

Faculty of Science Centenary Dinner

Monday 1 October 2018, Spier Wine Estate

Comments on centenary book, [A Particular Frame of Mind](#), by Professor Jannie Hofmeyr, distinguished professor of biochemistry and biocomplexity at Stellenbosch University

I am very proud to have been associated with the Science Faculty for 44 years as an academic. Not only did this time afford me the joy to learn from the best of the best, but it also provided me with the opportunity to transfer this knowledge and use it as a base to create new knowledge. Reading this book and thinking about the title I realised again how important it is that universities today continue to foster this “certain frame of mind” that the title refers to. We live today in a world in which science itself is threatened, and Prof SJ Shand’s words in his 1916 lecture entitled *The making of a University* resonates with as much power as it did then. Louise has already read the crucial sentence, but I would like to contextualise it by reading the whole paragraph.

A university is not a lecture-theatre, or a library, or a laboratory; it is not a building or a place at all; its essence is a *frame of mind*. We hear much in these days of the “will to power”: the true charter of a university is the “will to knowledge”. The real university is neither a collection of books, nor a collection of buildings, nor a collection of lecturers; it is a collection of students who possess the will to knowledge—the will to possess it and still more the will to advance it. A university is constituted by its students, and by them alone. When I say students, I mean not only the temporary students who join the university for a few years, but far more the permanent students who constitute its staff, for every professor worth his salt is a student to the end of his days. If the students are animated by the will to knowledge, there is a university; if they are not, if their studies are only a means to a selfish end, such as the learning of a narrow trade, the securing of a position or an income or an academic distinction, or the propagation of a favourite doctrine, then no university is there though millions be spent on staff and buildings and equipment. Where two or three are gathered together in the name of knowledge, there is a university.

The centenary book chronicles the endeavours of a century’s worth of such excellent academics and also has a few amusing anecdotes about a few of them. I have chosen a few for your entertainment:

Prof. Berthault de St. Jean van der Riet was Head of the Geology Department from 1895 until 1902 before he became Head of the Chemistry Department in 1903. By that time every Chemistry lecturer in the department had studied under him. Nicknamed *Oubaas Fenol* because of his interest in essential oils, he was the perfect gentleman and an outstanding lecturer. It is told that *Oubaas Fenol* was over 60 years old when he bought his first car.

When he was warned that he might run someone over, he said: 'I have been dodging them for many years, now it's time they start dodging me'.

And:

Prof Robert Broom, first Professor of Zoology was an inspiring teacher and his lectures were extremely well attended as evidenced in Phillip Tobias' John Ellerman Commemorative Lecture honouring him thus in 2003: "He was the most extraordinary of the early professors at the university. He defied the Senate's wishes that he take a roll call at each lecture and enter the names of defaulters in an Absentee Book. He pointed out that his lectures were extremely well-attended and his students passed their examinations. He agreed to reconsider the matter only if any other senate member had a better record. Apparently no-one did."

This anecdote illustrates another aspect of that certain frame of mind — a complete disregard for authority.

Broom se opvolger, Prof Ernest J Goddard, het met 'n groep van 19 studente in April 1918 die departement se eerste groot veldwerkkuitstappie onderneem in die gebied tussen Prins Albertstasie en George:

Te voet en met 'n donkiewa vir die bagasie het die groep meer as 130 kilometer afgelê. Volgens 'n artikel in die Universiteitsblad van Junie 1918 het die groep afgeskop met heelwat entoesiasme vir die wetenskap en Goddard "op sij gewone draf-stappie: Maar Meneertjie [menende Goddard] was nog die meeste in sij element. Als hij 'n hakkedis of 'n koggelmander sien, is hij agter hom soos 'n kat agter 'n muis, en hij vang hulle ook, somaar met sij blote hand.

Reading this book one is constantly reminded of the metaphor of dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. Apparently this metaphor arises from the Latin: *nanos gigantum humeris insidentes*, which expresses the meaning of "discovering truth by building on previous discoveries". Isaac Newton's version is most familiar to us: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."

Reading the book I was forcibly reminded of my own Stellenbosch giants: My organic chemistry lecturers were the formidable trio of Chris Garbers, Ben Burger and Dawie Schneider; who could ask for a better grounding in organic chemistry than what these three superstars provided? Prof Garber's approach to his research was nicely captured by Nicolene Basson who wrote of his conviction that "no problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking".

My biochemistry giant was Kirsten van der Merwe who launched my and Pieter Swart's respective research careers by teaching us the value of deep collaborative scientific discussion.

But if I have to single out my giant of choice for the Science Faculty: it is Fritz Hahne, who served as Dean from 1991 to 2002. During this period I was departmental chair and also Deputy-Dean of the Faculty for a year, and I witnessed first-hand how Fritz steered the Faculty from a rather inbred low-key concern into the diversified research juggernaut that it is today. He could of course not have done it without the support of the powers that were at that time — notably Andreas van Wyk and Walter Claassen — but it was Fritz's extraordinary vision of what a research-oriented faculty should be, that provided the impetus.

I end with Prof Chris Garbers' conclusion to his introduction to the book:

It has already been said that the 'human mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled'. Over the past one hundred years the Faculty of Science has surpassed itself in this regard, and may its contribution at the end of the next centenary be even more distinguished than its impressive past!

All that I can add to that is: Amen