

Veterinary education in South Africa: The Class of 1926

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ABSTRACT

Both Sir Arnold Theiler, appointed as Dean in 1920 when the Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty was established, and Dr P J du Toit, who succeeded him in 1927, appear in the compound photograph of the class of 1926, constituting the 3rd group of graduates. The probable reason for having 2 deans on the photograph, which was obviously composed from shots taken individually of the outgoing and incoming deans of the faculty as well as of each of the 7 graduates, is initially analysed in this paper. This is followed by short descriptions of the life histories of the graduates. The class of 1926 was probably unique in that 2 of its members, who were employees of the Onderstepoort Research Institute, were granted special permission to study veterinary science at the Faculty. After graduating, most of the class members spent the greater part of their careers as civil servants at Onderstepoort as researchers and part-time teachers in the Faculty, as was customary for many years, or as state veterinarians in the field. Private practice did not feature strongly with them. Noteworthy is that the class produced 3 outstanding scientists, i.e. a world class parasitologist, a very eminent pathologist and Onderstepoort's 1st poultry specialist.

Key words: 1926, government service, graduates, Onderstepoort, scientists, Theiler, P J du Toit, veterinary education.

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The only available photograph of the Class of 1926 was obviously composed from shots taken individually of the outgoing and incoming deans of the faculty as well as of each of the 7 graduates (Fig. 1). However, it is not clear why both Sir Arnold Theiler, the 'father' of the Faculty, and Dr P J du Toit, his successor as Dean, appear in the compound photograph of the Class of 1926.

Theiler was still in office during 1926, when the students were in their final year, while Du Toit spent most of that year overseas on a sabbatical visit. Since the graduation ceremony took place on 10 April 1927, it is clear that Theiler, who left South Africa for Europe on 7 March 1927, could not have officiated on that auspicious occasion.

Although it has not been possible to confirm with absolute certainty from the literature that P J duToit officiated as Dean at the graduation ceremony, he was Theiler's successor, his appointment most probably dating from 1 April 1927. Thus his presence in the photograph. The unusual involvement of 2 Deans with the Class of 1926, Theiler almost to the last 'minute' before graduation, probably explains why both were included in the composite photograph.

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The Class of 1926 was probably unique in the sense that 2 of its members, who were employees of the Onderstepoort Research Institute, were granted special permission to study veterinary science at the Faculty – presumably while still receiving a salary or some other form of financial assistance from the State. They were H O Mönnig and A D Thomas.

Hermann Mönnig had already obtained a DPhil (Zoology) degree in Zürich in 1921 (note that he is identified as Dr Mönnig in the photograph, and, for unknown reasons, does not wear graduation regalia like the other graduandi!) when he was appointed at Onderstepoort as a research officer in 1922. After qualifying as veterinary surgeon, he re-occupied his post and became one of Onderstepoort's most eminent, internationally acclaimed parasitologists. He was head of the section of Parasitology from 1928–1945 and Professor of Parasitology in the Faculty from 1929–1945. On account of his membership of the Broederbond, (a secret, pro-Afrikaner organisation) he was forced to retire from government service in 1945 near the end of World War II. He then went into the pharmaceutical industry, being the 1st veterinarian to establish a successful, purely South African enterprise which he named Agricura Laboratory Ltd. He

became its 1st Managing Director and later the Chairman of the Board of Noristan Ltd.

In 1934 the 1st edition of his classic book 'Veterinary Helminthology and Entomology' was published, which subsequently became the international standard textbook for tuition of these subjects to veterinary students. Much appreciated by farmers, even today, was the book he wrote with F J Veldman ('Vellie') entitled 'Handboek oor Veesiektes'. Moreover, by 1947 he had published 67 scientific articles.

Mönnig received numerous honours and distinctions such as both the Havenga and M T Steyn prizes of the South African Society for Science and Art, the Senior Captain Scott Medal of the S A Biological Society, and was awarded 2 honorary doctorates. He also served in the following prestigious positions, amongst others: Chairman of the Board of the University of Pretoria; Chairman of the National Parks Board of Trustees; Chief Scientific Advisor to the Prime Minister; Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He died in Pretoria in 1978 at the age of 82.

A D Thomas was born in Switzerland and came to South Africa with his parents as a small boy. At the time when he started his veterinary studies he worked as a laboratory assistant under Theiler, having obtained a matriculation certificate by private studies while at Onderstepoort. Apparently on account of his future promise, he was allowed to enroll at the Faculty, to qualify as a veterinarian in 1926. In 1927 he transferred to the research staff at Onderstepoort, also acting as a part-time lecturer and later as renowned Professor of Pathology in the Faculty. In 1929, only 2 years after qualifying, he was awarded a DVSc degree in pathology. He served as editor of the *Journal of the South African Veterinary Medical Association* – now the *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association* – for about 8 years.

In 1946 Thomas resigned from Onderstepoort to establish a private practice in Pretoria. He continued to serve as astute and feared (by students!) external examiner for Pathology at the Faculty for several years. In 1955 he joined the Division of Veterinary Services to initiate a diagnostic

laboratory in Louis Trichardt where he was the first to discover, with W O Neitz, the toxicosis of cattle caused by severe infestation with brown ticks, named brown tick toxicosis. Thomas finally retired in 1966 and took up farming, later moving to George where he died in 1991 at the ripe old age of 92.

Neville Starke – ‘Starkey’ to his students – hailed from a farm in the vicinity of Stellenbosch where so many of the well known Starke family have their roots. Having seen active military service in East Africa during World War I, he came back to matriculate at SACS (South African College). The next step was to do the veterinary preparatory courses at the Johannesburg University College (later University of the Witwatersrand) before proceeding to the Onderstepoort Faculty.

After qualifying he was appointed government veterinary officer in 1927 and spent the next 14 years of his career in the field, serving at places like Bloemfontein, Pietersburg, Duiwelskloof, Potchefstroom, Dundee and Durban. Whilst at Potchefstroom he was sent to Ramathlabama in Bechuanaland (now Botswana) to assist with the control of the 1932/33 outbreak of FMD. This experience stood him in good stead while stationed at Dundee where he diagnosed the 1937 outbreak of FMD in Zululand. The disease had been introduced into Zululand by cattle that had been illegally moved all the way from Bechuanaland, where an extensive outbreak had been discovered at Palapye Station.

Neville transferred to Onderstepoort in 1941 as lecturer in Animal Management and General Hygiene. In 1948 he joined the department of Surgery, succeeding Prof. S W J van Rensburg as Professor of Surgery, Gynaecology and Obstetrics in 1953, when the latter resigned unexpectedly. Prof. Starke retired in 1959 and thereafter farmed for 23 years on a small-holding near Stellenbosch. He finally moved to Pretoria where he died in 1988 aged 89 years.

J D W A (‘Dougie’) Coles was Onderstepoort’s 1st poultry specialist. Having initially experienced East Coast fever control measures at Allerton Laboratory in Natal as newly appointed veterinary research officer, he became the 1st lecturer in Avian Pathology at Onderstepoort in 1931. He was awarded a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship which he utilised for study purposes at the Medical School of the Washington University, St Louis, USA during 1934 and 1935. Back at Onderstepoort, he was instructed to also lecture in Dietetics for 3 years. This stimulated a particular interest in the discipline that led to his appointment to the National



Fig. 1: The Class of 1926.

Nutrition Council and to the local development of balanced poultry rations, South Africa being a leader in the field.

Dougie developed into a scientist of considerable repute. His achievements were not limited to poultry. He was, for example, the discoverer of a rickettsia named *Rickettsia (Colesiota) conjunctivae* in cases of infectious ophthalmia in sheep, and similar organisms have been demonstrated in cattle, goats and poultry. Their significance in ophthalmia is, however, currently unclear. He became interna-

tionally renowned in the nomenclature of rickettsias. He was very highly regarded as expert diagnostician and nutritionist in the poultry industry. He was first to discover psittacosis in pigeons; first to discover paralysis due to *Argas persicus* in ducks and geese; first to observe the vertical transmission of osteopetrosis in poultry. In 1957, on invitation, he advised the Nyasaland (now Malawi) government on the establishment of a poultry industry commensurate with the capacities of the existing small farmers.

In 1959 Professor Coles resigned from Onderstepoort to establish a poultry farm in Natal. In his later years he also made a considerable contribution to the promotion of nature conservation in that province as an active and enthusiastic member of the Natal Parks Board. He died in 1987 at the age of 82 years.

J L Dickson and C A Flight both joined the Division of Veterinary Services as government veterinary officers immediately after they qualified and were to a great extent cart horses in respect of their careers. John Dickson, better known as Captain Dickson, saw service at Dundee, Nongoma, Louis Trichardt and Piet Retief. He enlisted in World War II, serving with the rank of captain in Madagascar. After his return he was posted to Bedford and Bloemfontein where he was promoted to Sub-Director (later this title was changed to Assistant Director) of the Orange Free State and Northern Cape Region, to be finally transferred to the Western Cape Region. After his retirement from state service in 1961, he served as officer in charge of the Predator Control Research Station, Vrolijkheid at

Robertson, whence he finally retired in 1966. Captain Dickson died in 1973 after prolonged ill health at the age of 73.

Cyril Flight served at Komga, Butterworth, Port Shepstone, Oudtshoorn and Bloemfontein. He was promoted to Sub-Director in 1947, serving in this capacity in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Orange Free and Northern Cape Regions. He retired in 1964 to settle in East London and died in 1985 aged 82 years.

James Reid obtained a BSc (Agric) degree prior to enrolling for the veterinary course at Onderstepoort. Shortly after qualifying as a veterinary surgeon, he joined the Division of Veterinary Services as government veterinary officer and served at stations as diverse as Louis Trichardt, Pietersburg, Cape Town and Allerton Laboratory over a period of only 3 years. Like Boet Bekker, he then also 'broke the rules' by resigning from the service and going into private practice in 1930. However, he moved to the Standerton district in 1933 where he is reported to have farmed and practised. Although James Reid was therefore the

1st Onderstepoort graduate to venture into private practice, there is no convincing evidence that he managed to make a living out of that vocation. He died, apparently by his own hand, on his father's farm in the Standerton district in 1951.

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