First Principal of S.A. Native College
Dr. Alexander Kerr honoured

“Our University wishes today to mark the ending of nine years of academic association with the University College of Fort Hare by honouring two men who have been connected with the College from its earliest days. It has been our hope to honour a third, Harry Raymond Burrows, but that has been denied us.”

With these words the Public Orator, Professor D. W. Ewer, addressed the Chancellor, at Saturday’s graduation ceremonies in the Great Hall, in presenting the two recipients of honorary doctorates.

Proceeding, he said:

“Mr. Chancellor, I have the honour to present Alexander Kerr, first Principal of the South African Native College, subsequently to become the University College of Fort Hare.

“It is often suggested that sociology can lay little claim to being an exact science, for its generalisations are severely limited by the fact that the number of cases conforming with the rule is equalled, or even outnumbered by the exceptions. But there is one great law of sociology which, admits of no exceptions; this is the law which states that any man who has played a key role in the initial development of our South African educational system shall be a Scot. Alexander Kerr has always been law abiding and it is therefore no surprise to find that he was born at Kilmarnock in Ayrshire, and graduated from the University of Edinburgh where he was awarded high distinctions in Logic, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy.

THE S.A. NATIVE COLLEGE

“He had early determined to make teaching his career and was already established in that profession when, in 1915, he was appointed to the principalship of the newly founded South African Native College.

“It would be hard to picture a greater change of scene than that from the grey granite of Kylflyth, near Glasgow, to the rented room of Fort Hare, Hara! Dr. Kerr was confronted with a task which called not only for all the sternness of his Ayrshire stock, but also for all the philosophical outlook he had learned at Edinburgh.

“The academic buildings of the new College were some four or five hanger-lows, the Assembly Hall a converted store, the laboratory a kitchen, the staff two. From some 20 students enrolled in 1916, the new College grew not at first as a University College but as a secondary school, proudly producing its first matriculants in 1918 and then with increasing maturity in 1923 its first graduate, a graduate in the Faculty of Arts; still developing until in 1935 the fully adult stature of the College could be recognised, for in that year the first two graduates in the Faculty of Science were capped.

EXACT MEASUREMENT

“The technical triumphs of our times have followed from the practice of exact measurement. It is, perhaps, the success attendant upon this approach to the quantitative world which has led politicians to believe that if they too could make exact measurements, their policies would be equally triumphant.

“This it comes about that we are all numbered and censured and that for the information of governments there lie in the files detailed reports from which we can follow in precise numerical terms the growth of the College under Alexander Kerr’s direction— the increase in student numbers, the establishment of new departments, the erection of new buildings.

“From these we may see that when, after 33 years of service to the College, Dr. Kerr retired from the principalship, he had built an institution still destined to grow upon the foundations which he had laid and whose development was recognised by a change of name to the University College of Fort Hare at the time when it became a constituent college of our University.

NOT IN THE FILES

“But the stature of the College and Alexander Kerr’s influence are not to be gauged in such terms alone; they must be judged rather by the service which the graduates of the South African Native College have given to the peoples of Africa: this is not recorded on the files, nor can it be assessed quantitatively.

“Every year our University pauses amid the rush of lectures to honour those men who were our founders, and founders may be strange men. The founder of your own College, sir, is no exception; he was Kerr’s faith which supported him in the humble beginnings of the South African Native College and guided him in its development. Whatever the future may hold for the bricks and mortar of the buildings at Alice, the achievement of Alexander Kerr will live on in the inspiration which he gave to men and women whose education lay under his direction and in the ideals they will transmit to future generations.”

FAITH OF HIS FATHERS

“No creative work is but a reflection of inspiration. From his youth Alexander Kerr had been attracted to teaching, but he had a desire to transmit far more than knowledge, to transmit the faith of his fathers.

“At the South African Native College, Dr. Kerr’s faith found full scope. The success of the College was made possible by generous support from various Christian missions in South Africa, and in the mission field Dr. Kerr has been active, serving for more than 30 years as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and by the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Divinity, honoris causa, by the University of St. Andrews.

“St. Andrew’s was Kerr’s faith which supported him in the humble beginnings of the South African Native College and guided him in its development. Whatever the future may hold for the bricks and mortar of the buildings at Alice, the achievement of Alexander Kerr will live on in the inspiration which he gave to men and women whose education lay under his direction and in the ideals they will transmit to future generations.”

Kind looks, kind words, kind acts, and warm handshakes—these are secondary means of grace when men are in trouble and are fighting a portion to our demands or sacrifices our needs, but in proportion to our capacity to love.—Bolo May.