

## CHAPTER 22

## Visiting Mr Frank Malan in the early 1980s



This lightly edited account appeared in an unpublished document *Recollections of school days*, by Charles van Renen (Matric 1963) of which the school has a copy:

Mr Frank Malan –we called him ‘Frankie’ – was our science teacher in the junior secondary school. He was a mild-mannered, gently-spoken man of mature years (so it seemed to us) and one of nature’s gentlemen. I have an enduring memory of his method of explaining the solar system to us. He placed, on his table, (or did he suspend from the ceiling?) a yellow object like a beach ball to represent the sun, and then circled the table, holding out a globe of the world. This simple strategy was effective, somehow more so than any illustration in a book could have been. Science experiments were also fairly simple, being carried out on the teacher’s table in front of the class. Mr Malan became well known for producing a few unexpectedly dramatic moments. An example was when he placed a piece of sodium or potassium into a large glass bowl of water. A chemical reaction was expected. What was not expected was that the potassium, after completing a few high-speed circuits on the surface of the water, would jump clear of the bowl. It would then fizz away on the table, or more likely, on the floor. Once, a piece of sodium or potassium actually jumped onto Mr Malan, and he had to cuff it first out of his hair, and then off his jacket.

About twenty years later I found myself in the same classroom where I had witnessed the earth revolving around the sun, and where the sodium and potassium had performed their volatile tricks. It would have been in my first or second year as a lecturer at the Graaff-Reinet Teachers’ College. One of our students was placed at Muir College Boys’ Primary School for his teaching practice and I was there to evaluate one of his lessons. So there I was, sitting near the back of the very classroom where Mr Malan had commanded our attention. Even the desks looked the same. I’m not sure whether I gave my fullest attention to this student’s lesson; part of my brain was processing this interface between the past and the present.

I decided to try and make contact with Mr Malan later that day. I believed him still to be alive, and hoped he was still living in the same house in Dale Street, one block above the school. A few moments after I knocked at the front door it was opened by Mr Malan himself. He looked somewhat older perhaps, but was still very much the calm gentlemanly person I remembered. He invited me in as I introduced myself to him. We entered a front sitting room with a bay window that let onto the veranda. I immediately had a sense of being in a space that offered shelter from the outside world. There was also a hint of being sheltered from the passing of time.

It soon became clear that he remembered the boys in my class. We chatted freely over tea he brought in on a silver tray. He said he had retired at the end of 1967 – barely half a dozen

years after he had taught us – which confirmed our schoolboy impression that he was no longer young. I understood him to say that he had begun his teaching career in Graaff-Reinet, later moving to Uitenhage. He added that he had probably spent too long at Muir, and that he should have moved on somewhere else before retiring, but that he felt little inclination to do so. I realised that he, like some of his colleagues during our time at the school, was there ‘for life’. It was somehow their vocation to stay on at a boys’ school not lacking in atmosphere and tradition, and situated in a town that was comfortable to live in. I was very glad that I had decided to visit Frank Malan, and that he was at home when I called. He expressed sincere appreciation that I had made a point of calling.