

Who was MT Steyn?

Marthinus Theunis Steyn was born at Rietfontein in Winburg on 2 October 1857 and was one of 11 children. He went to school at a farm in the area where he was born and then proceeded to Grey College in Bloemfontein. He continued his high school education at Deventer in the Netherlands in 1877 and later went for training at the Inner Temple in London where he was admitted in 1880. In 1882, he returned to the Free State and started his own legal practice as an advocate. Steyn married Tibbie Fraser (of Scottish descent) in 1887 and they had seven children. In 1892, he was appointed as judge of the Free State Republic.

Although Steyn's home language was English, he championed the cause of the Boers and his popularity led to his election as State President in 1896. Under his government, agricultural practices were updated, and schools were built, among others. Despite his best efforts to broker peace, war broke out in 1889, and lasted until 1902. After a failed attempt at peace talks with Britain in 1900, a severely ill Steyn again engaged in peace talks with Lord Kitchener in 1902. Kitchener was very impressed with Steyn, considering him "head and shoulders above the rest". Unfortunately, Steyn's illness got worse and he went to Europe to undergo treatment for the next three years. He returned to his farm, Onze Rust, near Bloemfontein in 1905.

In 1906, Steyn advocated for a larger, united South Africa and expressed his views on numerous issues such as future capital, the public services, language rights, railways, and protectorates. Continuing tension between local leaders and a disregard for Steyn's warnings undermined his already poor health. He collapsed at a women's meeting that he was addressing and was laid to rest at the Women's Memorial – a monument initiated by him in memory of thousands of women and children who died in the fields and concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War. Emily Hobhouse supported him in this endeavour and also stressed the role and suffering of black people during the war in her speech at the unveiling of the monument.

Steyn would be remembered as an honest, moderate but firm leader who commanded the respect of associates and opponents. His reconciliatory approach in uniting different viewpoints during a protracted period of upheaval in the history of the Free State has been admired both locally and internationally. However, many current students associate him with negative concepts such as colonialism, institutionalised racism, and white supremacy, etc., rendering the symbolism of his statue at the UFS contentious.