

# THE HISTORY OF SACRED HEART COLLEGE IN RELATION TO SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

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History pupils at school seldom think of themselves as taking part in history as-it-is-happening. Nor do they think of the history of their school as a reaction to and reflection of the broader social history. The history of Sacred Heart College has numerous examples of how a school is influenced by outside historical events.

## DISCOVERY OF GOLD

The establishment of Sacred Heart College by the Marist Brothers in 1889 can be directly related to the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand and the influx of people to the goldfields. Although the Superior General of Marist Brothers was reluctant at first to establish a school in Johannesburg, the success of the Holy Family Convent which was started in 1887, soon underlined the need for a boys school. In October 1889 the first 14 boys were admitted to a small building in what was later to become Koch Street.

## THE UITLANDER PROBLEM

The tension in the Transvaal Republic between the Government of President Paul Kruger and the so called Uitlanders, are reflected in an incident which took place in 1895. In that year President Kruger gave the school permission to introduce a naval cadet corps. This a guard of honour for the President at the Johannesburg show using some obsolete Martini Henri carbines and rusty bayonets. The President inspected the youthful guard of honour and approved of their smartness. Soon however, an order arrived from Pretoria for the cadets to be disarmed "in case they proved a menace to the state."

## SECOND ANGLO-BOER WAR

Although the enrolment of the school fell from 800 to 150 at the outbreak of the Anglo Boer war in 1899, the school remained open for the duration of the war. It was placed under the protection of France and the Tricolor, adorned with the emblem of the Sacred Heart, floated above the school for three years as a sign of its neutrality. The name Sacred Heart College dates from this period. A hospital where Boer and British casualties were equally treated was set up in the unused part of the school by the French Red Cross. For the matriculation examination in 1900 the papers were brought from Cape Town under British military escort. In that year there was only one successful candidate.

## THE MOVE TO OBSERVATORY

The rapid growth of Johannesburg following the war so encroached upon the Koch Street grounds that it was decided to obtain a large site in Observatory where the first building was opened in September 1924.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The English speaking community of the Union of South Africa identified with the decision of the Smuts Government to enter the second world war. It is therefore not surprising the 845 old boys of SHC enlisted for active service. Because of the obvious link between cadet training and the defence force, cadets became very popular. The college detachment had three full companies of infantry,

a platoon of signallers and a platoon trained in the use of the trench mortar and bren gun. In December 1944 several matriculants volunteered for service. A chapel was built on the school grounds to commemorate the 123 scholars of the school who died in the two world wars.

## CULTURAL INTEGRATION

In 1948 the National Party took control of the government and initiated the era of segregated education. At this stage there were no black students at the school. The first Chinese student to be accepted to a white school in South Africa was admitted to SHC in 1933. Since then Chinese pupils have studied at this school and this tradition was continued after 1948 in spite of official government policy. The cultural diversity within the school was further increased following the independence of the Portuguese and British Colonies in Africa, because many Catholic families of Portuguese, Italian, Greek and British descent moved to Johannesburg. Because of the policy of the school to keep its fees as low as possible, many of these families could afford private schooling in the Catholic tradition.

In 1976 civil unrest, centred mainly around education issues, erupted in Soweto. In the previous year the Association of Teachers in Catholic Schools came out strongly in favour of integrated education in Catholic schools. Thus it was that when black Catholic parents applied for admission of their children to SHC, the principal of the college could make the following statement: "In terms of our mandate to spread the gospel of Christ I have no choice but to accept them into the establishment. It is our quiet resolve to open our school to all in the spirit which we believe to be Christian and authentically patriotic."

Although this move was directly opposed to government policy, no open confrontation developed.

The School has responded to this cultural diversity in many ways: as from 1986 six languages will be offered in the curriculum; an international fête has become an annual fixture on the school calendar at which the various cultural groups are encouraged to express their cultural identity. In 1985 the three head prefects are respectively Black, Chinese and Portuguese. As far as can be determined this is the first time that a black student has become a head prefect at a predominantly white school in South Africa. The changing cultural pattern within the school led to a decline in interest in the cadets and the detachment was disbanded in 1977.

In 1980 the school underwent another historical change — a change that upset many marist old boys. In that year 300 girls were admitted to the school! Population shifts in Johannesburg had led to a decline in numbers at the Holy Family and Ursuline Convents. This led to the decision to close these convents and transfer the girls to SHC. Although the official name of the school had always been Sacred Heart College, this was not generally known. Most people knew the school as Marist Brothers. When the school became co-educational, the old name of SHC was re-instated.

History not only happened in the past, it is also taking place in the present. The last historical event to be described is therefore the recently announced plans for 1986 to introduce Afrikaans as second medium of instruction and to offer religious education in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. This means that from 1986 the school will be a multi-cultural and multi-racial, co-educational, parallel medium, Christian school.

This step by the school is also related to numerous outside events. The first mention of Afrikaans as a possible medium of instruction in Marist brother's Schools, is found in the Marist Centenary Digest in 1967. The second Vatican Council established a new ecumenical spirit which influenced Catholic educational policy. In 1977 the principal of SHC characterised the challenge of the age not only as reconciliation between Black and White, but also between Boer and Uitlander as well as between the separated Christian traditions. The past success of the school in bringing together children of different backgrounds, laid the foundation for this next step. In 1977 the Chinese Consul General had already remarked that SHC "has always been the most cosmopolitan school and serves as an example of how people of different cultural backgrounds can come together to study and play without friction."

Within Afrikanerdom the split between the verligtes and verkramptes enabled Afrikaners to seek educational reforms which differed markedly from the traditional Afrikaner thinking on educational matters. The report of the De Lange Commission of enquiry into education also played a role in setting the scene for these changes within the school.

## CONCLUSION

It can therefore be seen in the history of SHC how the school was influenced by and responded to various outside historical events. A school is not a passive observer

of history but an active participant. In his prize giving speech in 1977, the Principal, Br. Neil McGurk, pointed out that the changing patterns and demands of society always raise issues that require of the school evolution and re-alignment, True education, he said, "Must aim at the formation of the human person with respect to his ultimate goal and must be directed to the good of the society of which the student is a member."

The very nature of education, and of the school, therefore demands an active interaction between the school and the society in which it is situated and this, I feel, is clearly demonstrated in the history of Sacred Heart College.



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