

Dr Reginald Koettlitz

POLAR EXPLORER, GEOLOGIST, BOTANIST

Visit to Cradock, South Africa by Aubrey A. Jones

In my article concerning Dr Reginald Koettlitz (RK) in the 50th edition of the Society newsletter I said I was hoping, during 2005, to visit South Africa where Dr Koettlitz and his wife died and are buried.

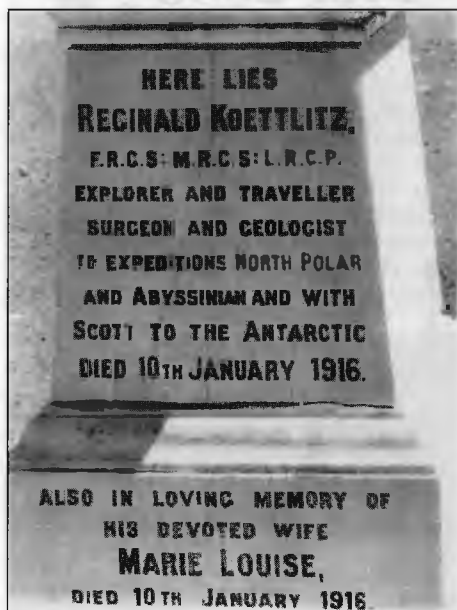
In November I accomplished this and visited both Cradock and Somerset East, Eastern Cape, where Koettlitz practised as a rural doctor and ostrich farmer and was later interred in the Anglican section of the Cradock Cemetery.

This is a brief account of what I achieved and discovered, to add to the reputation of Dover's famous explorer from the heroic period of polar and African exploration. I had previously

been in email and postal contact with a number of elderly contacts in the area who had direct knowledge of RK through their ancestors or by taking an interest in local history.

You may recall, from my previous article, that Dr Koettlitz had an impressive memorial stone in the cemetery and I was hoping that this still existed. Other objectives were to locate the original photograph of RK in his polar clothing shown in the 50th edition and any correspondence he may have written during his time in South Africa.

Cradock is a small rural town located in the Karoo region of the Eastern Cape and is still fairly remote. It is the largest



Cradock Cemetery, South Africa



Vortrekker Street, Cradock

Dutch Reform Church, Cradock



serve the Eastern Cape. His subsequent practice was in the Karoo town of Somerset East which remains an attractive farming community at the foot of the Bosberg hills and was sited here for defence purposes during the frontier wars.

On the approach to Cradock there is one of two large "townships" which house the majority of the town's 50,000 inhabitants which includes approximately 4,000 Afrikaans and British descendants of the early settlers.

The town is much as it was during the time Dr Koettlitz resided in the region with many buildings from the Victorian period and a small number over 150 years old. Having located my B&B, which was a fine Victorian house, it was time to become familiar with the layout of the town, which is dominated

by a fine Dutch reformed Church, a perfect copy of St Martin's in the Fields in Trafalgar Square.

I headed for the Municipal offices and town museum where I discovered that RK is one of four celebrities highlighted in the information guide to Cradock. In fact, he holds number two spot after Olive Schreiner the famous South African author who resided in the town.

The curator of the museum was somewhat bemused by my arrival and pointed out he was only at the museum by default and had no knowledge of local history. I then spotted on the wall above his desk the very photograph of RK in full

town between Port Elizabeth, my place of arrival and Bloemfontein in central South Africa. It is 300 kilometres from Port Elizabeth and the only hamlet en-route is Cookhouse which derives its name from being the main cookhouse and depot of the British army during the Boer War in that region.

During the time RK resided in South Africa 1905-1916 it would have been even more remote although there was a single railway line between the two towns with a junction at Cookhouse. RK initially practised in the area of Darlington near Somerset East. This is now at the bottom of Lake Mentz a large reservoir created to

polar attire. Had he sat at the desk for over a year without looking up? Initially I thought he was about to give me the photograph to return to UK but once I had explained the significance of Dr Koettlitz in 19th century exploration, he decided the picture should remain in Cradock. Unfortunately, no further information was retained at the museum.

I then met an elderly gentleman by the name of Duncan Ferguson, a retired manager of South African railways whose lifetime's passion had been historical research of the Eastern Cape. This I discovered was the place to locate the history and records of Cradock and Somerset East and his home housed the most wonderful collection of manuscripts, photographs, paper cuttings and other material going back 150 years. This included a sizeable file of Reginald Koettlitz and his life in the region. We spent many hours together discussing RK and many other issues concerning South Africa from the past and present time.

Duncan Ferguson then escorted me to the Anglican Church, Cradock where the burial service for RK and his wife, Marie Louise, was conducted and to the



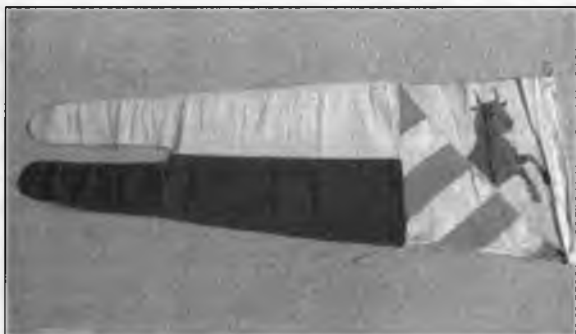
Duncan Ferguson, local historian, at Dr Reginald Koettlitz grave

Anglican Cemetery where the fine memorial still stands. Both Dr Koettlitz and his wife were carried to the grave by local Freemasons as stipulated in his will which incidentally had been witnessed by Sir Ernest Shackleton the heroic polar explorer. A little worn, the grave lies amongst those of the British soldiers killed in the Boer war in engagements in the Cradock area.

Although a well-kept cemetery it seemed a lonely resting spot for one of Dover's eminent citizens and outstanding explorers of the period. This was made even more pronounced when I discovered his plans to lead another expedition south to the Antarctic, the objective being to reach the South Pole set up a base there for up to six months. This was to be a purely scientific expedition and linked to a shore base with similar objectives. It is interesting to note that such a scientific expedition base was not established for approximately another fifty years. Unfortunately, as with many grand plans, funding was not forthcoming and he never left his hard life in South Africa but was thinking years ahead of his time.

This is the first time that plans for such an expedition have been published. RK was held in very high esteem in the Eastern Cape by local residents and the professional community but it shows he never entirely settled. It was the failing health of his wife that finally scuppered any further thoughts of exploration or a return to England.

I remained in Cradock for six days and by the end of my stay had become a well known visitor to the town and the profile of Dr Reginald Koettlitz had risen to new heights. The 50th edition of the Dover Society Newsletter is now located in the town museum, the Municipal Building, the Olive Schreiner museum and the Victoria Hotel which happens to be the only hotel in town and the meeting place of Cradock's influential citizens.



Dr Reginald Koettlitz sledging flag discovery Antarctic expedition

I have been asked to re-write the official RK historical document held in the Municipal Hall and museum as it contains many inaccuracies and links Koettlitz to the death of Captain R F Scott on his subsequent fatal expedition. By this time RK was resident in South Africa.

My research in Cradock at an end I headed for Somerset East and the museum in particular. The comparison with Cradock museum could not have been greater. The very helpful curator once I had gained access via many security doors, immediately went to the safe and located the "Reginald Koettlitz" file, which contained many documents and other material of great significance. Two letters in particular show the

outstanding reputation of RK in the Eastern Cape. In one an old lady describes his excellence as a doctor to the whole community and his particular attention and kindness to children. She also writes that Marie Louise Koettlitz received brightly coloured magazines from France which she turned into dolls for the local children. The second, from the late Professor W H Craib of Somerset East hospital,

describes RK as a "Tallish, thinnish, sad-faced and withdrawn world famous north and south polar regions explorer. He travelled by horse and cart for over 50 miles attending his patients and collecting his post and other necessities. He was sad and seemed frustrated by something that happened to him in Europe - not uncommon behaviour among OUTSTANDING EXAMPLES OF HOMO SAPIENS".

Following my research and enquiries in Somerset East in was time to head back down the N10 highway to Port Elizabeth and a few days rest and recuperation on the coast before returning to the UK. I was most grateful for the assistance and kindness shown

me in the towns I visited which are well off the normal tourist trail for visitors to South Africa. The Eastern Cape receives many visitors from the UK, so if you happen to be in the Karoo region don't forget to visit the memorial to one of Dover College's outstanding alumni and it is the reason Dover Museum has that most famous polar bear.



Somerset East Museum, Eastern Cape