

"The struggle for survival:"* Adams College's battle with the Bantu Education Act

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Introduction

"Adams was the home of inter-racial conferences and gatherings, and its school arrangements were made, not to exemplify apartheid, but to the glory of God. Therefore it became in the eyes of the government an 'unnational school', an alien institution, and therefore it had to go."¹

Subsequent to failed attempts to register as an independent school in the wake of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, on 02 December 1956, after more than a century of existence, Adams College, combining a high school, a music school, a teachers training college, and an industrial school, held its final assembly. When Adams reopened in January 1957, with most of the staff having left, including George Copeland Grant-principal of the College from 1949-1956, it had been renamed 'Amanzimtoti Zulu College', and was now under the authority of the Nationalist Party government's department of Native Affairs' Bantu Education subdivision.

The process culminating in what must have been, for many, an extremely emotional occasion on December 02, had begun in 1949 with the constitution of the Eiselen Commission, headed by Dr W.W.M Eiselen-inspector of Native Education in the Transvaal Province- whose report, two years later, paved the way for the passing of the infamous Bantu Education Act, which was, inter alia, aimed at transferring education of the so-called "Bantu" from Missions, the main source of black education prior to the passing of the Bantu Education Act, to the department of Bantu Affairs.

Mission education, argued the then minister of Bantu Education, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd, not only tended to create 'false expectations' amongst the

* This quote is from Jack Grant's *"The liquidation of Adam College"*.

¹ Foreword by Alan Paton in Jack Grant's *"The liquidation of Adams College"*.pg.04.

natives, but was also in direct conflict with South Africa's apartheid policies.²

While Adams College named after its 1847 founder, Newton Adams- one of the first American Board Missionaries to arrive in South Africa- ultimately surrendered to the regime's imposition of Bantu Education, it was not without a fight. Encouraged by Grant, affectionately known as Jack, and the Board of Governors, Adams embarked on an intensive campaign to remain independent. In "The Liquidation of Adams College" written by Grant, published almost a year after the closure of Adams, with a foreword by Alan Paton, Grant provides some background information, including correspondences exchanged between Adams and the Bantu Education department, and the numerous meetings that were held with commissioners of the Eiselen Commission and other government officials, leading up to the closure of Adams College and the advent of Amanzimtoti Zulu College.

Together with the 1913 Land Act, the Bantu Education Act became one of the most loathed legislations of the apartheid era. It was often blamed for the inadequate supply of educational facilities in black schools and colleges. Without a doubt, Bantu Education became synonymous with an 'inferior' form of education. Amongst black people, the inability to perform simple calculations, read properly, or a reasonable command for the English language- perceived by many as a sign of good education and 'intellect'- was usually blamed on Bantu Education. "*I le Bantu Education le*" which translates to "It is this Bantu Education", became quite a common phrase in many a township.

Reiterating the perceived inferior nature of Bantu Education is the current Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor's statement "The aim of the Bantu Education Act (1954) was to destroy the education that black people enjoyed. The aim was to educate black children only for the labour needs of

² Rose, Brian W., "*Bantu Education as a facet of South African policy*", pg. 209.

the apartheid state.”³ Also providing some justification for the ‘All roads lead to Bantu Education’ theory is Verwoerd’s widely quoted dictum “There is no place for him-that is the African-in the European Community above the level of certain forms of labour.”⁴

At the beginning of 1954, in the midst of Adams’ battle against Bantu Education, Grant had his office and home searched by members of the CID. It was this unexpected visit, which made Grant realise, “The struggle for survival had begun”. The proposed topic of the research is derived from this pronouncement. Focusing on the period from 1953 to 1957, I will investigate the character of this “struggle” which takes place in an era of extreme paranoia, where anyone who appeared to be posing a challenge to one or more aspects of the hegemonic apartheid system was regarded with intense suspicion and, sometimes, even dismissed as “communist.” Why did the officials at the College risk all this labelling and decide to confront Bantu Education head on? Was this a collective decision? Who were its main proponents? What were some of the main reasons for its failure?

Susan Durand mentions that as a result of increased political discussions amongst the community of Adams College “staff seemed to be more politically assertive during the passing of the Bantu Education Act, in their attempt to save Adams College.”⁵ Did this ‘politicisation’ have anything to do with the police search conducted on Grant’s office and home? Did the principal and the Board see their action as a direct challenge to the mighty apartheid regime? These are some of the questions the research hopes to answer.

Reasons for choosing the topic

³ Address at the land hand-over and centenary celebrations at Tiger Kloof Educational Institution on 12 September 2004.

⁴ Speech delivered in January 1954 in Parliament.

⁵ Durand, Susan, “*Total Institution*” or “*A Beacon of Light*”? *Some Reflections on Adams College*, paper presented at a workshop held at the then University of Natal from October 27-28, 1988.

Undoubtedly, Adams College contributed towards the education of many prominent South Africans. There was also a strong connection between Adams and many 'outstanding' individuals of yesteryear. Amongst the alumni were writer Ellen Khuzwayo, John Langalibalele Dube, the first President -General of the South African Native National Congress, the predecessor to the African National Congress, and Es'kia Mphahlele. Albert Luthuli who also acted as the College Choir Master was the first African in the 1920s to join the teaching staff. In 1925 Z.K. Mathews became the first African to be appointed as head of the high school.⁶ Finding out the real reasons for the closure of this "Great Institution" triggered my initial interest in the topic.

Furthermore, the story of Adams College opens up a whole new debate regarding the definition of "victim of apartheid". Indeed, to a large degree, learners and staff of Adams College and other mission schools were dearly affected as a result of a particular legislation of the apartheid system: The Bantu Education Act, hence, should, also be classified as "victims" of apartheid. Regrettable, however, is that such victims, outside of the mainstream liberation movement, seldom receive mention in the "rewriting" of South Africa's history books, and their tales were, unfortunately, also not prioritised by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions which adopted a very narrow definition of "victim of apartheid."

In accordance with the government's campaign, spearheaded by the departments of Education, and Arts and Culture, of rewriting the country's "distorted" and "incomplete" past, stories of such long forgotten people who suffered as a result of South Africa's racist policies should also be told. In addition to meeting the requirements for an Honours degree, my aim is also to relate such long forgotten stories which, I believe, form an integral part of our past.

⁶ Durand, Susan "Total Institution" or "A Beacon of Light"?

Broad problems and issues to be investigated

As a start, and to be able to understand Adams College's response to the Act, it is crucial to investigate the provisions of the Bantu Education Act. What did the Act mean for mission schools? Mission education, argued the then minister of Bantu Education, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd, in 1954 at the introduction of the Act in parliament, not only tended to create 'false expectations' amongst the natives, but was also in direct conflict with South Africa's apartheid policies.⁷

"The government is holding a veritable pistol at our heads in the Act", declared Grant in an address to the General assembly of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa in September 1954, "It is literally telling us "hand over your schools or you take the consequences."⁸ And as far as he was concerned, "It [Amanzimtoti] shall be handed over to the government only over my dead body."⁹

Given its renowned status, Adams' fight to maintain its independence and the Bantu Education Act in general, must have elicited a lot of media interest. How was the College's struggle against Bantu Education covered by the media? From what I have read thus far, *Ilanga LaseNatali* and *The Mercury*, reported widely on the issue. Examining this aspect of the research could easily make up a whole chapter. Was the reporting sympathetic to Adams College?

The above quote from Alan Paton's foreword seems to suggest that prior to the imposition of the Act, Adams College was what could be termed a one 'big non-racial happy family', and argues that this was one of the reasons the "white supremacist" government was so determined to see it shut down. Bunting on the other hand, in her 1990 Masters thesis entitled "From Mission school to Bantu Education: A history of Adams college" seems to make a strong contention that assuming that Adams College had no racial,

⁷ Brian W. Rose "Bantu Education as a facet of South African policy", pg. 209.

⁸ Address by Jack Grant at the Presbyterian General Assembly, September 1954.

⁹ Letter to the Chairman of the Board.

or other problems prior to the enactment of the Bantu Education Act is wrong. She provides some evidence to corroborate her claim. In the light of this, I intend investigating the nature of race relations at Adams prior to incorporation into the department of Bantu Education.

Many leading persons within the liberation struggle had been former students of Adams College. Moreover, as Grant has pointed out, Bantu Education was not so much about education, but was a well-calculated political manoeuvre. This calls for some research into the liberation's movement response to Bantu Education and the struggle waged by Adams College against the Act. The main liberation organisation, the ANC, as part of its national campaign against Bantu education, had made a call in 1955, to African parents to "withdraw their children from all primary school by April 1955."¹⁰ Was this campaign any way linked to Adams' struggle for independence? Did Adams receive any solidarity from the liberation movement? This could be broadened by also including other messages of support that were received by the College. For example, at its biennial meeting held in February of 1956, the Christian Council of South Africa passed a resolution in support of Adams College. The Bantu Congregational church at a conference of its pastors also passed a resolution favouring Adams.¹¹

The Principal Jack Grant who, with his wife Ida, first arrived at the College at the beginning of 1949 sounds like a very fascinating individual. Grant, a cricketer of note appears to be the main driver of the struggle for survival. His disgust and disappointment at the government's policy of apartheid, largely informed by his religious background, and the government's refusal to allow the College to register as a private institution were clearly expressed in his final address to the staff and students of Adams at the school chapel on 02 December 1956, and the subsequent "The liquidation of Adams College" Together with Ida, he had donated \$5,000 to the 'Centenary Appeal'. Someone who had invested so much energy and money towards

¹⁰ Durand, Susan, *From Mission School to Bantu Education*, 1990 MA Thesis.

¹¹ Grant, Jack, *The Liquidation of Adams College.*,

Adams College must have been grossly affected by its closure. I will therefore include a short chapter on Grant's life, with a particular focus on the seven years he spent at Adams and his activities shortly after the College was closed.

He mentions three main reasons for disapproving of the Act. Firstly, he was not happy about the manner in which it was being done, and he equated the entire process to daylight 'robbery'. Speaking at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church he stated "Suppose Mr Moderator that you had inherited a goodly estate from your forebears. Suppose too that in your lifetime you had worked hard, spent considerable capital, made many improvements, and looked forward to handing it over to your next of kin. And then along came a covetous Ahab and a cunning Jezebel, who cast longing eyes on your estate, and who forthwith proceeded to use their royal seal to transfer it to themselves."¹² Finally, he saw the Bantu Education Act as part of a much wider political plan.

Adams College was certainly not the only mission school affected by the Bantu Education Act. By the mid 1960s almost all mission schools which had been the main source of schooling for black people, prior to the introduction of the Act, had been forced to shut down. It would be ideal to make comparisons between Adams College and other mission schools, to see what was their response to the passing of the Act, and what measures, if any, were taken to avoid it.

Conclusion

This paper is a summarised version of the Faculty of Humanities Honours Degree Research proposal, which has been submitted to the Department of Historical Studies and Vukile Khumalo, the supervisor of the project, as per requirements. Comments, suggestions and criticism would be most welcome. I have found a lot of interesting material at Killie Campbell Africana Library (Marriott Road) relating to the subject in question, but,

¹² Grant, Jack. *The liquidation of Adams College*. Pg. 03.

unfortunately, the Pietermaritzburg Archives do not seem to have much material. Suggestions for more sources of information will be highly appreciated.