

## Obituaries

### *Dr Ernst Gideon Malherbe*

At the end of November, 1982, some three weeks after his eighty-seventh birthday, Dr Ernst Gideon Malherbe died in Durban. Few men have contributed more to the welfare and progress of South Africa. Throughout his long and busy life he devoted himself to the promoting of co-operation and harmony among our diverse racial groups.

If any man had cause to be a “bittereinder”, a narrow racist, it was surely Ernst Malherbe. In the impressionable years of early childhood his home, a Free State parsonage, was looted and burned by British soldiers, his father made a prisoner of war, and the rest of the family, including the five year old Ernst, forced to seek refuge at the Cape. But the father drew the right lesson and passed it on to his son! “It was war, and war is a terrible thing.” Throughout his life, Dr Malherbe, an eighth generation descendant of another refugee, a Huguenot, remained a thorough Afrikaner, proud of the Afrikaner volk and its achievements, but also a citizen of the world, singularly able and willing to work with people of the most diverse origins and experiences.

Education at a small Boland school and at the University of Stellenbosch was followed by extensive research for a doctoral degree at Columbia University and other seats of learning in the United States. To pay his way this versatile and ever-resourceful man took on a variety of jobs, among them shovelling snow at a few cents per hour, steering a taxi through the crowded New York streets (he was always as proud of his taxi-driver’s licence as of any of his academic honours), tending seasick cattle on an overloaded cattleboat, and tutoring the mentally defective heir to a millionaire at a Boy Scout camp.

On his return to South Africa in 1924, he became a senior lecturer in education at Cape Town University under Fred Clarke and published *Education in South Africa*, still the most authoritative work in its field. Some fifty years later, when retirement brought some leisure to an incredibly busy life, he brought his history up to date in a second volume. In his first volume, he gave no space to non-White education; in the second he amply made good this omission. Malherbe could learn as well as teach.

In the thirties he founded, and became director of, the Bureau of Educational and Social Research. One result was particularly noteworthy. Investigation into bilingualism convinced him of the need to educate English and Afrikaans speaking children side by side in the same schools.

When a Commission was appointed under the aegis of the Carnegie Corporation to investigate the Poor White problem, the presence in South



Dr E.G. Malherbe

(Photograph: PRO University of Natal)

Africa of a large mass of poor, unskilled, often illiterate and, in many cases, possibly uneducable Whites, Malherbe was a most active member. The problem is still with us but seems no longer so intractable. How much improvement was due to general economic expansion is arguable, but the Commission certainly made an important contribution.

Towards the end of the decade, Malherbe was Director of Census. Then came World War II and, by the barest Parliamentary majority, South Africa decided to join the Allied ranks. Nationalist opposition was fierce, and sabotage and subversion were rife.

A group of liberally-minded academics, notably Alfred Hoernlé and Leo Marquard, persuaded Smuts to set up, under Malherbe, a corps of information officers to counter subversion in the armed forces and to stimulate the troops to consider what they were fighting for. About the same time, Smuts made Malherbe Director of Military Intelligence. Henceforward South African propaganda which had hitherto been too defensive, too prone merely to counter Nazi propaganda, became much more positive and more South African in its orientation. Also, the unrivalled insight Malherbe gained into treason within our borders made him then and for the rest of his life a feared and disliked object to not a few politicians still active. Though habitually diplomatic, genial and urbane, he has never been afraid to remind even the most exalted of their nefarious traffickings during World War II.

Just before the War ended he became Principal of the Natal University College and remained there until his retirement twenty years later. Under

his guidance it acquired full university status, spread from Pietermaritzburg to Durban, added a Medical School, and increased enormously in size and importance. In his early years he had striven to have Afrikaans and English speaking children taught in the same classes; now he struggled to throw open the universities to students of all races. But for a time his policy was defeated by sectional prejudice.

Malherbe's record is long and illustrious. He did much for his country. But it is to be mourned that the climate of his times did not permit this gifted, dynamic, industrious and far-seeing man to do more. We should then have been assured of a more promising future.

J.W. MACQUARRIE

