

WAUCHOPE, Isaac Williams

1852, *Doornhoek near Uitenhage* —
21 February 1917, *the English Channel*

**Author, political and educational activist,
church minister**

On both sides of his family, Isaac Williams Wauchope had strong connections with the pioneering Christian missionaries to the Xhosa people. His great-grandmother Tse, together with her daughter, Mina, were early disciples of J.T. van der Kemp*, following him to Bethelsdorp in 1802. Tse was beaten to death by a farmer's wife in Hankey in about 1807. Mina, who was 17 years old at the time, gave evidence at the subsequent hearing in Uitenhage. She died in Port Elizabeth in 1887 at the age of 96. Her daughter, Sabina (1828-1907), was Wauchope's mother.

In 1816, Joseph Williams* established a mission station near the home of Citashe, Wauchope's grandfather. It was Williams who accorded the family the Scottish name Wauchope. Citashe's son, Dyoba, (also known as William Wauchope) married Sabina Heka in November 1850, and Isaac Williams was the eldest of their ten children. Wauchope himself married Naniwe Ntame, the daughter of John Lukalo, on 9 April 1878 in Uitenhage. His wife served as an assistant in the Lovedale Institute's boarding department from 1874 to 1879. They had four sons (one of whom, Isaac Stephen Wauchope, followed his father into the ministry) and three daughters.

Wauchope was one of four pupils at

Lovedale to accompany a missionary party to Malawi in July 1876, but he fell victim to fever and was sent home in December 1876. On his return he served as a teacher in Uitenhage, where one of his pupils was Charlotte Manye (later Maxeke*). In September 1882 Wauchope played a key role in the establishment of *Imbumba Yamanyama*, one of the earliest political associations for blacks in South Africa, formed in response to the foundation in 1879 of the Afrikaner Bond. Wauchope served as Secretary and Chairperson. He moved to Port Elizabeth, where he took up service as clerk and interpreter to the magistrate. In 1885 Wauchope complained to the railway authorities about physical abuse suffered by his younger brother, Peter, at the hands of a white shunter and won a formal apology from the railways and the shunter's dismissal. Wauchope himself was less successful two years later in personally bringing a charge of assault against a Port Elizabeth stationmaster. Through his active involvement in the community, his work with *Imbumba* and these court cases testing white authority, Wauchope earned a reputation among blacks as a 'public benefactor'.

In 1888 he responded to an appeal for 'native' ministers and studied theology at Lovedale, where he became an active member of the Lovedale Literary Society. On 6 March 1892 he was ordained as pastor of the Congregational Native Church of Fort Beaufort and Blinkwater; officiants at the ceremony included James Read Sr*, Henry Kayser and Pambani Mzimba*. From 1906 Wauchope joined the movement to establish a black institution of higher learning, addressing meetings throughout the Cape and serving on com-

mittees at the highest level. In this enterprise he was joined by his wife, who organized a women's branch of the campaign. This culminated in 1916 in the foundation of the South African Native College, now the University of Fort Hare.

In 1907, after administering the estate of a parishioner for 18 months, Wauchope filed a will entirely in his own handwriting, including the signatures of the two witnesses. In the subsequent controversial case of **Tshona vs Wauchope** Wauchope, defended by R.W. Rose-Innes, was charged with forgery, even though it could not be proved that he had profited in any way from the will or that he had exhibited any intention to defraud. The all-white jury found him guilty after a very brief deliberation, and Wauchope was sentenced to three years' hard labour. He was committed to Tokai prison.

In 1916 Wauchope volunteered to join the South African Native Labour Contingent, a party of black auxiliaries who sought service in the First World War. On 21 February 1917 the troopship *Mendi*, on which he was travelling, sank in the English Channel with a loss of over 600 black South Africans. Numerous survivors testified to the absence of panic among the black ranks as the ship went down: legend has it that they assembled calmly on deck for a death drill, where Wauchope exhorted them in strongly nationalistic terms to die like African heroes. Like his trial and conviction for forgery, this act is also shrouded in uncertainty.

The notice of his death in *Imvo* of 3 April 1917 recorded that Wauchope was one of those who possessed abundant talent that facilitated his emergence as a distinguished man of his people. Wauchope also led the black temperance organization, the Independent Order of True Templars, for

five years between 1893/98. In addition, he can claim a significant role in the history of Xhosa literature. His earliest contribution to a newspaper was an article on liquor in *Isigidimi samaXosa* in July 1874.

After his return from Malawi in 1876, he continued contributing articles from Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage with a religious bent, critical of drinking and encouraging education, his lifelong preoccupations. In May 1882 he contributed his first poem: a rousing exhortation to his readers to transfer the heroic resistance of their forefathers from war to rational argument: 'Fight with the pen!' Wauchope contributed an extended discussion of Xhosa proverbs to *Imvo zabantsundu* in 1891 and 1892, a number of hymns in 1896, and numerous historical articles. Particularly noteworthy is a series of poems he published in *Imvo* in 1912 under the collective title *Ingcamango ebunzimeni* (Reflections in darkness), written while in prison in Tokai, to date the only prison literature in Xhosa. *The natives and their missionaries* (1908) remains his only formal publication. His respect for the achievements of the early missionaries does not preclude the expression of undercutting criticisms, especially for their opposition to Xhosa custom. For nearly 40 years Wauchope published historical, educational and political articles, travelogues, poems and letters in his own name as well as under his pseudonyms Silwangangubo, Dyoba woDaka and Ngingi.

To many Wauchope must have seemed confrontational; viewed from a more sympathetic perspective, however, he was outspoken in his insistence on the rights and dignity of black South Africans. An associate of the most prominent figures in the emerging black elite in the eastern Cape (men such as Elijah Makiwane*, John

Knox Bokwe* and John Tengo Jabavu*), he also numbered among the leading Xhosa poets of his age (with the likes of William Gqoba*, S.E.K. Mqhayi*, M.K. Mtakati and Jonas Ntsiko), Wauchope lived and died at the cutting edge, ever in the vanguard in literary, educational, political, historical and temperance spheres and ultimately the true stuff of legend.

I.W. Wauchope, *The natives and their missionaries*. Lovedale, 1908; - [James Stewart], *Lovedale past*

and present. Lovedale, 1887; - André Odendaal, *African political mobilisation in the Eastern Cape, 1880-1910*. PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1983; - Norman Clothier, *Black valour: the South African Native Labour Contingent 1916-1918, and the sinking of the 'Mendi'*. Pietermaritzburg, 1987; - Jeff Opland, *Xhosa poets and poetry*. Cape Town, 1998; - T. Jack Thompson, *Touching the heart: Xhosa missionaries to Malawi 1876-1888*. Pretoria, forthcoming; - Obituary: *Imvo zabantsundu*, 3 April 1917.

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