

Natal Midlands Black Sash

FLEUR WEBB interviewed by Mary Kleinenberg
on Tuesday 19 July 2011

Interview for the records of the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu Natal.

I am Fleur Webb and it is the 19 July 2011

Mary: Would you like to say something about yourself - something about your background?

Fleur: I am just an ordinary, middle class South African white female of rather mixed blood – mixed in the sense that I have French, Dutch, Welsh and English, not that it made any difference to us as children that we had this mixture.

Mary: Do you want to tell us when you joined the Black Sash, and why?

Fleur: Well I was thinking back this morning to when I began to feel political and that was when I went to varsity, here on this Maritzburg campus. I had been at Girls High in Durban as a school child and we didn't think much in terms of South African politics. My mother insisted that we all go to university and thank heavens that she did. She was a person who would have loved to go to university herself but couldn't. So, I was three and a half years on the Maritzburg campus and I met all sorts of interesting young people, some had been thinking politically for a long time. There were a lot of liberal-minded young persons and one gravitated towards them. We did all sorts of political demonstrations – we were kind of leftish, liberalish young persons, and it was all part of being bloody minded.

Mary: When would that have been?

Fleur: In 1949, just after the war. It was with a sense of doing something not quite acceptable when we did the demos. I think that's what gave us the enthusiasm to get on with it. We did some really wild demos – I remember once we erased Erasmus. You probably don't even remember the name Erasmus, but he was a cabinet minister in those days – I can't remember of what. We didn't like him for some reason so we decided that we would erase him. We made an effigy of Erasmus and put him on a cart of sorts and had a procession. We hired some horses so they were part of the procession and we set off round the rock garden, or fountain, in the middle of the forecourt in front of the Main Hall, now Colin Webb Hall. It was very strange, and we set Erasmus alight. Meantime, the opposition, mainly from the Agricultural Faculty, who were very opposed to anything political and anti-government, had climbed onto the clock tower from which vantage point they were bombing us with buckets of water and sand. So it was that kind of nonsense, though it was political. We were fighting a political battle, the liberals against the conservatives but it was not really very serious. This all came bubbling up when you asked when I became politically minded.

Then, after that 3 ½ years on this campus I was lucky enough to get a bursary to go to France, so I went to France in 1951, which wasn't long after the war when you think about it. I stayed in

student residences in Paris and went to a school at the Sorbonne which was aimed at us foreigners, and mixed with people from all over the world. One of my best friends was an Indian girl from India who had married a French man and was desperately unhappy. We were just drawn to each other. I was also desperately unhappy in Paris which was so far from home, no emails and no telephoning, and I didn't know anybody, and one felt very cut off. This unhappiness disappeared after a month or so – at the end of my academic year I longed to stay. At least one mixed with many other people, lots of Americans, some of them very conservative, others very liberal-minded and quite a few black Americans, so that was a bit of an eye opener.

Back here I taught school for a couple of years in Maritzburg which was not terribly exciting. Then I got a part-time job as a junior lecturer in Durban on the varsity campus. That's where I encountered this group of young lecturers, a contingent of them from Oxford, as bright as pins, as political as they could be, as difficult and bloody minded as you can imagine, but they were exciting and one gravitated towards them. We went on doing odd demos but they were talking serious politics, so I learnt a bit about that. I met Colin (Webb) there - I got there before he did – he was a Cambridge person and he came out in the middle of the year after he had finished his degree. We were all part of that set – Anthony de Crespigny, Caroline de Crespigny, Graham Neam, various others. So, that kept the politics on the go.

Then we got involved in quite a lot of cloak and dagger stuff, which was again a bit of play-acting, but actually things were getting quite dangerous in those days. Colin and I married in 1960 and lived at Isipingo in a funny little hide-away place, but we were both on the (Durban) campus and doing political things. As we were living in this rather remote little village we used to hide people away. There were already people running away from the Special Branch.

Mary: So this was in the early sixties?

Fleur: Ya, One of our big mates was Violane Junod, I don't know if you have ever heard of her, she was very much an activist from Pretoria. Her father was a prison chaplain, the Reverend Junod. They were a famous Swiss missionary family and Violane was very, almost militantly, involved in the struggle. She was one of our best friends and would often come to Isipingo to hide. She would phone on a Friday night and say "Can I come? they are raiding tonight." There were other people that we didn't know. I remember bleaching the hair of odd bods who wanted to be someone else – all very theatrical, and great fun when you are only 30ish.

Mary: But also quite serious stuff.

Fleur: Yes, had we been caught, because there were a lot of people that the Special Branch were after. One of the, probably silly things, we did was to run one of the refugees out of the country. At one stage there was a big Court case in Durban when the government was trying to turn the *habeas corpus* thing around. You know *habeas corpus* means you are innocent until proved guilty. So a lot of us went out to listen to the case and, if I recall correctly, it was turned over and we had to get some of the guys out of the country immediately, that night, so that they were not arrested. We didn't know everyone's names, but somebody seemed to be in charge and they told Colin and me that we could take "whatshisname".

Fortunately, we had a new little car. When we married each of us had an ancient, decrepit thing and we thought we would amalgamate and have one good car which we shared. So we were to pick up our person in Maritzburg. We were told he wanted to get to Lesotho, because in Lesotho you could disappear. So we got an address where we picked him up – we had never met him before. His name might come to mind and I might repeat it or I might not. Anyway, off we drove into the night with a little bag of padkos, some brandy, and quite a lot of trepidation because we knew that the police stations were all going to be on the look-out. Word had gone out that this law had been overturned and there would probably be attempts at escapes. So, every time we got anywhere near a police station we were nervous but nobody stopped us and on and on we went eating our padkos and having a few slurps of brandy to keep us going. When we were way up in the Free State, I can't remember exactly where, quite a way from Bloemfontein, Colin decided that that was as far as he was going to take this bloke. He said he would not go into the Freestate (Lesotho) because it was a black night, the roads were non-existent, and he could not take that risk. He told the bloke to walk across the river and somebody would pick him up on the other side. The escapee was a little bit apprehensive about this and asked that we take him in.

Mary: Into Lesotho? You said Colin wouldn't go into the Free State.

Fleur: I meant Lesotho, but we were still on the Free State border and our next big stop was Bloemfontein. Anyway, we dropped him off, and then set off back home, falling asleep and driving, I remember that awful feeling because we were taking it in turns driving and had driven for I don't know how many hours. I just remember driving and then finding I had fallen asleep. Anyway, we got back and he escaped, but in later years he was heard saying that we had really let him down because we hadn't taken him right into Lesotho, we'd left him to walk across the river himself. Anyway, we never saw him again, and he never said thank you so that was that. So, that's just by the way, one of the sort of silly things that one did.

Mary: So this was in the sixties – were you then a member of the Sash?

Fleur: I hadn't started yet. We came back to Maritzburg in 1962, I think it was, our son Jonathan was born in 62, two years after we were married, and Colin was asked to take up a lecturing post here in the History Dept; we thought that might be a nice idea, so we came back. He got involved straight away in political things; he was a very good speaker, I don't know if you knew that. He was always in demand to address political meetings on campus, and often off as well. I didn't want to get too involved while the children were small – I had the fear that I could be arrested and what would happen to these creatures who were more important to me? For a while I didn't get too involved and used to go and listen to Colin speaking at meetings just as a back-up in case he got whisked away and at least I'd know where he had gone. Yes, there was a lot of adrenalin around my dear, and a lot of people getting arrested.

I think it was the late sixties, I can't remember, when I got involved. Do you remember Jacques Bertoud and his wife Astrid? They were great chums of ours. He was English Dept and she didn't work, but she was in the Black Sash and she was doing the demos and then Jacques got an offer of a job in England, as several of our young bright people did, and he was very keen to get out of the country. Before they went I remember Astrid asking to me to do these demos, and I

was appalled and thought no I can't that, it's too difficult for me. Eventually I said OK, I'll have a go and I did do it for five years.

Mary: So, you did the protest stands?

Fleur: Yes, we would decide at meetings what we were standing for; we had a lot to stand for in those days but I can't remember any details. Then I would have to go home and think up the slogans to put on the billboards. Rather difficult, but fortunately I had Colin around to give ideas and then I would have to write a letter to the Town Clerk, Mr White, and then go and see him. He treated me like dirt, all I can recall is the implication was that it was disgusting sort of stuff we were doing. Anyway, "Please Mr White can we stand on the corner of Church Street and Commercial Road, round the cannon, on Saturday, on such and such a date, from 9 to 10, or whatever the time?" and grudgingly he would grant permission. Then I would go to the poster writer because I wasn't much of an artist, to do these 10 or so posters with ink in large clear writing. Sash just paid the few rands for the posters. They did them very nicely and it looked like a professional job which was better than having a mess. On Friday I would pick them up and in the evening, stick them onto the boards which lived at my house, and on Saturday morning I would set off and we would meet on the corner by the cannon. We would hand the boards out and arrange ourselves around the corner with sashes on, and remind everyone: no talking, no looking up, look at the ground and take no notice of whatever is flung at you, don't chat among yourselves.

Mary: And were insults flung at you?

Fleur: Yes, quite often. We were spat on sometimes, things were thrown at us - toilet paper was thrown at us.

Mary: How absurd.

Fleur: The noble citizens of Maritzburg hardly condescended to see us, they were very embarrassed by us, these ladies of a certain age standing there so seriously, most of us wearing hats. I remember we were attacked by little hooligans one time. There was a particular Lieutenant Fourie in the Special Branch who was always gunning for us, a great big chap. He used to take up position across the road from us, and one Saturday he called, "Mrs Webb come here," so I went across the road and asked what he wanted. He said he wanted me to give the names of all the women and I told him if he wanted their names he should go and ask them, why should I give their names. It was that sort of, you know, stupid intimidation. And we saw them sometimes, the Lieutenant, and his cohorts, picking up young fellows from the movie queue - you remember there used to be the Grand Cinema across the road- and it was Saturday morning bioscope and often there were teenage louts, and he set them onto us. They didn't actually punch us or anything, but they were intimidating, and said rude things.

There was one great march that I mustn't forget. It was organised by the University. Who was the chap who was arrested, you know, the SRC student leader in Durban? Can't remember. Anyway, varsity decided to march and we decided to join them, a contingent of us from the Black Sash as solidarity. It was a night time thing and we set off from varsity main gates. It was

dark already, and we went in academic gowns with us wearing black sashes. We were attacked all along the route by young men taken from the railway hostels. The Special Branch had rather invited or instructed these young men to come and attack the march, which they did; we were told to take no notice. There were some big, strong tough guys in that varsity march, like Cake Manson whom you might remember, who was fiery and powerful; he took no notice, and walked on even though he had mud thrown in his face. They were throwing all sorts of stuff at us. But the most dangerous thing was that some of our people, usually the taller ones like Colin, were holding flaming torches, it was night time you see, and these wretched young louts were coming in and tipping the flaming torches over so that the flame fell on the man carrying it. Colin was set alight because, being tall, he was carrying a torch. Someone pushed the torch and it went all over his gown, fortunately he had people around him who had the presence of mind to take their gowns off and put out the fire. But I remember, now that I am thinking of it, that horrible sound of human beings in a crowd, who have lost their sense of being human. There was that almost animal panting, they were running and they were panting like demented animals, running along the side of the march and you could smell them because they were sweating. Anyway, on and on we went and we got to the City Hall and presented our petition to God knows who. That was fairly memorable, especially because of the flaming torches and because it was dangerous. We thought that they would come and shout rude words at us, but we didn't expect to be set alight.

Mary: We have answered some things that come later, but that's lovely. Tell me now if you can remember some of the people that you worked with.

Fleur: We used to have our meetings at Mamie Corrigan's house when I first joined. She was a real tough leftie, actually a communist, and I was terrified of her; I was terrified of most people. Then the next place we met at was Meg Strauss's house, and Meg was a dear, her old husband was a doctor who had been interned in the war because he was a German. They were very sweet and humane people and we went to their house for night time meetings, and I think Meg used to be the Chairlady. There was Gwen Phillips who later became Gwen Alday, a charming older-than-us lady, and totally dedicated to the cause. Pessa (Weinberg) was quite often there, Joy, she was still Joy Hay then and became Joy Roberts, Phoebe Brown, Iris Friday, she was older than us, and Heather Morkell.

Fleur: Iris was a dear, very gently spoken but totally politically committed. Else (Schreiner) was there though I am not sure she was always there, and Mary Gardner was mostly there. Those are just names that came up, there must have been several others.

Mary: It is interesting that so many people talk about the same people, they must have been the core.

Fleur: Yes, but those were the older ones.

Mary: We are going to leave the political Black Sash for a moment. Did you ever work in the Advice Office?

Fleur: No, I never did. I never had any dealings with the Advice Office.

Mary: A lot of members didn't. Was there any feeling at that time, that you knew about, that the Advice Office was unnecessary?

Fleur: I don't think we ever talked about it at those meetings, it was an entirely separate thing and I don't remember anybody saying why don't you go and work in the Advice Office. They must have been a different lot. Now, a friend of mine from Kloof, Jane Balfour, was working for the Black Sash in Kloof, but she was always in the Advice Office, she never did demos. But I liked the drama of the demos, that little dramatic sense of wanting to do something a bit flashy. I didn't want to plod in the Advice Office which was much more useful.

Mary: I don't think so, necessarily, I think they were both useful.

Fleur: I don't remember the booklets.

Mary: Alright, now you have talked a lot about protests stands and how you did the posters, you have also talked about being harassed by Security Police. Were you charged with anything, or was it just that general harassment?

Fleur: No, it was just to try to upset us. Oh, they came to our house once in Townhill, near the Schreiners because we were both being a bit high-profile at the time. You know if you stand on the street corner you become obvious, and Colin was doing a lot of talking, and we were involved in some sort of controversy, some black guy had tried to infiltrate, in the clumsiest way, into the Progressive Party. We thought it was so stupid we were going to make an official complaint to the police because he was really a plant, he was a spy, and the Special Branch were on to us and they came. They had been tapping our phone for years, we knew that. They came one night, actually they came two nights. It was really a pantomime these two blokes arriving at our door in the dark, in the rain wearing raincoats with the collars up and a Fedora, or whatever you call those hats. They said, "We are very sorry to disturb you but we would like to come in and talk to you for a little bit." Oh they were sinister, really, and I couldn't resist playing them along, I was such a silly flibbertijib, but I thought this was too ridiculous for words. It was like a play, making threats, and of course, there were the children and the men were making insinuations. The one bloke had a big moustache and I remember, just because I couldn't resist it, I went up to him and pulled it, and I said, "Oh Captain, is that moustache real?" Something had to burst their ridiculous bubble, there were bulges in the raincoats which might indicate that there was something in the pockets. Anyway, they went off and didn't arrest us but they had made threatening noises, they had tried to scare us, through the children they tried to scare us.

I did see the man one day when I was collecting in Church Street, I used to do that often, standing there with my little box collecting for I don't remember what. Along came these two clowns of the raincoats and fedoras and I said, "Hello Lieutenant, hello, come and put some money in my box." And, this was because he had said to me "no one ever recognises me" when he was frightening us at the house that night.

Mary: Did he?

Fleur: No, they slunk past looking a bit shamefaced. This was just a nonsense that I couldn't resist but they could be scary if they did arrest you. What recourse did we have? We just wondered sometimes if they put Colin and me in jail what would happen to our babies. I think they wanted us to think that.

Mary: I wanted to ask about other branches in the country – did you meet?

Fleur: I think there were congresses and things and a couple of people would go, probably Maimie and some of the older group, but I didn't because I didn't want to leave my children.

Mary: I think you have said that you were not involved in writing any of those "You and..." booklets.

Fleur: No, I didn't do anything useful.

Mary: Well I think the protest stands were very useful.

Fleur: Well you know we tried to draw people's attention to what was going on – read our posters and think about what's going on, but they just walked past and spat on us.

Mary: Do you think it made any difference? Surely it did affect some people.

Fleur: You know people, like middle-class white ladies doing their Saturday morning shopping, would give us a wide berth, we were an embarrassment. Quite a lot of the young black people didn't have a clue about what we were doing. A few people, like Colin Gardner, bless his heart, would drive past and hoot and we got cheered by that.

Mary: And apparently Meg's husband would walk past and lift his hat to you.

Fleur: Oh yes, he was a very old-world gentleman, but mostly we were reviled and disliked and as I said, the town clerk always treated me like a bit of rubbish when I went to ask permission to stand.

Mary: Much later when I was going to get permission to stand from Mr Dicks, the Chief Magistrate, he was charming and I didn't ever feel as though he thought we were awful people, though I am not saying that he supported us but there was a feeling that there was some respect.

Fleur: You were, after all, decent women, not a bit suspect.

Mary: Fleur, I think we can skip this bit because if you didn't go to those meetings you can't say what they were doing in the rest of the country. What I want to know is how you felt when the membership organisation closed in 1995. What did you think about that?

Fleur: I didn't care anymore. We went to Cape Town in 1975 when Colin was appointed to the Chair of History at UCT so we upped and went. I made contact with the Sash down there and

they were a totally different bunch and didn't seem to be very interested in me, and I thought that I didn't really belong.

Mary: Isn't that a shame.

Fleur: I was teaching because I had to add to the family finances but I did try and I joined the Progs. I went to one Sash meeting, but somehow I didn't belong, didn't even feel particularly welcome and I thought they were a bit of a closed shop. I might have been wrong, maybe I was feeling unconfident or something. Even in Durban later, I did try in Durban, and once again I felt unwelcome.

Mary: I think that is very sad but that's how you felt. So, when it closed you weren't involved.

Fleur: But you see when it started it was the Women's League in support of the Constitution and that is what I was interested in – it was a political pressure group and when it became a paid official group I lost interest. It is not anything to do with the constitution any more. It's an Advice Office and that's fine, but I don't feel like belonging to an Advice Office so I'll go and do something else. That's a failure on my part because it's not politically exciting any more.

Mary: I think you have said a lot about looking back and it seems to me that you felt quite excited about it.

Fleur: Yes, as I said we spent the passion of our youth, quite a few of us white, old people in opposing the unjust government and there was that feeling of something really useful because you came from a decent background, you had always known that honesty and justice, and decent treatment for everybody was what it should be like, and then you found it wasn't like that and you really cared about opposing it. We were terribly embarrassed as young adults knowing some highly refined Indian people in Durban and you would go somewhere and find they couldn't even come in, and you began to understand that it was so wrong. People like Junod were very friendly with some of the Indians, she was a great chum of Fatima Meer and people like that and she stayed with them. We didn't have close friends across the line, although we both had had lots of black students.

Mary: That's about it Fleur unless you can think of anything else. We have gone through the questions but they were only there as guidelines.

Fleur: You asked what other organisations did you work with? Well, I got involved with what was called the Progressive Party in those days so we kind of belonged quite a lot to that. I always canvassed for elections and that sort of thing and Colin spoke at a lot of meetings, so we were always involved with the Progs. Quite a lot of our friends were Liberal Party; Alan Paton and some of the other people were liberals, but I never voted Liberal because I didn't believe they were quite on the right track yet. Colin, I don't think, did either. We were liberally-minded people but didn't belong to the Liberal Party as such, we preferred the Progs which seemed to us more feasible. At the time there was a possibility that people would accept a limited franchise, but there was no way that they would accept an open vote. But it was interesting to be so much

with the liberal people; you know we used to go on these extraordinary picnics and things organised by the Liberal Party, all so self-consciously non-racial, and American students coming to meet Alan Paton and fawning all over him, it was a strange time. There was a great deal of starry-eyed stuff that went on. I don't see any stars any more. I wish my children were able to but they are not political at all really. My two sons had to go to the army, there was no other way, you went or you went to prison and I was not going to let my kids go to prison in this country. They didn't mind going to the army. It was hard but they were never in the front line.

Mary: Now do you want to say anything more?

Fleur: No not really, it was just the things that made one politically conscious. It was such a different time but I don't know what difference it made – maybe there would have been a revolution.

Mary: Now, thank you and I am going the switch this off.

Additional information written by Fleur Webb which was not part of the Interview:

“TEA PARTIES”

The tea parties were interesting and lots of hard work! I hosted several (3 or 4). The trick was to find something to attract our visitors, apart from the tea and cakes. I recall two successful occasions held at my house. One was a “Tupperware” party – the lady guests placed their orders but I was left having to deliver the goods! My favourite memory of this arduous chore was calling at the home of a “coloured” lady living in a remote suburb. I was invited in and observed with interest, in her living room, two large coloured portrait photographs on the wall – one was of a very dark skinned lady in formal Victorian dress – the other was of a young British soldier, pill-box hat, blond curls and blue eyes – upon enquiring, I was proudly informed that these portraits were of her grandmamma and Grandpapa.

My most successful party was the one when I invited a beauty consultant from one of the local shops to come along and demonstrate her art to the guests – how they loved it - all wanted to have “make-overs” – at long last this bevy of happy new beauties departed into the sunset! It was all such nonsense but the goodwill was great.

One last thought – Colin's mother was there for one of the parties – she spoke fluent Tswana having grown up on a farm near Zeerust in the Northern Transvaal – she attracted a group of Tswana speaking women around her and they chatted together so comfortably.

So, I guess something good was achieved in the end. Politics never entered into the picture. I suppose that my more intellectual friends might feel that there was condescension on our part but we did not see it that way. These things happened nearly fifty years ago.