

# An interview with Dr P.E. Raper, Head of the South African Centre of Onomastic Sciences<sup>1</sup>

Int.: Dr Raper, would you mind explaining to the uninitiated, as we so obviously are, exactly what the term onomastics, alternatively onomatology, means?

Raper: Yes, I'd be pleased to answer that. Onomastics, or onomatology, means the study of names. It is derived from the Greek word *onoma*, meaning a name. In the Centre we don't distinguish between different sorts of names specifically — everything that has a proper as opposed to a common name is within our field of study. Place names, for example, personal names, names of tribes, even titles of books, and so on, will eventually be within our sphere. At this stage we are concentrating on the names of places because there is a specific need for this and also because more background work has been done in this regard. Perhaps you'd like me to mention what we regard as being a place: we don't, as is sometimes the case, differentiate between names of cities and towns and other names. We incorporate in our field of study such names as the names of farms, streets, buildings, rivers. The name of any topographical feature, any man-made edifice, any man-made entity, is a name as far as we are concerned, a place name.

Int.: So you have quite a broad sphere of interest?

Raper: A very broad sphere.

---

<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted by A.D. Adey and Mey Hurter, and transcribed by Maureen Troy.

Int.: Now, what prompted you, personally, to extend your studies in this particular direction? Did they start while you were at university? What actually set you going?

Raper: I have Professor P.J. Nienaber to thank for my studying onomatology. He was my lecturer in linguistics at Honours level at Wits, and he suggested that for my dissertation for the Honours study, I should do something based on research, on field work and what have you. I asked him to suggest a topic and he said 'place names'. I agreed and wanted to know how to go about it. He showed me the M.A dissertation of Professor Van der Merwe which dealt with farm names in Ermelo and Carolina. When I asked him to suggest a district he said Boshof, because that is where he comes from. And he was so satisfied with the dissertation that he encouraged me to write articles on place names. One thing led to another and when I received permission to do my doctorate, I decided to do a thesis on the names of regions.

Int.: And how did you get to this job — I mean, did you come to the Human Sciences Research Council or did they come to you?

Raper: No, I was teaching and they invited me to apply for the post of Head of the Department of Onomastics. Actually, the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* had an institute for onomatology at the University of Pretoria. Professor S.A. Louw and Professor Fanie Strydom started this work in 1965. It was at the instigation of Professor P.J. Nienaber that they launched this project at the University of Pretoria. But they did the work on a part-time basis and when the Human Sciences Research Council was established, the *Akademie* asked the Council to take over the work. A number of institutes which the *Akademie* had initiated were taken over by the Human Sciences Research Council, and the Centre for Onomastic Sciences was one of them.

Int.: What exactly are the aims of your Centre?

Raper: Well, we undertake research into names; names of places and names of people, etc.; we publish research findings in

dictionaries, in articles, including newspaper articles; we publish source lists and we also publish research findings done by other people and by ourselves in our Onomastics Series. We also try to plan and co-ordinate research on a national basis with a view to eliminating duplication and overlapping. We try to create a centre where all possible onomastic material — everything which a student or researcher (or any interested person) will require for his studies — will be concentrated. This includes books, pamphlets, brochures, newspaper articles, and periodical articles as well as tape recordings, and other results of field work, and the answers to questionnaires which we send out periodically. We give advice on the giving or altering of names. We try to obtain the co-operation of related bodies, and we try to promote interest in onomastics.

Int.: Well, I think that's about it.

Raper: That's about it, unless you'd like me to expand on one or two of these; the way in which we co-operate with other bodies, perhaps?

Int.: Yes, I think that would be most interesting.

Raper: Well, both Professor G.S. Nienaber (who works here in the Centre) and I serve on the *Place Names Committee* of the Department of National Education, and I serve on the *Advisory Committee on Street and Place Names* of the Pretoria City Council. We also co-operate with various universities. In this regard, I'd like particularly to mention the University of Natal where Professor Botha is actually presenting a course in Place Names Study to his post-graduate students.

Int.: Is this at Pietermaritzburg or Durban?

Raper: Durban.

Int.: Professor G.S. Nienaber was Professor of Afrikaans at Pietermaritzburg, wasn't he?

Raper: Yes, he was. I think Professor Botha was one of Professor G.S. Nienaber's doctoral students.

Int.: Do you attend many conferences?

Raper: I haven't in the past; the first one was in Bulgaria, but this was a little difficult to get to!! However, I have been to a number of countries to do research into how their onomastic centres or institutes are operated. I have been to Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Belgium, Holland and England. When I returned I was able to apply their methods here. The *International Committee of Onomastic Sciences* publishes a periodical, and once a year they publish a world-wide bibliography of onomastics — *Bibliographia Onomastica*, they call it. And our Centre contributes data from South Africa.

Int.: To whom are you responsible?

Raper: In the first place to Dr P.G. du Plessis, Director of the Institute for Languages, Literature and Arts, of which the Centre is a Division. We are fortunate enough to enjoy tremendous sympathy and co-operation from him. Beyond Dr. Du Plessis we are responsible to Dr A.J. van Rooy and Dr A.L. Kotzee, the Vice President and President of the HSRC respectively.

Int.: You were telling us about your contacts overseas and the material you got from there. How do you go about collecting your data within South Africa? What exactly do you do?

Raper: There are various methods we employ. We naturally go through all the old history books, travel journals and diaries of the early travellers and early Cape Commanders and so forth. We get quite a bit of information from archival sources. Then, we try to keep up to date with modern literature on the subject. The *Institute for Contemporary History* of the University of the Orange Free State supplies us with newspaper cuttings dealing with onomastics. In the Centre they are then catalogued and filed. We use these as well as periodical articles to compile annual 'source guides' for onomastics.

Int.: And maps?

Raper: We use maps to a very large extent. We have here, in the Centre, complete maps of the 1:250 000 Topo-cadastral and Topographical series. We find these invaluable,

particularly in identifying names mentioned in old documents, as, for example, Professor Forbes did in recording his pioneer travels in South Africa. We do the same sort of thing with many modern maps. We find that to a very large extent the modern names have been translated from the old languages: Hottentot, which we nowadays call Khoekhoen, and others. And we also use questionnaires to a large extent. For specific projects we do field work.

Int.: What is a Topo-cadastral map, and what does Khoekhoen mean?

Raper: Khoekhoen means 'people of people'; 'men of men'; 'men/people par excellence'! Khoeb actually means a man, Khoes is a woman. 'Cadastral' has reference to land ownership.

Int.: What is the practical value of the work at your Centre? I know it's a difficult question!

Raper: It's a long question rather than a difficult one because it's of such fantastic practical value; one considers how the country has developed and is developing at the moment: new townships are being laid out and need names. The streets themselves need names, even new buildings need them. We expect township developers to submit the names of towns etc. in the first place to the *Place Names Committee*. Then they consider whether the names are suitable or not, whether they are linguistically correct. They are the only people who actually approve a name as such. We have published, *inter alia*, a book called *Toponymical Practice*, which aims at advising people on how to give names. This book deals with such matters as whether the name is suitable or not, and then considers the linguistic composition, the method of writing these names.

Int.: Will any of your publications help historical researchers and so on, people who want to trace a name? They may have a letter, or some other document, in their possession. If your book provides a place-name and the approximate date when this name was first used, could this help them in arriving at some conclusion?

Raper: Actually, that's one of the advantages of onomatology and place-names research. In a book that Professor G.S. Nienaber and I are writing on Khoekhoen place names one can find out which plants or animals were prevalent in a certain area at a certain stage. One can even trace the migration of various tribes in pre-historic times. We have found that various tribes have been forgotten completely. But through the place-names we can still find out where they were, and, to some extent, who they were.

Int.: So it's not only historical, it's sociological as well?

Raper: Sociological, ethnological, and historical. You can also (from place-names) establish the geographical development of an area. Ecological changes that have taken place are often reflected in place names.

Int.: That's something I hadn't thought of. One could do this with your work on, say, Hottentot, which goes back pretty far 'in time'?

Raper: Very, very far indeed. I think Hottentot names must be among the oldest names.

Int.: Have any publications resulted from the work of your research team?

Raper: Yes. Apart from quite a large number of periodical articles which we have published, and apart from our contribution to *Ensiklopedie van die Wêreld*, Vols. 1-10, to which we have contributed a large number of articles, we've also published a number of books. I think we have about 8 either published or in the process of being published at this stage. The first, which has no serial number, is a reprint of Professor P.J. Nienaber's *Pleknaamwoordeboek* (Part 1). This was originally published in 1963 but has been republished by the *Human Sciences Research Council*. I was overseas when this was published and it wasn't given an Onomastics Series number. It should have been number one. Now number one is *Streekname in Suid-Afrika en Suidwes* which I submitted for my doctoral thesis at Wits. The book, as it is published, has been somewhat curtailed, abridged. Volume 2 in the series is an *Onomastics Source Guide*

(1970). This contains periodical and newspaper articles and bibliographical references. Volume 3 is the doctoral thesis of E.J. du Plessis, '*n Ondersoek na die oorsprong en betekenis van Suid-Afrikaanse berg- en riviername*. The fourth is *Toponymical Practice*, which is a bilingual publication. That's the one that I mentioned previously; it is aimed at being of use, in the first place, to the personnel in the Centre. It shows them how to compile the various cards we use: bibliographical cards, place-name cards and so forth. It even tells them how to go about typing them. Our second reason for including such administrative detail in this publication is that students can also apply it. You see, if the Council subsidizes their research, or publishes their research findings in our series, or helps them in any way, such as sending out questionnaires for them, or making our data available, we expect, in return, that they should give us their unprocessed material. This helps us tremendously in integrating their material with ours so that later researchers may use it again, if it follows our pattern. With this in view, we have included such information as how to type the cards, if the cards get typed at all. But this book also deals with such matters as where to find information and how to go about compiling or preparing the information, how to write a thesis. We list methods and sources available, and also suggest how to prepare a book like this for publication in our series.

Int.: In glancing through this book, it has occurred to me that it would also be of value to the interested man-in-the-street.

Raper: It would, because, as Professor Botha pointed out in his review of this book in the *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* in April last year, it could be useful to the ordinary man. A teacher, for example, who is at a loose end during the holidays, could consult this book and, on the basis of what is given here, could do his own research and come to light with something scientific, and interesting.

Int.: Which would be of interest to you?

Raper: Which would be of interest to everybody who reads it. It may be an article he publishes, it could even be for research purposes.

Int.: So that he would, in fact, then become one of your sources?

Raper: Yes.

Int.: That was number 4, was it?

Raper: That was number 4. This book, as I mentioned before, also gives guidance to people who give or alter place-names. Number 5 was a retrospective source guide for onomastics called *Source Guide for Toponymy and Topology*, which means the study of place-names and the study of places, because it encompasses more than merely names. This includes books, theses, dissertations, and commemorative brochures of towns, cities and churches. It contains a list of periodical articles on places and place-names, and of newspaper articles. It also includes a subject index which is a list of place names with everything written about each place chronologically arranged. This book, as a matter of fact, was sold out within six months, and has just been reprinted.

Int.: When people are interested, where can they get these books? Can they write to you?

Raper: They should write to the President, The Human Sciences Research Council, Private Bag X41, Pretoria, 0001. The first three volumes in the series can only be obtained from bookshops or from the publishers. Number 6 in the series is Volume I of *Toponymica Hottentotica*, which was written by Professor G.S. Nienaber and myself. Volume 2 should be appearing in the course of this year and will probably be Number 7 within the Onomastic Series. Number 8 in the series is *Watername in Natal* which deals with Zulu hydronymical names. It was written by Professor T.J.R. Botha and is also in the press at the moment. We are hoping it will be published in April. Number 9 in the series will then probably be Volume 3 of *Toponymica Hottentotica*.

Int.: You mentioned this latest publication of yours in which you are presently engaged on a study of Hottentot place-names. Has this involved you in any travel or extra study?



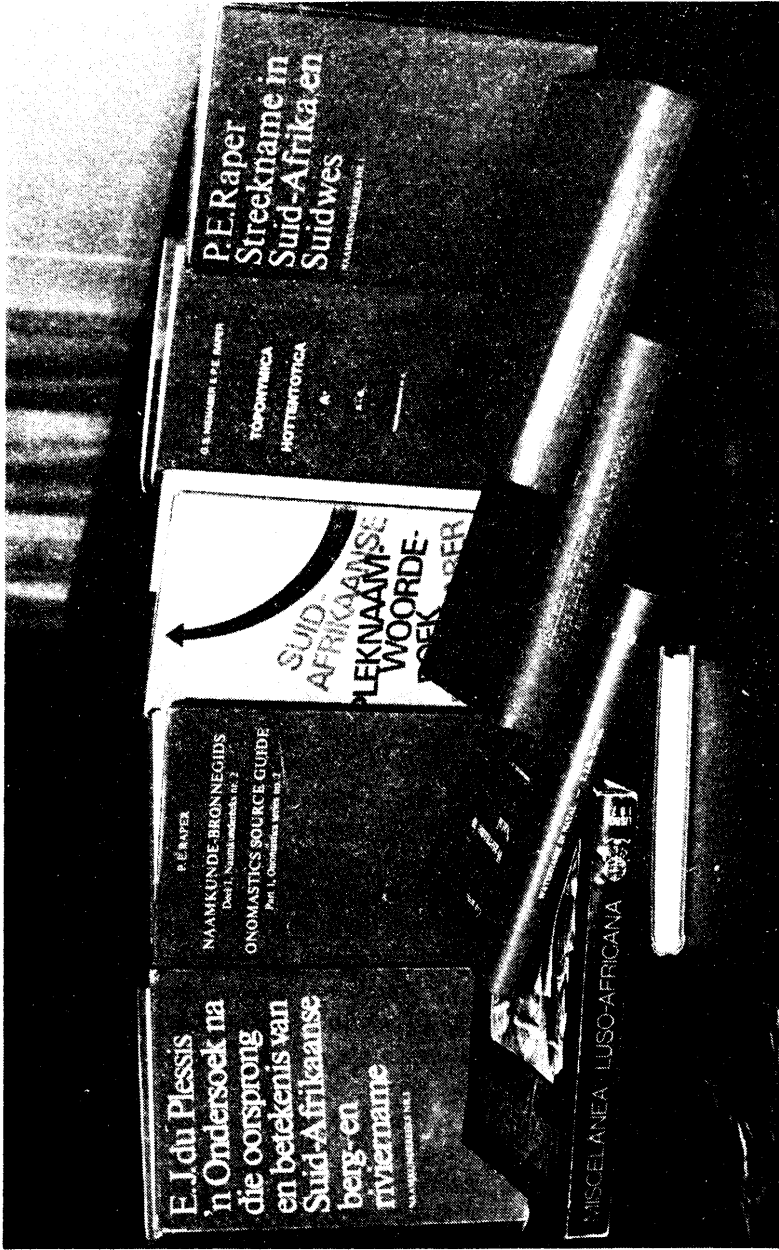
Raper: Most certainly it has. Professor Nienaber and I both went to South West Africa and the Northern Cape. The project does not only include South West Africa, but the entire Republic. You know, these Khoekhoen place-names occur from the Kunene River in South West Africa through the Namib, through Namaqualand, down to the Peninsula, eastwards all along the South of the Cape Coast up to about the present border of Natal. So it is actually a very vast field which is covered by these names. To a large extent the Xhosa language has been influenced by the Hottentots. I believe the 'clicks' in the African languages were taken over from the Hottentot languages.

Int.: Does any name of any river or place in the Transkei spring to mind?

Raper: Well, the Kei River, for one. The second part of the name 'Transkei' is actually of Hottentot origin. It means Sand (River).

Int.: What is the original pronunciation? Xh or the X?

Raper: Well, it's a lateral click which is denoted in typescript by a double 'slash'. We get four 'clicks' in Hottentot: first of all, the 'dental' click which is formed by placing the tongue behind the front teeth and withdrawing it. Then you get the lateral click, which is the sound you get when you put the side of your tongue against your back teeth and withdraw it. The 'dental' click in typescript is represented by a single vertical line, the lateral by a double vertical line. Then you get the palatal click which is represented by a vertical line with an 'equal' sign through the middle of it. And then, finally, you get the cerebral click represented as an exclamation mark in script. But you know, it's a very difficult language and this ties up with your question about extra study and travel. As I say, we did field work, we stayed away about two months, travelled something like 8 000 kilometres; we spent a vast number of hours in archives, we visited many people and we collected a lot of information. But this language is old and, within the borders of the Republic, the Khoekhoen language has died out completely. Of all the dialects remaining the only one that we still have



P.E. Raper  
 Streekname in  
 Suid-Afrika en  
 Suidwes

0-8  
 TOPOONIMIE  
 HORTIKULTUUR

SUID-  
 AFRIKAANSE  
 WOEK-  
 BOEK

P. E. RAPER  
 NAAMKUNDE-BRONNEGIDS  
 Onomastics Source Guide  
 Part 1, Onomastics series no. 1.

E.J. du Plessis  
 'n Ondersoek na  
 die oorsprong  
 en betekenis van  
 Suid-Afrikaanse  
 berg- en  
 riviername

MISCELANEA LUSO-AFRICANA



*Above* Dr. P.E. Raper (left) and Professor G.S. Nienaber.

*Left* Some publications in the Onomastics Series.

extant is Nama in South West Africa. The difficulty that arises is that the place-names were originally written by people who didn't know the language very well and, in the Republic particularly, before they had signs to indicate what the clicks were.

Fortunately Professor G.S. Nienaber has now given us the key to the explanation of these old names. The key to the connection between modern-day Nama and the old dialects in which the old place-names were given is what we call 'Old Cape', that is, Hottentot dialects up to about 1815. Professor Nienaber has written a book, *Hottentots*, which contains a list of the words in early Hottentot as they were encountered, with their modern equivalents. And, using the consonant laws which he established, we can actually find the key to the old names.

Int.: And once again this opens up sociological, geographical and historical spheres?

Raper: And linguistic spheres.

Int.: You have mentioned that, as the people did not know the language when they came here, they had to invent symbols, and had to use known symbols in the alphabet for these words. Could you enlarge on this?

Raper: They used known symbols and some unknown symbols as well. You know, what we call in Afrikaans, 'kratsels', which look like 'lightning'; or they used figures, 1, 2, 3 and 4 next to the T or the K, or something similar. They used apostrophes, inverted commas, or commas (high or low or double or single) above the word or next to it.

Int.: In your research, have you had an equal response from Afrikaans and English speakers in South Africa?

Raper: Unfortunately, no. Because here too, most of the recent research into onomatology has been done in Afrikaans. We haven't had as large a response from the English-speaking people in South Africa as from the Afrikaans, because most of the dissertations and theses in the past were written in Afrikaans, at Afrikaans universities, or, more specifically, at an English university, namely Wits, in the Department of Afrikaans, where

Professor P.J. Nienaber was the leading light. Professor G.S. Nienaber led the field in Natal. However, it is the policy of the Human Sciences Research Council to serve both languages in the country equally. We are, in theory, supposed to publish one book in English and the next one in Afrikaans. I have tried to do this. My thesis, which was the first in the Series, could not be translated, but the *Onomastic Source Guides* are bilingual publications. *Toponymical Practice*, no. 4 in the Series, is a bilingual publication. We hope to have the *Toponymica Hottentotica* translated into English as well, because I think it will have a big market — there is a lot of interest, not only among English-speaking people in this country, but also overseas. But now, by the very nature of onomatology, we must be a multilingual Centre because place-names have been given in all languages, and not only indigenous South African languages such as Khoekhoen, Bushman, and so on, but we have French names, we have German, we have English, Dutch, Afrikaans. We even have a few Portuguese and Greek names. Not so few Portuguese names, come to think of it: I published an article, quite a substantial one, in a publication called *Miscelânea Luso-Africana*, edited by Professor M. Valkhoff and published in Lisbon. The book deals with Portuguese matters in Southern Africa, and I wrote on Portuguese place-names here. Now, these various languages from which the place-names have been derived have resulted in a great deal of contact, we feel, a lot of inter-linguistic contact. This can be seen in place names. I don't want to keep saying 'I published', but in 1972, I had an article in a Canadian publication, on inter-linguistic contact and place-names in South Africa.

Int.: Why do you think you have not had such a good response from the English-speakers?

Raper: Because they haven't known about what we have been doing — we have been too busy working! We've been contacted by a few people. Mr J. Findlay Dick, for example, has been interested and we've been giving him information. But what we would like to see, of course, is

English-speaking students, undergraduate and post-graduate, doing research into names.

Int.: Now, in what way can the man-in-the-street help?

Raper: In the first place by donating onomastic material to the Centre. Or else by sending us information on names. A person may have a farm or place to which he has given a name. He can send us the information, saying the farm name is this and it was given for that reason, sign his name and date it. Or he may have knowledge about the origin of the name of his place of birth, the place where he lives. For example, *Ogies* or *Koppies*: if a person knows that the latter is actually a Bushman word, or Khoekhoen word, meaning *vaalbos*; we may not have known this. And then, if a person feels sufficiently interested in writing, saying: 'You may not know that *Koppies* means *vaalbos*; here is the information. My name is such, and I have been in the country for so long, or this area for so long... dated',— it would be of fantastic value to us.

Int.: And especially, I suppose, if he quotes the source of his information: how he came to know about it. It has to be scientific?

Raper: It has to be scientific. He may have found it in some published source, but his source may also have been his father or some other person. In questionnaires sent back to us we often found that the informant, when asked where he got his information, said: 'Well, my father told me' or 'We have a Khoekhoen or Xhosa servant, and he has told us this, or that'.

Int.: What about the person who is perhaps interested in this as a hobby; who is interested in place names, in language development of place names, and so on, in his area. Could he help you in any way by going round doing research, asking people...?

Raper: That would be extremely helpful. And then in return we could also help that person by making pre-prepared lists available to him, which he has merely to fill in 'in the field'. We could give him the questions that he should actually ask. If he wants to send out questionnaires, we

can do that for him. With our guidance, he can go out into the 'field' and get a list of these names and ...

Int.: And you provide them with a list so that they elicit the proper response?

Raper: Yes.

Int.: So they wouldn't be 'going about in the dark', as it were: they would have the result of your experience, could use methods you have established?

Raper: The result of *Toponymical Practice*, which many people are already using for guidance.

Int.: So you suggest they write to the President of the Human Sciences Research Council and acquire this?

Raper: No, the publication is out of print! We, however, are re-printing it, and they can order it from the President of the Human Sciences Research Council, and it will be fairly cheap — about R5,00.

Int.: And you say it has everything they need to know?

Raper: If there is anything that they find is not in the book, I'll be very happy to help them.

Int.: You mentioned the fact that the students could help (in this way) during the holidays. That brings me to my next question: Do you help students wishing to study toponymy and topology at post-graduate level; do you encourage them?

Raper: Most definitely. As a matter of fact, one of our primary aims is to stimulate onomatological research. We have the Centre here to help them if they wish to come and do research on the premises. That's what we're here for. We are trying to accumulate all the material they will need. We do have our own Library, and our own archives containing newspaper cuttings, periodical articles; there are maps here, even photographs.

Int.: Do you perhaps provide assistance, I mean material assistance, in this respect, for say, students who wish to come and do research? Would they be able to apply for some sort of grant-in-aid?

Raper: The Human Sciences Research Council does that. As a matter of fact, they do have a number of students, even professors, who are busy with onomatological research at the moment, with grants from the Council.

Int.: People wishing to apply should go through the usual channels: write to the President, requesting forms?

Raper: That's right. What we are hoping for is that, in due course, universities — all the universities — will incorporate onomatology as a subject.

Int.: As a full subject?

Raper: Either as a full subject which is inter-disciplinary, or as a sub-division of Afrikaans or English, or even Geography. Professor Vernon Forbes was Professor of Geography at Rhodes, and yet in some respects his work could quite easily have been onomatological.

Int.: So, in other words, onomatology should really not be seen as a discipline on its own, but as an important facet of many of our disciplines at university level, such as we mentioned earlier: history, geography, language, linguistics, sociology?

Raper: Because it has its roots in so many different disciplines, I think it *should* be a discipline or a science on its own. A Department of Onomatology can help in so many different ways. Look, it could be a sub-division of the history department — by the very nature of things, the geographical or linguistic aspect may just be neglected. But anyway, it is only in its infancy: we would be happy to see it anywhere, as a sub-division of the Afrikaans Department as is presently the case at Natal, or it could be a sub-division of English, with the emphasis then falling on English place-names.

Int.: And as the science develops, there would be more and more positions — prospects for employment — at the universities?

Raper: I think so. Actually, you know, what's happening now is that more and more municipalities are becoming interested in place-name study. I think in due course



municipalities may create posts for experts in this field to give them advice, as they do in Holland, for example, where you have a man whose job deals with road names, street names.

Int.: Would you welcome interest from High School pupils, or do you think their interest would be too frivolous?

Raper: When I was a teacher, I tried to get them interested, but without much success. They haven't the scientific background at that stage really to contribute anything.

Int.: Dr Raper, from what we've seen here, and heard, you seem to get through an incredible amount of well-organized work. How many assistants have you?

Raper: Well, I'm pleased that you feel that we get through a large amount of work, and if you think it's well-organized, I'm even more pleased! Apart from myself, we have Professor G.S. Nienaber who has been appointed solely, or primarily, should I say, for the study of Khoekhoen place-names (owing to his extensive knowledge of Hottentot and Old Cape). I help him with this, but I also do the compilation of the Source Guides. Then we have Mrs P.F. Nel who does the administrative work for Professor Nienaber and myself: typing of name cards, catalogue cards, filing of all the various archival bits that we have. There is also Mrs. D.R. Bower who has been 'lent' to us to help with the coding and typing of the Hottentot place-names.

Int.: And among the few of you, you get through all this work?

Raper: Yes. But we are going 'on to computer'. As a matter of fact, we have already computerised all the place-names in the Cape from the map series mentioned earlier, and also all the names in South West Africa from the only map we could obtain, namely the 1:1 000 000 map. Most of the names in the Free State are ready to be computerised. We are in the process of putting all the names in the country on computer. Now, in this regard, we could make very valuable use of student assistance. We are prepared to provide maps, cards, and an indication of the sort of data

we require on each name. And then the grid reference, in terms of latitude and longitude. With this information on computer, we can make available, on request, lists of names which students may require. For example, all the farm names within a specific district or in a number of districts; all the names from a specific language. For example, a man may want all the names of English origin within such and such a grid square, or part of a grid square, or a number of magisterial districts; or he may want all the English names of mountains in a certain area, or he may want the whole bang-shoot! We have found the computer to be an extremely valuable tool in the classification of names, or the analysis of names. It is a ready means of storing and retrieving data. The computer can now help us to arrange source information chronologically. In this way we can get, for example, various study variants for a specific place-name. We receive many queries and requests from the press, public, students, and others. If we have all this data computerised, we can let them have it very quickly. The trouble, of course, is that we have to computerise this data. We have to get it from the archival and written sources, somebody has to do the physical research. At the moment I am doing it at home, working through all the Van Riebeeck Society publications. So far, I have merely indicated in pencil what is to be computerised. When we are going to get around to everything, I don't know. But it's exciting!!