

Phillip Vallentine Tobias (1925- 2012)

Professor of Anatomy



A personal memoir by Laurence Geffen

(Circulated as Newsletter #8 – Phillip Tobias)

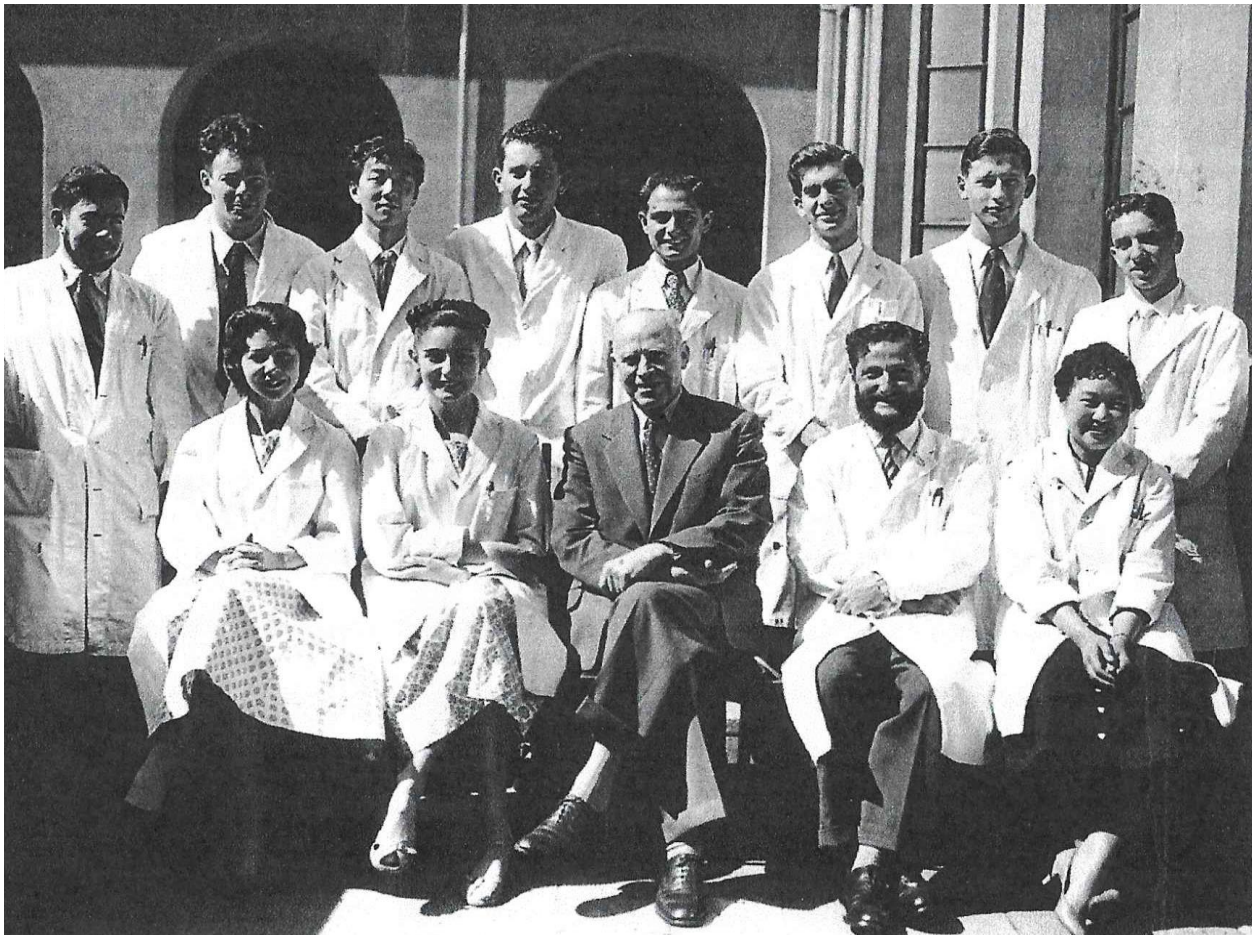
There can be few more memorable teachers of the Class of 1960 than Phillip Vallentine Tobias. Most will remember him primarily for his lectures to our spellbound second year class in Anatomy in 1956. Slight of stature, in a crisp white coat, with glittering eyes and an aquiline profile, balancing on the balls of his feet, his presence filled the main lecture theatre located at the entrance to the Medical School. A torrent of words, slides and gesticulations projected his passion for the topic of the day. Not even the growing impatience of the next class, crowded outside in the foyer, seemed capable of stemming the flow.

Four years later, when most of us were well into our clinical years, Tobias was to assume the mantle of Professor of Anatomy at Wits University, handed on to him by his mentor, Raymond Dart. The bond between Dart and Tobias was profound. First being in the role of pupil, and then as colleague, Tobias became Dart's 'bulldog', defending his views on human evolution against a hostile reception, much as Huxley had guarded Darwin. Not that Dart was as reticent as Darwin on the topic!

Medical BSc

I first got to know Phillip Tobias on a personal level when I, along with a few other members of the second-year medical class of 1956, (including Martin Bobrow, Peter Arnold, and Clive Rosendorff) undertook intercalated studies in **anthropological and physiological sciences** in the years from 1956-7. I subsequently had less contact with him, as I completed the medical course and then left South Africa in 1964, going first to the UK and subsequently to Australia. However, when the Apartheid era ended, I occasionally returned to South Africa to visit family and always took the opportunity to visit Phillip. In turn he, an inveterate traveller, was to visit me in Australia several times.

My first close encounter with Tobias was as a member of the 1957 medical sciences class. Instead of the formaldehyde suffused atmosphere of the dissecting hall, we were introduced to the twin challenges of living physical anthropology and paleo-anthropology. We also had our first heady encounters with the disciplines of genetics, comparative anatomy, evolutionary biology and other cognate (or related) sciences. Not to mention courses on the main University campus down the hill on the history and philosophy of science and a smattering of scientific German!



Here we all are in our final year BSc Anatomy class of 1957

Back row: Martin Bobrow, Michael Benjamin Berger, B Himpoo, Laurence Geffen, R Ismael, Peter Arnold, Clive Rosendorff, E Friedberg

Front Row: Misses J Colere, Adele Blankfield. Prof Raymond Dart, Dr Phillip Tobias, Miss MR Himpoo

Tobias the polymath, was our main guide to these wonders, although Dart would, to our terror, also appear regularly at our student seminar presentations. Martin Bobrow has remarked that those student seminars were a trial by fire. But they were also transformative. Ever since, I have subjected my own research students to equivalent in-house rehearsal(s) before they were allowed to present in public.

Makapansgat



Absorbing though these daily challenges were, nothing compared to the excitement of the annual field camping trip to Makapansgat, in what was then the Northern Transvaal. While still a medical student in 1945, Tobias had initiated a series of annual research visits to this fossil rich site. The fruits of these expeditions formed the core of the collection of bone, tooth and horn artefacts that Dart adduced in support of his controversial Australopithecine Osteo-donto-keratic culture. On our Makapansgat expedition, Tobias' enthusiasms were in full flow and he relished holding court in the evenings around the campfires. Back at home, he would invite us to his apartment for reunions at which he would serve his speciality, giant fluffy omelettes!

Phillip Tobias retires from the Department of Anatomy

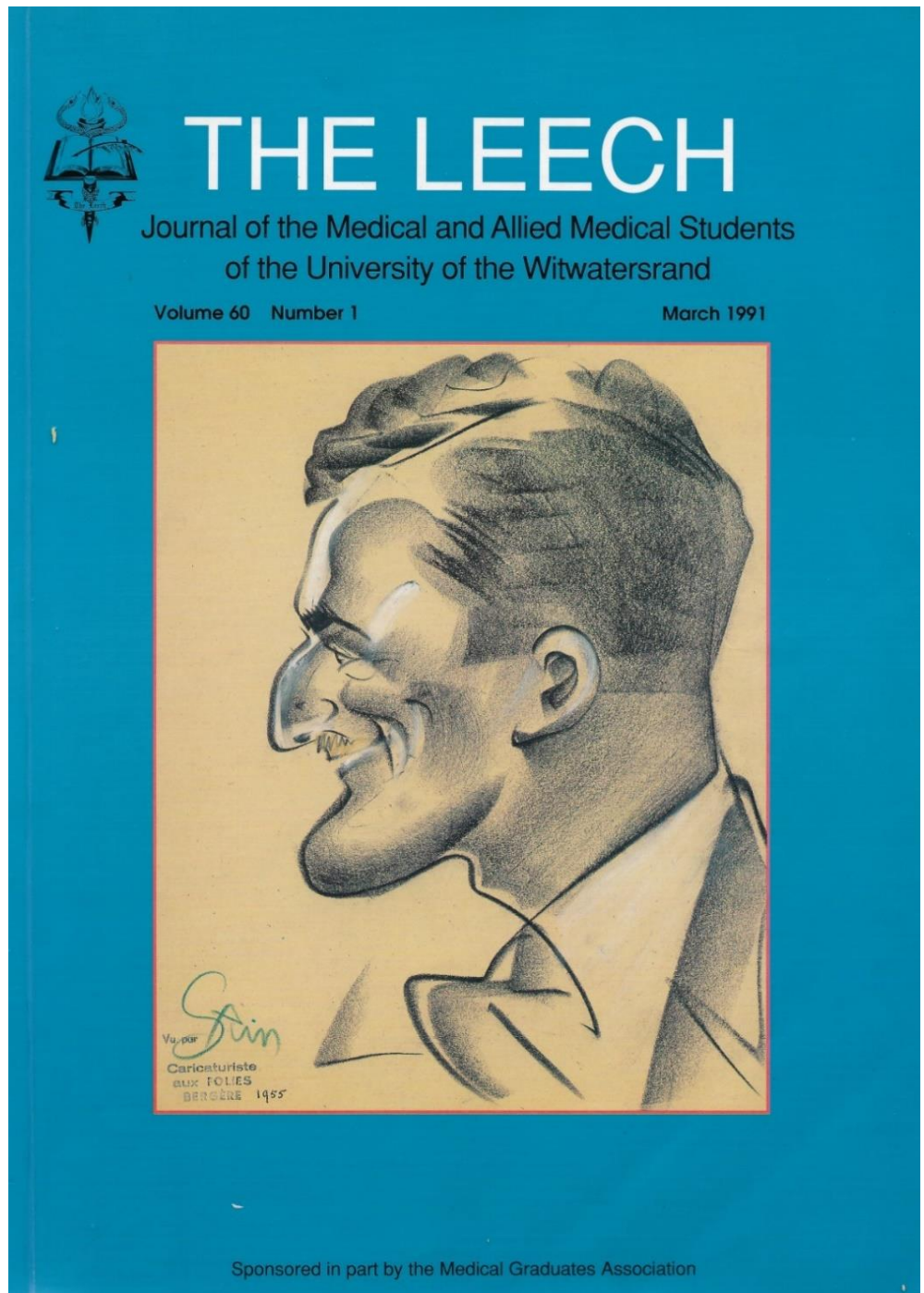
In 1990, Tobias retired from the Department of Anatomy, after 45 years on its staff, 32 of them as Head. I was then approached by the editors of *The Leech*, to produce a tribute to Tobias. *The Leech* is a remarkable quarterly journal founded in 1928 and run by the Wits Medical Student Council. It publishes scientific papers, local news and letters submitted by under-graduates and graduates. (In our time, Irving Lisssoos served as editor of *The Leech*.)

For this tribute, I wrote a detailed account of his career which was published in March 1991, in volume 60 (1)1-4 of *The Leech*.

What follows is a much briefer, more personal account of Phillip Tobias as I knew him.

In my 1991 Tribute to Tobias in *The Leech*, I recounted an episode from our expedition to the Batonga in 1957, that was revealing of Tobias' qualities as a scholar.

" I still remember, to my shame, sulking in my tent because he would not allow me to keep as a memento even a single stone arrow head that I had picked up on an ancient river bank, despite that fact that the gravel bed was littered with thousands of (to me) identical artefacts. Tobias insisted it be properly labelled (with its exact location) and put in a museum collection: the object did not matter but the principle did! "



In that same article, I also described *'the crowds of pot-bellied Tongan children who followed him and fell about with hilarity when he peered into their mouths and guessed their ages from their erupting dentition. He was later to amaze my own sons with this party trick on a visit to Adelaide in 1979 and almost launched them into careers in dentistry'*. (They eventually did medicine instead).

Cover of *The Leech* March 1991 edition with my tribute to Tobias

The artist signs himself as a Caricaturiste aux Folies Bergere 1955

'Tobias' Angels' study the Batonga, 1957

I was to get to know Tobias even better when in July 1957, he invited fellow BSc student, Martin Bobrow and me (we were known as 'Tobias' Angels') to join him on an expedition to study a tribe called the Batonga. They had lived isolated, for centuries in the valleys lining the Zambesi river. However, their villages were to become part of the flooded bed of Lake Kariba, when the river was dammed for what was then Africa's largest hydroelectric scheme. The Batonga were to be moved, not always willingly, onto the higher ground of the escarpment that would form the lake shore, where it was anticipated they would convert from a hunting to a fishing community.



These fairly grainy snapshots illustrate our expedition to the Batonga tribe, Gwembe Valley of the Zambesi River in 1957. **From the top clockwise:** Tobias with antelope foetus (preserved in precious expeditionary brandy); Tobias with village children; Tobias performing minor surgery; Tobias posing as a "wild animal" (in front of a sign saying 'all wild animals are dangerous'); Tobias and Martin Bobrow recording anthropometric data:

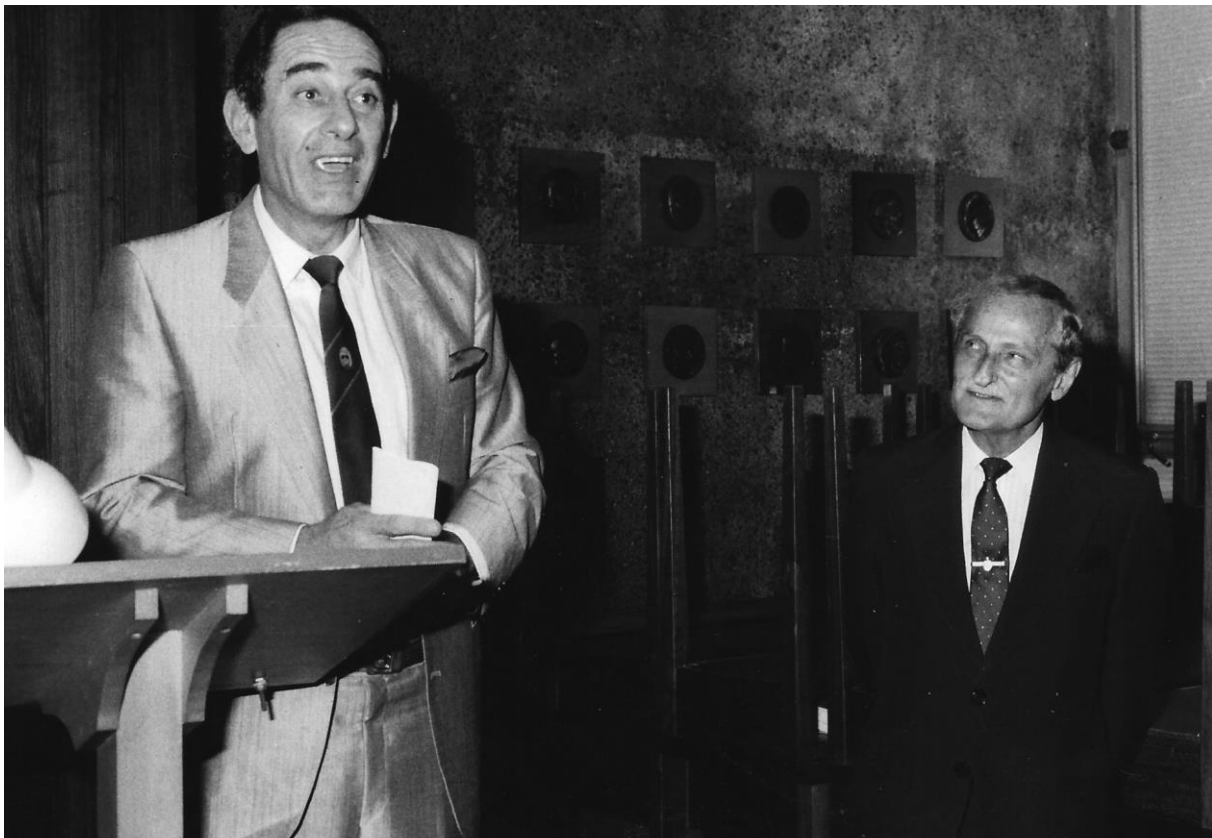
I recall one dramatic episode when a tsetse fly (*Glossina* species), a vector of sleeping sickness (*Trypanosoma brucei*), found its way into Tobias' shirt. We were going about our daily anthropometric exercises when Phillip let out a yell and frantically tried to remove his shirt, only to become entangled in the straps of his camera, binoculars and other devices adorning his neck. Martin and I did not help matters in the ensuing confusion by pulling in opposite directions on the various straps until his eyes nearly popped out. Realising the futility of this manoeuvre, we then saved him from a nasty bite and from a tropical disease, by beating the fly to death on his chest – for which Tobias was not particularly grateful.

Tobias in Australia

In 1979 when I was Dean in Adelaide, we invited Tobias there to deliver the inaugural Andrew Abbie memorial lecture, named after an eminent Australian anthropologist who also happened to have been our neighbour.

As I wrote in the article: *"It was vintage Tobias. Before a packed, be-gowned audience in the Howard Florey Theatre (so named by the Governor-General in Tobias' presence that very morning) he delivered an epic lecture worthy of his gifts: 'The Evolution of the Human Brain, Intellect and Spirit.' It was epic in scope, epic in delivery and epic in duration. More than two hours later, the audience emerged, exhausted but exalted, to seek revival in cold tea and curled sandwiches. I was very proud of him."*

I became Dean at Brisbane 1992



When I became Dean of Medicine at Dart's alma mater, the University of Queensland, I invited Tobias to open an exhibition arranged by the University Anthropology Museum, in 1992 commemorating the centenary of Professor Raymond Dart's birth in Brisbane.

Here (above I am introducing our special guest, Tobias, at the opening of the Dart Centenary Exhibition
Below: Tobias talking about Dart as a young soldier in WW1



Tobias' talk was delivered with the same passion, fluency, erudition and theatricality that I remembered from nearly forty years earlier.

And yes, it ran so much over time that again the post-lecture tea was cold, and the sandwiches curled.

On this occasion of Tobias' visit to Brisbane in 1992, the Staff and Graduates Club of the University of Queensland held a dinner in his honour.



In the picture above, we see:(left to right) John Pearn, Deputy Dean and Professor of Paediatrics and medical historian; Gina Geffen, Professor of Neuropsychology; Laurie Geffen, Dean of Medicine and Professor of Psychiatry; Phillip Tobias, Guest of Honour; Sam Mellick, President of UQ Medical Alumni and cardiac surgeon at the Dinner in Tobias' honour at University of Queensland, Brisbane 1992

Tobias' lifelong fight against injustice

In this brief personal memoir, I shall not allude further to Tobias' scientific accomplishments, nor to his renowned courage and tenacity in opposing the closing of the University to black students among many other assaults on human rights. However, I recall one episode during the dark days of Apartheid that particularly incensed me. This was when the organisers of the World Archaeological Congress held in Southampton in 1986 excluded all South Africans, including Tobias, from attending.

Mustering all the academic authority I could, I wrote to the Chair of the Organising Committee as follows: *"Your committee should be aware that in its zeal for making a political gesture that Professor Tobias has made far more significant statements against Apartheid in the past 38 years. Moreover, by living in South Africa and acting upon them he exposes himself to risks your committee does not face from the secure haven of the United Kingdom"*. I never got a reply, but Tobias subsequently refused the offer of a personal exemption from the ban on South African scientists. To him what was at stake was the integrity of the scientific process.

The first precept of the **Oath of Hippocrates** of Kos enjoins us *"to consider dear to me as my parents him who taught me this art"*. I am but one of thousands of Wits medical and science graduates who would immediately think of Phillip Tobias in this regard.

Personal memoir written and contributed by

Laurence Geffen, Brisbane, Australia, November 2020

(Read Laurence Geffen's biography on the class of 60 website here [Geffen, Laurence](#))

Video honouring Phillip Tobias

Here is a link to a charming YouTube video made by Wits honouring Phillip Tobias (discovered courtesy of the class of 66)

<http://www.classcreator.com/Johannesburg-South-Africa-Medical-1966/Wits-Video2.htm>



Other students of our year, remember Phillip Tobias' incredible memory

Geoffrey Boner, of our class of '60, who became a nephrologist in Israel, remembers

The lateral incisor on the left side of my upper jaw never developed, while the lateral incisor on the right side of my upper jaw, was small and pointed. As luck would have it, I had Professor. Tobias for my oral examinations in anatomy. He had noticed my small tooth and we spent the allotted time discussing my teeth.

Many years later I was present at a lecture he gave in Israel. I went up to him after the lecture and asked him if he remembered me. His answer was that he remembered me, not my name, but that I had a small, sharp incisor tooth on one side. Our next meeting was at the Re-union in 2005. He had recently published his Memoir. I bought the book and had him sign it for me. I will always remember him as one of our great teachers and one with an outstanding memory.

Ronnie Auerbach, member of our class of '60 who became an ENT Surgeon in London says.

I travelled to London by mail ship after my matric in December 1954. At my table for dinner each evening were Trevor Huddleston and Phillip Tobias. I can't recall what must have been scintillating conversations. Tobias was on his way to Cambridge to spend a year at the Duckworth Laboratory, and I was visiting paternal grandparents that I had never met, before embarking on my medical studies.

Towards the end of 1956, nearly two years later, when he had returned to Wits, I was walking down the anatomy corridor when a man popped out of his office and without hesitation, pointed to me and said 'Auerbach, Transvaal Castle!'. It was Phillip Tobias.

WITS UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASS OF 1960

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