

OBITUARY

REX FRAMPTON PENNINGTON M.A. (Oxon) 1923 – 2017

BISHOP'S HOUSEMASTER AND DEPUTY-PRINCIPAL 1953 – 1968

RECTOR OF MICHAELHOUSE 1969 – 1977

PRINCIPAL OF PACE COMMERCIAL COLLEGE, SOWETO 1980 - 1985



Written by his son Stuart (D.C.P.S. 1958 - 1963).

Rex Pennington was born into a family of renowned educators, the son of Ken Pennington (fondly known as 'KMP') who himself was one of five brothers written up in a widely published article in the 1980's entitled "The Famous Five" where it read "*The Pennington brothers made an enormous contribution to the fields of education and sport, and to the Anglican Church in Natal – a contribution that extended over 50 years of sustained effort*".

Rex continued that legacy and enriched it, he was blessed with an abundance of talent both as a Christian, a leader, an educator, and a sportsman.

In his young days at Cordwalles he captained the 1st XV and the 1st X1 and was deputy head-boy. At Michaelhouse he completed his matric at age 16 with distinction, was Senior Prefect, vice-captain of Natal Schools rugby, and in the 1st teams of cricket, tennis, squash and athletics.

He spent 1942 and six months of 1946 at Rhodes University in between serving the Natal Carbineers in Italy. At Rhodes, while stooging at St. Andrew's Prep, he excelled on the sports field and on the stage, was Squash Champion and Tennis Champion and played for the 1st XV and the 1st X1. He played many a lead role in a varied number of productions! Anecdotally, on one occasion he was badly concussed on the rugby field just prior to playing

the lead role in “The Emperor Jones”, there was great anxiety that he may become confused while rendering the demanding lines of this O’Neill tragedy – after interminably holding his breath, then winking at the leading lady, Joy Hopwood, he proceeded to deliver ‘*an almost flawless performance*’. Such was his talent and sense of fun.

In 1943 he was posted to the Intelligence section of The Royal Natal Carbineers in Italy under Colonel Francis, not long thereafter the Carbineer encampment was heavily shelled by the Germans, Lance Corporal Rex F Pennington number 589379 was thrown out of his trench with a badly fractured skull, riddled with shrapnel, and literally left for dead. Five days later he regained consciousness in the South African hospital in Naples and spent many months convalescing with an Italian family where his first class Matric Latin enabled him to master the Italian language comprehensively.

On his return he learned he had won the Natal Rhodes Scholarship and no sooner had he arrived home than he boarded the Stratheaden, a converted troop carrier, for Oxford and occupied the same room in Trinity College under the Chapel Clock, where his father, KMP had been as a Rhodes Scholar some 25 years previously after the first World War. He read P.P.E, won Blues for both squash and badminton, captained Oxford squash and then graduated with an MA (Oxon), In 1949 he married Sarah, the daughter of Sir Arnold Wilson M.P. (D.S.O), who, incidentally KMP had met during WW1 in Mesopotamia. The newly married couple was then offered a three- year assignment to set up the English department at Casady School in Oklahoma City. Anecdotally, a young girl after her first day at school was heard to remark to her mother, “*Well Ma, Casady is swell, but our nuu English teacher Ma, whay he cain’t even speak English!*”

In 1953 he joined the staff of Bishops in Cape Town where he was until 1968. During his time at Bishops, amongst the happiest days of his teaching career, he was appointed Housemaster of White House, he headed up the Latin department, was in charge of drama, was the U16 rugby coach, school tennis coach and squash coach and Senior Officer of the Bishop’s Cadet Corps (during his 15 years at Bishops the inter-school cadet competition was won by Bishops every single year). During this time he won the Western Province Squash Championships five times. He was then appointed as vice-Principal under Anthony Mallett in 1965 (Nick’s father).

In 2003 White House had their 50th reunion at which Steuart was asked to do a presentation on behalf of his father who was away at the time. There were at least 20 boys at that occasion who made a special point of telling him how profound an influence Rex had had on their lives as young adolescents and in particular his ability to instil confidence and bring out the best in his pupils.

In 1969 Rex was appointed Rector at Michaelhouse, he had four major challenges.

The first to make the school into a gentler place. As he often commented, the school had the same look and feel as when he had been a boy there 30 years previously. He delivered on his mandate by stopping the boys caning the boys, fundamentally changing initiation, and expanding the awarding of Honours to include achievements on the sports field, in the classroom and extramurally.

The second was to deal with Government interference in Private School education, in response to a Government report on "Differentiated Education in South Africa" he said *"If our country is to become a better place for all to live in, our children must be able to make valid judgements in all the decisions they are called on to make as individuals and as citizens."* (Speech day 1972).

The third was non-racial education, speaking on this Rex said, *"No liberation is so great – and I speak here from deep personal experience – as the gift of seeing every human being simply as a human being, not as a member of any race or group. There are signs of hope and optimism – the pessimists would have us believe that the writing is on the wall. My earnest hope is that no such pessimist will ever walk out from here, that no boys will leave this school, through ignorance or unawareness, or worst of all, lack of concern."* (Speech Day 1973.) As Greg Theron, current Rector of MHS said in his Tribute, *"Rex fanned the debate here on admitting boys of other race groups. In short, he was a man before his time."* In Rex's final year the first boy of colour was admitted.

The fourth was the infrastructural development of the school. Rex played a significant role in raising the funds that were required. The fund-raising effort plus the responsibilities of running a large school became all-consuming and Rex, after nine years at the helm, resigned at the end of 1977. Anson Lloyd, then Chairman of the Board said in his Speech day delivery *"1977 must undoubtedly go down in history as Pennington Year, and the naming of the Pennington Quad in tribute to the whole Family Pennington."*

1978 found him teaching at St Peter's Prep in Johannesburg under one of his former Bishop's pupils, Richard Todd. In 1980 he was appointed Headmaster of PACE Commercial College in Orlando West, Soweto, opened by Bishop Desmond Tutu. This was the time of 'liberation before education' and after five very successful years the school was temporarily closed down during the Soweto riots of the late eighties. Rex then retired but continued to serve on the Boards of a number of schools.

In 2004 Rex was awarded The Bishops' Medal by the Bishop of Johannesburg *"In honour of a man who has given his life in the service of others, in education, in transformation, and in the life of St. George's Parish; a man of humility, courage, vision, and with a profound sense of the presence of God; a man who, in spite of disappointment and adversity, has always stood for what is right."*

Born with extraordinary talents he chose to use these in the service of his fellow man, as a teacher, as a Housemaster, as a Rector and Principal and as a devout Christian. He leaves his wife Sarah, five children, Steuart, Kathryn, Miles, Jervis and Ruth and 12 grandchildren. He was deeply loved by all and will be sadly missed.

As Mark Anthony said in a eulogy for Julius Caesar, *"His life was gentle; and the Elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, 'This was a man'."*