

R.O. DUDLEY: TEACHER, EDUCATOR AND POLITICAL DISSENTER (1924–2009)

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In education and anti-racist politics in South Africa's Western Cape region, Richard (Dick or R.O.) Dudley was an exceptionally influential intellectual figure who was revered by those who knew him and enjoyed legendary status among many others who had simply heard of his towering reputation. In the school classroom, far more than just a gifted teacher, he was a probing and challenging educationist in the deepest philosophical sense. Likewise, in his left-wing political activism and caustic opposition to segregation and apartheid, Dudley was a true radical nonconformist, dismissing the politics of liberalism, African nationalism and Communism as either tepidly reformist, vacuously populist or slavishly Stalinist.

One of seven children, R.O. Dudley was born in Newlands, Cape Town, in 1924 and was raised there in a house which his family had owned since the 1850s. He attended the local St. Andrew's Church Mission School (of which his father, Samuel, was headmaster) and went on to secondary schooling at Livingstone High, a school for Coloured pupils that had been founded just two years after his birth.



Source: Photograph provided by Livingstone High School

R.O. Dudley: outspoken and uncompromising educationist

Already academically prestigious and staffed by a committed coterie of left-wing teachers, including White people, it was an institution to which he would be bound for the rest of his life.

After a top-notch school performance, Dudley enrolled at the University of Cape Town in 1940, set on studying English and History. However, his Livingstone committee patrons had other plans. His old school needed him to return there to teach science. As a result, he was steered towards chemistry, physics and mathematics and went on to win the class medal in physics. He graduated 5 years later with a MSc degree and a teaching diploma, then still only twenty years old.

That was the age at which Dudley began teaching. As with his older sisters, teaching would be his fate, although, as he once later confessed, he hardly felt a 'schoolmaster type' at first; it was something he would turn into with supreme dedication, serving the same school until his retirement in 1984. He married another teacher, Iris Atkins, three years after starting work. He had first encountered her as a younger Livingstone student when he had been head boy. She recalls consenting to marriage to a man who seemed to have no money but was awash with books of every kind. The Dudleys had two sons, Gary and Russell, and a daughter, Nerine, a medical doctor whose accidental death in 1979 was a devastating blow to the family. It was an especially grievous personal loss to her devoted and admiring father, to whom she had been close.

Several years earlier, Dudley had endured pain of another kind inflicted by the apartheid Group Areas Act, which had already struck his family a decade before, forcing his parents to vacate their Newlands home. With the declaration of the Harfield strip of lower Claremont as a residential zone reserved for White people, R.O. was turfed out of his house in 1973. It had been within strolling distance of the cherished school with which he had been associated since the age of nine, that rigorously academic institution that had done so much to make him and which he himself had done so much to make.

There, he ended up as Deputy Principal and, at times, even Acting Principal, but never as the top dog. The education authorities found his politics too indigestible for him to be put in charge of the school. Thus, for decades, imported Livingstone headmasters were in the humiliating position of commanding a quietly truculent school whose staff and pupils all acknowledged who ought truly to have been its legitimate head. Yet, by restricting his compelling presence to the classroom, generations of awed students became the unintended beneficiaries of such official vindictiveness. Dudley was a visionary educator, for whom Livingstone's chemistry room was a transmission belt of all sorts of questioning knowledge.

His pupils were taught to think critically and widely and not to see learning as a matter of absorbing this or that school subject. Accordingly, they would be encouraged to grapple not only with rudimentary chemical concoctions but also to understand the significance of Joseph Needham's illumination of Chinese science or to contemplate the Marxist science of J.D. Bernal. Depending on the day, there might be a supplement of Shakespeare or Byron, or Maurice Dobb on the history of capitalism. A formidable

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rationalist, R.O.'s abiding humanism also saw him presiding over alternative secular school assemblies, held in a discreet back corner of the quad, well away from scripture readings. There, those who were Muslim, Hindu, atheist or agnostic could gather for Bertrand Russell rather than John the Baptist.

Beyond this, there was even more to the world of R.O. Dudley. In anti-racist politics from a young age, he was part of an independent radical tributary which found expression in the heated Marxist debates of the New Era Fellowship and in the revitalisation from the end of the 1930s of the previously conservative Teachers' League of South Africa. In its Cape Town school strongholds, such as Livingstone, Trafalgar and Harold Cressy, it would play an enormously influential role in resisting the discriminatory system of apartheid education. A strong presence in the anti-Coloured Affairs Department movement in the 1940s, Dudley was also integral to the formation in 1943 of the Non-European Unity Movement. An eloquent embodiment of its independent socialist beliefs and non-racialism, he was placed under government banning orders in the early 1960s and barred from participating in political activities.

In 1984, after 39 years of teaching at Livingstone, Dudley resigned and became president of the New Unity Movement, serving it until ill-health obliged him to step down in 1998. Thereafter, he was elected its Honorary Life President. Retirement was a hard period of chronic ill-health, although Dudley held on grittily to educational and political commitments. Iris died in November 2008 and he followed at the end of May 2009. In April of that year, with his health failing fast, the University of Cape Town bestowed on him an honorary doctorate in education in recognition of his exceptional contribution in that field. The setting for this honour was unusual as it was the Dudley home. If there ever was a university case of better late than never in recognising the stature of one of its graduates this, surely, was it.

Always a figure of the left in his fusing of education and politics, Dudley clung unshakeably to an ideology of pure non-racialism, in that he did not acknowledge racial classification for any purpose. No less fierce was his attachment to the principle of non-collaboration, which meant not only having no truck with the apartheid authorities, but also avoiding any alliance with other kinds of resistance politics which accepted race as a basis of mobilisation, such as the ANC.

Lastly, a personal anecdote on which to end. At the end of the 1960s I was a Livingstone pupil and R.O. was my class teacher. Even if, like me, you were a science dunce, with Mr Dudley there would always be something to dilute the misery of being unable to fathom the periodic table of the elements. In one lesson it might be metaphysical English poetry, in another the deformities of Stalinist Russia. In addition to having knowledge and opinions about everything, he was always composed, mild-mannered and never distracted as he wandered up and down, talking about what we ought to learn from some great mind, that of William Blake or, perhaps, Charles Darwin.

One day, a cocky boy tested him. A whole roast chicken was smuggled in and passed around under our desks, wolfed down stealthily while R.O. was wrapped up in his lesson. As he appeared to remain oblivious when the bell rang, it was an adolescent triumph. But the class grin suddenly turned sheepish. As we filed out, R.O. announced, quietly, that next time we ought to reserve him a thigh, 'my favourite part'. Everything was educative, even being mocked. ■