A FURTHER NOTE ON THE FIRST CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA 1908-1910

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In an article in the previous issue of this journal,¹ I drew attention to the existence of a Classical Association of South Africa (CASA) in 1908, much earlier than had hitherto been thought. The Association’s President was William Ritchie, Professor of Classics at the South African College, which later became the University of Cape Town.

In pursuit of further information about this first CASA, I consulted the ‘Synopsis’ of William Ritchie’s life (for the most part a detailed diary) handwritten by him, a copy of which is held by the Manuscripts & Archives Department of the University of Cape Town Libraries.² For a typical month, the document notes in telegraphic style the lectures Ritchie gave to, or heard at, various societies; the committees he attended; the dinners he went to; the walks he took; family news; the sports and entertainments he enjoyed.

I have scrutinized the ‘Synopsis’ for the years before 1908 and can find no mention of a CASA. Then, beginning in March 1908, the following entries show the inception of the Association:

Constituted a Classical Association of South Africa, of which I was president 28th [March 1908 – Ritchie’s underlining].

Classical Assoc.- council 25th [April 1908].

Classical Association Council 21st [May 1908].

The ‘Synopsis’ gives no details about who made up the CASA ‘Council’ or what it discussed.

² BC 220 Ritchie Collection, Folder D.2 : ‘Photocopies of Professor Ritchie’s “Synopsis” of his life.’
Then comes an entry – in the midst of other matters – that corrobo-
rates exactly the notice in the Cape Times for 17 June 1908, discussed in
my earlier article:

A transcription of the relevant sentences here runs:

Classical Association general meeting. I gave presidential address & there
were two other papers. 22nd [June 1908].

The ‘two other papers’ were no doubt those by Professor G. Robertson of
Bloemfontein and Miss A.S. Bleby of Rondebosch, announced for 22 June
in the Cape Times of 17 June 1908.

Between June 1908 and April 1910, Ritchie’s ‘Synopsis’ mentions
meetings of the Classical Association or its Council on 25 September and
13 November 1908; and on 12 February, 10 September and 26 Novem-
ber 1909. Then we get an entry clearly indicating that the Association had
shrunk to a small local body:


The ‘Synopsis’ records a further meeting of the Council on 20 August and
an ‘Annual Meeting of Classical Assoc’ on 23 September 1910. But then
comes the last sad mention in November:

Classical Assoc Council 19th [November 1910] The Assoc seems
moribund.

It is clear that the Association was not just ‘moribund’ but, in fact,
dead. I have examined the ‘Synopsis’ for the next eight years, up to the end

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3 Whitaker (note 1) 177-78.
4 Dr Suzanne Sharland of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in a personal
communication, has now pointed out to me that the ‘Miss A.S. Bleby’ mentioned
here is almost certainly Miss Alicia S. Bleby, first Principal (1894-1911) of
Rustenburg Girls’ High School in the suburb of Rondebosch, Cape Town.
of 1918, but have found not a single word more about the Classical Association of South Africa.

For reasons that do not appear, this CASA could not sustain itself. Perhaps there were too few classicists in South Africa. Perhaps travel was simply too difficult and expensive. Whatever the reason, ironically in the very month, November 1910, when Ritchie's 'Synopsis' records festivities — a great pageant and illuminations — to celebrate the coming of the Union, the first Classical Association of South Africa, which may have been inspired by the idea of that Union, held its last meeting.

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