

# *Edgar Harry Brookes*

1897-1979

Edgar Brookes died on 22nd April, 1979. His was a great life, richly varied, richly creative, richly beneficial to his fellow-men. The people of Natal are privileged to have been able to count him amongst their number. He was not a South African by birth, but no "son of the soil" was a more devoted South African than he.

He came to Natal from England with his parents in 1901, when he had just turned four. The long agony of the Anglo-Boer war had all but ended, and it was to a British-dominated South Africa that the small boy was brought. It says much of the man that the first cause to which he felt himself drawn was that of defeated Afrikanerdom. The epic story of this pioneer people captured his imagination; its recent sufferings fired his indignation and sympathy; and he gave expression to his feelings in a volume of republican verse, published when he was a young man in his twenties. A long pilgrimage lay ahead; but the end of that journey was implicit in its beginnings. Illuminating his compassion for the Afrikaner was a Christian faith which would, as it developed, lead him away from sectionalism to delight in the brotherhood of men, and devotion to the cause of a society free of discrimination.

In later life, Edgar Brookes would liken himself to a second-rate J. H. Hofmeyr. It was one of the few dubiously just judgments of a very just man. The similarities were there, of course; and when they are compared, Edgar Brookes does, it seems, trail the man whom he so greatly admired. There were, for example, the precocious, but unequal, scholastic achievements: Hofmeyr matriculated first class at the age of twelve; Brookes matriculated second class at the age of fourteen. There were the youthful, but unevenly matched, publishing achievements: Hofmeyr produced a biography of his uncle, "Onze Jan", when he was in his teens; Brookes produced a volume of political verse when he was in his twenties. There were the brilliant, but unequal, early academic careers: Hofmeyr, after studying at the South African College and at Oxford, was appointed Professor of Classics at the Johannesburg School of Mines when he was twenty-two, and became principal of that institution three years later; Brookes, after studying as an external student through the University of South Africa, was appointed lecturer in Political Science at the Transvaal University College when he was twenty-three, and became a professor in that institution six years later. There were also the public careers: Hofmeyr was selected to serve as administrator of the Transvaal when he was twenty-seven, and after some vicissitudes rose to be deputy prime minister of the Union of South Africa; Brookes was selected to serve as a South African delegate at the League of Nations when he was thirty, and after some vicissitudes became a senator representing Natal African interests in the Union parliament.

When all this has been said, there were dimensions to the life of Edgar



**E. H. BROOKES**

Photograph: *The Natal Witness*, Pietermaritzburg

Brookes that were lacking in the life of J. H. Hofmeyr. Brookes was a "whole man" in a way that Hofmeyr was not — less brilliant, to be sure, but very brilliant nevertheless, and blessed with a maturity of the emotions and the spirit which Hofmeyr seemed to lack. To continue the comparison could only diminish both, for greatness is not cast in a single mould. Though they shared much in common, they were, in the last analysis, very different men. It is fortunate for South Africa that they were.

Throughout his career, Edgar Brookes was conscious of his development being shaped not simply by his own will and purposes, but also by chance interventions, twists of fortune, that were beyond his personal control. For the people of Natal, one such moment stands out as particularly important: his failure to secure the South African Party nomination for the Pretoria East constituency in 1933. By then, the great metamorphosis in his outlook had already begun. He had renounced the segregationist principles which had informed his first major work of scholarship, *The History of Native Policy in South Africa from 1830 to the Present Day*. He and a number of other prominent South Africans (amongst whom were C. T. Loram, J. D. Rheinallt Jones, D. D. T. Jabavu, R. F. A. Hoernlé and Leo Marquard) had established the South African Institute of Race Relations; and he was also working in close collaboration with J. H. Hofmeyr. For a man with his views and interests, an academic career at Pretoria University had ceased to be appropriate. He decided accordingly to resign his professorship in Political Science for a life in active politics. But the unfavourable Pretoria East nomination decision cut that career short before it had properly begun. Without a university chair and without a seat in parliament, he turned to fund-raising for the Institute of Race Relations, of which he had been elected president in 1933; and in 1934 he made his headquarters in Durban.

Natal, which had been his home in childhood and youth, now became his home again. With his return to it there began a career of service to his fellow-men in an awe-inspiring variety of roles: as principal of Adams College from 1934 to 1945; as senator representing the Africans of Natal from 1937 to 1952; as a member of numerous government committees and commissions;<sup>1</sup> as a South African representative at UNESCO in 1947; as a churchman and a member of many influential public bodies;<sup>2</sup> as an academic at Natal University, Pietermaritzburg, from 1953 to 1969;<sup>3</sup> as a visiting scholar at a variety of distinguished overseas institutions of learning; as chairman of the Natal Convention in 1961; as national chairman of the Liberal Party from 1963 to 1968; as a teacher at St John's Diocesan College, Pietermaritzburg, in the late sixties and early seventies, as a priest of the Anglican Church from 1973 until his death; and as a friend of the needy throughout.

During his years as an academic in Pretoria, Edgar Brookes had, in addition to his *History of Native Policy*, produced two important volumes, one entitled *The Colour Problem of South Africa*, the other *Native Education in South Africa*. He had also contributed to such notable works as *Coming of Age* and I. Schapera's *Western Civilisation and the Natives of South Africa*. Thereafter for twenty years, while he was principal of Adams and a Senator in the Union parliament, the nature of his activities changed. For the printed record of his ideas and opinions one has to scour sources such as newspapers and journals, the publications of the Institute of Race Relations, and government documents, including the outwardly uninviting volumes of *Senate Debates*, to whose pages

his Augustan oratory contributed an unfamiliar, but welcome, literary splendour. Then, with his return to academic life at Natal University in 1953, a new phase of scholarly and literary activity began and gathered momentum until, in the late fifties and the sixties, his pen seemed never to be still. The pattern can be seen in the publication dates of some of the more important of his works: *South Africa in a Changing World*, 1953; *The Native Reserves of Natal* (written in collaboration with N. Hurwitz), 1957; *Civil Liberty in South Africa* (written in collaboration with J. B. Macaulay), 1958; *The Commonwealth Today*, 1959; *The City of God and the Politics of Crisis*, 1960; *Power, Law, Right and Love: A Study in Political Values*, 1962; *A History of Natal* (written in collaboration with C. de B. Webb), 1965; *A History of the University of Natal*, 1966; *Apartheid: A Documentary Study of Modern South Africa*, 1968; *White Rule in South Africa* (a revision of his *History of Native Policy*), 1974; and *A South African Pilgrimage*, 1977.

These achievements won him high academic honours in this country and abroad. In different circumstances, he might have been the recipient of others, for there were — in addition to the students and intellectuals who gained enrichment from his teaching and writing — millions of human beings who had no means of honouring him, but whose needs and interests were his constant concern. To that it must, in fairness, be added that amongst his compatriots there were some who would gladly have seen him stripped of all honour. The principles which he arrived at through his faith and his scholarship were not universally shared; and they ran so directly and strongly into his public life that responses to him could never be neutral. Political scientist, historian, cleric, he lived by his Christianity, and saw it as his moral responsibility to contribute (so far as his abilities and the times would allow) to the shaping of history by active involvement in politics. Such a man was bound to have critics and enemies in great number. He never flinched in the face of their threats; nor did he respond to their attacks with rancour. Wit was his weapon rather than hate.

If compassion, intellectual brilliance, courage, generosity of spirit and humour were some of the qualities that distinguished Edgar Brookes, this was not the full range. He was a complex man. A scintillating common-room companion, and a convivial dinner-table guest, he was difficult to get to know, nevertheless. He treasured his friendships; but they deepened very slowly. Passionate by nature, he was also shy of intimacy, and preferred to build most of his relationships round light-hearted banter and, more seriously, round discussion of matters of general concern. He was also a man of driving ambition. He knew this, and at times it troubled him. He needed to score up achievements; he was gratified by the honours that came to him; and he found amusement in being able to claim all the titles appropriate to the male sex on a South African income tax form: "The Hon., Prof., Dr., Rev., Mr.". One of the more difficult challenges of his life was that of reconciling himself to the fact that in public affairs he was "the coming man" who never "arrived". He saw this as a sign of failure. But the explanation was different. His life took the course it did because principle was stronger in him than his very strong ambition. It was this that made his talents so fruitful; and it was this that made him a great man.

C. de B. WEBB

## NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Particularly important for Natal was the University of South Africa Commission, which met under Brookes's chairmanship. Its report included recommendations under which the Natal University College was to gain autonomy as the University of Natal.
- <sup>2</sup> Of the various public bodies on which he served, the South African Institute of Race Relations continued to enjoy his particularly vigorous support. He was twice president of the Institute during this period. His services as a lay member of the Anglican Church was recognised by the conferment upon him of membership of the Order of Simon of Cyrene in 1962.
- <sup>3</sup> After serving briefly as a temporary lecturer in the Department of History and Political Science, he was appointed Senior Lecturer in 1954, and in 1959 he became the university's third Professor of History and Political Science in succession to A. F. Hattersley and A. M. Keppel-Jones. On his retirement at the end of 1962, he remained closely associated with the university in a number of different capacities until 1969. It was during his tenure of the headship of the Department that plans were laid for a new *History of Natal* to supersede Robert Russell's *Natal; the Land and its Story*. The new *History*, written after his retirement, is now in its third imprint.