate of university education in Natal, was held, judiciously and symbolically, at that venerable half-way house, Inchanga, in September 1928. (Did the delegates travel there by train?! Did they meet at the Colorado Hotel?!) Opposing factions wanted on the one side to retain the entire University in Pietermaritzburg and on the other to defer to commercial and numerical seniority and transfer the whole institution to a new base in Durban. So it was perhaps Bews's greatest 'non-botanical' triumph (though he was wont to interpret such things ecologically) that he convinced the meeting of the viability of a two-centre university, and carried the vote at the end of the day.

Incidentally, though Prof. Phillips remembers not a trace of dourness in the Scottish principal ('He was gifted with a delightful little smile, always the subject of affectionate remark') one Scottish talent seems to have been of tangible benefit to the principal's University. Says Prof. Phillips:

It occurs to me that it might not be generally remembered that J.W. had a sound sense of business, and his business acumen in University matters was widely reported. Very occasionally he indicated an interest in investments and the 'state of the market'. At death his estate

'amounted' to far more than that of the average academic, and he willed an amount of it to the College.

Lest that seem to touch too much of a materialist note, a tribute should also be recorded from Dr Reg. Lawrence, husband of the late Prof. Ella Pratt-Yule, who had arrived in the 1930s to occupy the position for which she became famous, as head of the Department of Psychology. She committed the crime of falling pregnant whilst engaged in full-time teaching, and Dr Lawrence remembers with a chuckle how the academic climate of the day found this little short of immoral. It was Bews (perhaps egged on by the fact that he was helping a fellow graduate of St Andrews) who cut away the red tape and quietly made sure that she got the special leave that, today, a woman academic can count upon as her hard-won right.

Of such stuff, then, was the first Principal of the University of Natal, and such was the loss that the University suffered when Bews died in 1938 at the sadly early age of 53. (It seems that the hip trouble gradually took on a tubercular complication). It had only been a few years before that, presiding at the meeting in 1930 when the University College came of age, General Smuts had said: 'I feel honoured to have Professor Bews as chairman this evening. Like many of you, I have sat for years at his feet . . .'

REFERENCE

GALE, George W., *John William Bews*, U.N.P., 1954.

Notes and verbatim anecdotes from Prof. John Phillips, sometime Head of Department of Botany, University of Witwatersrand, Dr R. Allen Dyer, retired Head of the Botanical Institute, Pretoria, and Dr R.F. Lawrence, sometime Curator of the Natal and Albany Museums.

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