

address to Walter Geyl High School

29/5/64

On an occasion such as this, when we are commemorating milestones in the history of our country, it is right and fitting that we should look back over the pages of the history of our country, look back to honour those who have gone before, and draw inspiration from their deeds.

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It is right, too, that we should look forward and resolve that we too should play our part in making this our land a better one for the generations to come.

I am not here to give you a history lesson, but to tell you of one person, perhaps not known to you all, who yet, in his way, made a significant contribution to progress. He was a person who came to the Cape Colony in the 1820's after the second British occupation.

You all know the history of Van Riebeeck's landing at the Cape to establish a half-way station for the ships belonging to the Dutch East India Company which were sailing from Holland to the East.

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You know that the Dutch East India Company wanted to restrict their interest to serving their ships, and how disinterested they were in developing the hinterland. Then, as you know, the fortunes of the Company changed and eventually they were unable to pay their debts, so that they were not generous in their allocation of funds for the development of the Cape.

While no census figures are available, it is estimated that in the year 1791, that is 140 years after Van Riebeeck's landing, the whole <sup>where</sup> population of the Cape was only some 15,000 people. The Dutch East India Company had not allocated money for the construction of roads into the hinterland, nor were they interested in the development of schools, so that at this time there was not even a high school in Cape Town, and to get a proper education children had to go to Europe.

Many of you who have been to Cape Town know how

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sandy it is on the Cape Flats, and there was no made road to the farms near Stellenbosch or the Fransche Hoek Valley, and to cross the rugged mountains to the interior was a nightmare.

It was into such a state of affairs that there came the person about whom I want to speak. A person who, by his selfless service, singleness of purpose, and energy, was to change the situation for so many people. He was a schoolteacher. He had been a teacher in Scotland before taking up his post at a school in Uitenhage where, without assistance, he had to cope with a school varying from 100 to 160 pupils of all ages and every race. His name was James Rose-Innes. Schools had been unknown in the hinterland of the Cape Peninsula. Now I know you boys are not over-enthusiastic about teachers, but on the other hand, can you imagine what the position was of those boys in the hinterland at that time who had very little opportunity of schooling?

In 1830 Rose-Innes left Uitenhage and went to Cape Town to help found the first High School and University to be established in South Africa - the famous South African College which, over the years, eventually became the University of Cape Town. At this time it was still impossible to find an educated man in Cape Town who had not been trained in Europe.

Nine years later he was appointed to a post in which he was to provide free State education for all the settled parts of the Cape, which meant founding twelve Government Schools in the area which we would now call the Western Cape. For this task he was allotted £3360: which was to take care of teachers' salaries, the supply of books and stationery, the provision of quarters for teaching, and out of this sum his own salary had to be taken. His method of travelling was by horse and cart across tracks rather than roads, and the area of the territory he had to cover was 150,000 sq. miles.

He had to prepare a syllabus of what was to be taught. Shortly after his appointment he set out to find how bad the educational outlook was. He found that the schools which had been founded by Lord Charles Somerset had largely collapsed, and some had barely a dozen pupils. In all, eleven schools only had 500 pupils.

The majority of white children in most districts lived in the countryside, not the towns, and the countryside was still in the grip of the 'meesters'. In the three districts of Caledon, Graaff-Reinet and Somerset East alone, he found more than ninety 'meesters' giving farmers' children schooling of the briefest and most ignorant kind in exchange for £2 to £3 a month and their board. Many of these 'meesters' were really vagrants. Innes bluntly called them 'illiterate persons'.

He had found no thirst for education; it would have to be created. He had found scarcely a competent teacher on his tour. There were no books in the houses of the people. All that most parents, outside the wine-growing districts, wanted was enough schooling for their children to enable them to scrape through the Dutch Reformed catechism in order to be confirmed in the church. Otherwise they could not marry. English-speaking districts were not much better. The children were wanted at the earliest possible age to help on the labourless farms or in stores and workshops.

There was only one way in which Innes could create a thirst for education or a class of South Africans in the country districts who could foster adequate local effort to provide it. He must recruit first-class teachers in Europe, open free schools or schools charging the lowest possible fees, and train teachers in South Africa for the future.



On his return to Cape Town he realised that his first task was to find teachers, so he sailed for Scotland and returned in 1841 having recruited the necessary staff.

Besides inspecting every pupil in the government free schools, he had to inspect the mission schools that accepted aid. By hard travelling and hard work in stifling schoolrooms, where the dust raised by crowded pupils from the mud floors hung like a fog, he managed to cover the whole Colony in 1841 and again in 1842. As he drove or rode over the appalling mountain passes, across flats where lions still lurked, and through flooded rivers, he came to know the common people of South Africa as few have ever known them. Night after night he had to put up at lonely homesteads. He was the kind of visitor who was almost invariably welcome.

His courtesy, his integrity, and his genuine affection for the people and their country were immense assets in creating a thirst for real education where there had been none before. The keen but kindly eye of the Superintendent, as he watched the children of the house over the evening meal, saw much that the parents missed.

He knew how little the future held for almost illiterate people. He knew at what an economic disadvantage the lack of schooling would place the South African child, especially the child of the interior, in comparison with immigrants from Europe. Agriculture itself could scarcely rise beyond the subsistence level until the farmers of South Africa began to read. How could he bring them real teachers in place of the drunken 'meesters'?

In 1839 he had found only 500 pupils in government schools. By 1844 he had ten times as many to inspect, thanks to the system of grants-in-aid; and yet the expansion was only beginning. He still made long inspection tours every year. These became a sore trial on his health as he neared 60. But he covered only a part of the country yearly. This gave him more time to address meetings wherever he went, to stir up a thirst for education, and to encourage parents, with offers of State assistance, to take the initiative.

When he retired in 1859 some of the fourteen first-class government schools were well on the way to becoming high schools. But even with the five second-class government schools, they now formed only a small part of the system of public education. Innes had fostered the rise of 38 primary schools of the church-clerk type all over the Colony, 47 State-aided farmers' schools, and 112 aided mission schools.

The foundations of national education had been laid throughout the Cape Colony, which at that date embraced about eighty per cent of all white South Africans. Above all, a new class of educated South African had arisen, trained by the Scottish teachers he had installed nearly twenty years before. It was this new class that now made local initiative dependable.

When Dr. James Rose Innes left his office for the last time on 22 November 1859, he was more trusted and beloved than ever before by the scattered towns and villages of his country.

I think there is no need to tell you why I have chosen James Rose-Innes as a person who has an honoured place in our history. Today South Africa still needs people like him, and luckily in South Africa we have many of his descendants, one of whom became Chief Justice of South Africa. We need people who are thorough, who are prepared to undertake the jobs which are not perhaps in the public eye, people who are prepared to put all the strength at their command into building this country into a better place for all our citizens.

Dr. Rose-Innes was a gentleman, and here I would just like to close by giving you a definition of a gentleman which has been an inspiration to me -

"A gentleman is a person who puts more in than he takes out."

May 29, 1964.

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