

The Battle of Andringa Street

Rioting by students has by no means been an uncommon phenomenon in South Africa's history. Especially in 1976 and during the subsequent 14 years, student protests against apartheid occurred regularly on the campuses of various English-language universities as well as the University of the Western Cape. These protests were aimed at an oppressive system and were often suppressed violently by the authorities.

The University of Stellenbosch was not characterised by uprisings of this nature. Most students supported the then governing National Party, and even for dissidents open protest and frequent political marches were not part of the student culture. The closest Stellenbosch came to street protest was when some students objected to the banning of the *Voëlvry* anti-apartheid music movement from the campus in 1989.

Yet 49 years earlier – in the winter of 1940 – there had been an eruption of anger among certain students that resulted in violent rioting near the then campus. The target of their anger was not the university authorities or the state directly, but fellow residents of the town who were categorised as “coloured” in the terminology of the time. In sanitised versions of the university's history, what was referred to as the “Battle of Andringa Street” was either ignored or condoned. This incident had never formed part of the general historical consciousness of and about the university. It was only rediscovered in 2005, 11 years after South Africa's political transition of 1994, at a time when many preconceptions were being re-evaluated. The unpleasantness of the events came under scrutiny in publications and was starkly outlined. For the first time, the spotlight was turned on that which had long remained unexpressed.

What happened?

On the evening of Saturday 27 July 1940, a number of Stellenbosch students became embroiled in a fight with coloured residents of the town near the corner of Andringa and Plein streets. Coloured and white residents had crowded together in front of a café (Senitzky's) to buy the late edition of the *Cape Argus*. Mutual accusations of queue-jumping and misbehaviour resulted in some people coming to blows. Feelings ran high, and it would seem that certain students deliberately assaulted coloured people. Stone-throwing ensued, with broken concrete stone that was used in the building of the town hall employed as “missiles”. The fighting spilled over into Andringa Street. One observer likened some students to “wolves” charging down the street in “outraged pursuit” to “hunt as a pack”.

After the first clash there was a brief period of quiet. But another eruption occurred when the windows of a private student residence, Protea, were broken by stone-throwing coloured people. They were under the impression that students who had caused trouble at the café were housed in the residence. Students from Protea then turned to their friends in the Dagbreek men's residence for help, and about 100 of them answered the call. Stone-throwing erupted once again and students went on the rampage in the town's coloured area, indiscriminately assaulting coloured families. The situation was only brought under control when a police force with reinforcements from Cape Town, Paarl and Kuils River arrived.

The following day, Sunday, everything was quiet until about noon, when another clash took place after a house in Crozier Street had been pelted with stones and a large crowd had gathered in Andringa Street. The events of the previous day were repeated with greater intensity, with students of Dagbreek among others determined to “teach” the coloured people “a lesson”. The students were later described as a “white young rabble”, and this time the police were undermanned and unable to restrain the two groups. In the view of the students, the actions of the coloured people demanded harsh retribution. They not only attacked the coloured crowd but also stormed into the houses of people who had nothing to do with the clashes. Crockery and glasses were smashed, and furniture and radio sets were destroyed. In one case a student remarked with spiteful pleasure to a resident after he had struck the radio set – the pride of the home – with an axe: “Now you have two.”

No respect was shown for people or property. Even an esteemed person such as the builder Boetie Kannemeyer, who was widely respected among both coloured and white residents, was not spared. The Kannemeyer family, whose house was situated on the site of the present-day Arts Building, had just sat down to their Sunday lunch when the students burst in. Without any scruples they ripped the neatly starched tablecloth with all the dishes and cutlery from the table. As if that was not enough, it would appear that they also damaged Kannemeyer's vehicle.

The destruction lasted from about 13:30 to 16:30 and was only brought to an end when police reinforcements arrived and the rector, Professor RW Wilcocks, intervened.

Why did it happen?

The events that took place in Andringa Street had both indirect and underlying causes as well as more immediate and direct ones.

The late 1930s in South Africa was a period characterised by surging Afrikaner nationalism. It found expression in, and was simultaneously stimulated by, events such as the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek, which took the form of a symbolic oxwagon trek. Nine oxwagons travelled through the country from Cape Town, stopping along the way at numerous towns where they were welcomed enthusiastically by white residents. The celebrations, which have been described as unprecedented political and cultural drama, conveyed an over-arching message of homage to the 19th-century Voortrekkers and a glorification of their actions. The underlying theme was that the country actually belonged to the descendants of the Voortrekkers and that the salvation of Afrikaners supposedly lay in the exclusive development of what could be regarded as their inheritance. This involved self-assertion in various spheres, political as well as cultural and social. The *Ossewa-Brandwag*, an organisation that was unabashedly sympathetic to radical action at times, grew out of the Oxwagon Trek. In Stellenbosch, too, the *Ossewa-Brandwag* had a following among students. One participant in the fights in Andringa Street even went as far as saying: "The whole business had its origin in the *Ossewa-Brandwag*."

In addition, there was also an increasingly intolerant attitude towards coloured people in the town that was partly anchored in formal politics. Up to 1956, coloured people in the Cape Province had the vote provided they met certain property and educational qualifications. In Stellenbosch, some Afrikaners had fastened on the idea that the National Party's narrow loss to the United Party in the 1938 election could be attributed to the coloured people in the town who had voted against the National Party. The National Party campaigned for the removal of coloured people from the common voters' roll and openly stirred up racial feelings. This orchestration of a negative attitude towards coloured people undoubtedly resonated among students, and they increasingly rallied behind an exclusive form of nationalism during this time. Broadly speaking, a mood prevailed that was based inter alia on the assumption that if coloured people should not have full rights, they should also have a diminished status in the town. On the other hand, it could also be argued that resentment against this attitude had been growing among the coloured people. During the 1938 election they had already been encouraged by politicians to use their civil rights. Shortly before the events in Andringa Street, therefore, forces and emotions had been brewing among white as well as coloured people that could come to a head under specific circumstances.

A related and important factor was the aversion among some Afrikaners to the fact that the government of General JC Smuts had involved South Africa in the Second World War against Germany. In 1940, this attitude found expression in the practice of certain Stellenbosch students to travel to Cape Town and then disrupt the brief midday pause during which people were supposed to pray quietly for the war. It was on such an occasion that some of the students clashed with soldiers on 27 July 1940 and became involved in fist fights in Adderley Street. This was one of the direct causes of what would happen later that day in Stellenbosch. The students encountered fierce resistance from the soldiers and returned to Stellenbosch. Back home they licked their wounds, had a beer or two, and then joined the queue on the corner of Andringa Street to buy the *Cape Argus*. Some of the students who had been in Cape Town that day were also among the ringleaders in the fights that subsequently erupted in the town.

Hence it was a combination of factors that played a role in what was surely the most dramatic racial clash the town had experienced in its long history. It was a clash that proved that under certain circumstances, the pattern of race relations that could generally be placed within a paternalistic framework did not form an adequate bulwark to deal with mutual tensions.

"Peace of Andringa Street"

After the events there was a realisation on the part of both a committee formed by the coloured residents and the university authorities that the matter had to be investigated and that compensation would be required. The matter dragged on for a long time, however, until in December 1940 *ex gratia* payments

were made to some people who had suffered losses. A limited amount was paid out, and it is doubtful whether it really covered all the losses.

Although the university considered the case closed once these payments were made, there was no in-depth reflection on the broader sociopolitical gravity of the issue. This kind of introspection was not yet part of a university culture. In retrospect, however, the events foreshadowed the more hard-line attitude that would be adopted towards coloured people after the National Party assumed power in 1948, which was destined to leave many scars over time.

History is seldom completely dead and buried, especially in a country like South Africa where new questions are constantly being posed to the past from the perspective of an ever-changing present. And after years of near oblivion, the “Battle of Andringa Street”, which had for long been omitted from the official history of Stellenbosch, figured again in the public consciousness in 2012. Student leaders from Dagbreek – a new post-apartheid generation – recognised the blot left by the events of July 1940 and thought it advisable to apologise for what their predecessors had done 72 years before. Their initiative provided the current rector, Prof Russel Botman, with an opportunity to host the student leaders and members of the coloured community at his home, and to convey the message that the past could indeed be exorcised positively if the legacy of the “Battle of Andringa Street” could become the “Peace of Andringa Street” in a new dispensation.

SOURCES

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