

Citation for the late R.O. Dudley, D.Ed. Honoris Causa.

by

The University Orator, Francis Wilson.

Richard [‘Dick’] Dudley was a man deeply rooted in the education of this city who--when added to the years of his father as a headmaster---taught throughout most of the twentieth century within a few miles of this university where he was educated. He was a legendary teacher and, here in the Western Cape, one of the most influential men of his generation. To get some idea of who he was and what he stood for the following story provides some insight.

In 1998 he was invited to lunch by President Mandela who hoped that he might be willing to help persuade ‘coloured’ voters to vote for the ANC rather than for the old National Party, and this is what Richard Dudley had to say:

[N]ow look, in the first place I am not a coloured person. I said that other people have classified me as that but I am not a coloured person. I am not a coloured leader. I said that I had for the past fifty years been associated with a political movement that does not accept these classifications, and has consistently fought to unify the people in this country and to establish a South Africa where such things are completely irrelevant.....I said to him that I will never , never surrender the political position that I have been supporting for the past fifty years. I will never want people to vote as coloured persons.....[H]e [President Mandela]said that he understood readily what I was telling him, and he was satisfied that I had spoken candidly in regard to this.’¹

R.O. Dudley was born in Cape Town in 1924 and grew up in Palmboom Road, Newlands in the large house his great-grandfather had bought in 1852 and where his father and one of his aunts all lived with their two families and where the other two aunts often came to stay. When his brother, who was two years older was first sent to school little Richard insisted on going too and so entered sub A when he was four. He managed fine and so got through primary school---- St Andrew’s Mission in Newlands where his father was headmaster---- by the time he was 9. From there he went to Secondary School @ Livingstone High in Lansdowne Road, Claremont, already one of the best schools in the country,

¹ R.O.Dudley Interview, 2003 cited in Wieder, Alan, Teacher and comrade: Richard Dudley and the Fight for Democracy in South Africa, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2008, p.149

where he studied a range of subjects in both humanities and science and learnt to read even more widely which he continued to do ever after.

At the age of 15 Richard Dudley enrolled, in 1940, at UCT where he had hoped to study History and English. But his old teachers had other ideas and he was called before the School Committee who instructed him to study science so that he could come back to Livingstone to teach what they needed. So in his first two years he focused on Maths, Physics & Chemistry. He was awarded the class medal in Physics and emerged 5 years later, aged 20, with a B.Sc., M.Sc. & Teacher's Diploma at a University which, it must be recorded, was reasonably open in the class-room but grievously infected by racism in student social life. Sport clubs, for example, were open to whites only.

He began teaching at the age of 20 and went on to do so ---all at the same school, Livingstone High--- for 39 years. Whatever else he did in his life R.O. Dudley was first, foremost and always a teacher; a first rate teacher who demanded high standards; but one with a tremendous sense of humour. One of the best stories told about him at the huge memorial service held at Livingstone last Saturday came from one of his old pupils who remembered the occasion when some boys had been messing around in the chemistry lab and had managed to produce some lethally explosive concoction which one of them was holding in his hands when R.O.Dudley walked in. Absorbing the situation at a glance, R.O. said, "Boy, how many children does your mother have?" Somewhat flustered and mystified the boy replied, "F-five Sir." "That's good. She won't miss one of them, then".

R.O. Dudley was a teacher who did not compartmentalise life into different school subjects and then the wider world but who saw it all as a whole and who was determined that his pupils would accept first and foremost that they were human beings; that they would ask questions, think for themselves and take due responsibility for the society around them----not least for the education of the next generation.

But that is not the whole story. For this was South Africa and the politics of a racist society raised its ugly head. During the 1940's and '50s the University of Cape Town was a hive of political activity not least on the left as Trotskyists, Marxists, Liberals and others debated passionately with each other about race

and class in the emerging industrial society. Coming from where he did R.O.Dudley dived into the debates with relish and joined the struggle against the growing racism manifest in such events as the establishment (by the Smuts government) of the 'Coloured Affairs Department' in 1943. He joined that anti-CAD movement and became part of the process of formation of the NEUM, Non European Unity Movement in 1943, and of the revitalised Teachers' League of South Africa, TLSA, [originally founded in 1913] which was to play such a huge role in battling, during the apartheid years, for proper education in a number of schools in the Western Cape but most particularly Trafalgar, Harold Cressy, South Peninsula and Livingstone.

Nor was his knowledge of the impact of racism purely theoretical. In 1961 his parents were forcibly moved from the home which the family had owned for more than a century and in which they had lived since they were married. It was the house in which both R.O.Dudley and his father had grown up. That process, Richard Dudley believes, killed his mother and broke his father's heart. Token 'compensation' paid was R6200 which was less than one-sixth of the subsequent valuation of a house which, today, is worth millions. As if that was not enough, ten years later, in 1972/73 Richard and Iris Dudley were also forced to move, with their 3 children, out of the house in which they lived a few blocks from the school at which he had been teaching for more than 25 years. All this part of the deliberate and destructive cruelty of Group Areas removals which affected an estimated 150 000 people in Cape Town during the apartheid years and wrought such long-term havoc in our community.

After he had been teaching ten years R.O.Dudley, although he was only just 30, was appointed Acting Principal to succeed Edward Roberts who had been Principal of the school since Dudley had first come there as a pupil. After two years the staff resolved that he be appointed permanently but the Department refused on the grounds that it was not prepared to have a Principal who clearly regarded racism as 'the last refuge of the small mind'.²

The government in this country wants the boys in the class here to go and work on the farms. My job is to keep them off the farms. They want the girls here to go and work in the farmer's wife's kitchen. I want to keep them out of the kitchen. I think that you're worth far more and you've got a

² Ibid. p.53

contribution to make. You've got to be new people in the new South Africa. I don't want you to be in the vineyards picking grapes. You've mastered mathematics and you know science so that you know what's going on in the world around you.³

For the next thirty years Livingstone was to have a succession of Principals in the unenviable position of running a school one of whose staff members was acknowledged by all to be the rightful Head. For although he was banned in the early 1960's and prohibited from participating in political activities R.O.Dudley, in grudging recognition of his superb teaching abilities, was never banned from the class-room.

In 1984, after 39 years of teaching R.O.Dudley resigned and became President of the New Unity Movement [NUM] to intensify the struggle for nonracialism and noncollaboration. Nor did he let up after the negotiations of the early 1990's and the first democratic election of 1994. His guiding principal—as his biographer Alan Wieder makes clear---was always was to 'speak the truth to power'. Hence his response to President Mandela when he was invited to lunch in 1998.

Always the teacher, R.O. Dudley in politics was a prophet. Not so much an individualistic old-Testament lone prophet as a principled, disciplined and highly articulate member of a movement that was determined to stand firmly by its vision of a non-racist, non-class-ridden society without collaborating in any way that compromised this ideal. Of course not everybody agreed with his philosophy of non-collaboration right up to and including a principled refusal to vote in the election 1994. For some he was deemed to have become irrelevant: symbol of a failure to move with the times. But one needs to look deeper than that. There are occasionally times in history when the roles of politician and prophet coincide but this is surely not one of them. As member of what has been essentially a prophetic movement through bad times and good times, R.O.Dudley consistently held before us all ----whether we happened to agree with his particular analysis or not---- the vision not only of the non-racial, but also the non-exploitative classless society where inequality is being systematically reduced and poverty abolished. It is for that vision too that we honour him.

³ Ibid. p.75