

## GERT JOHANNES GERWEL

Professor Gert Johannes (Jakes) Gerwel has distinguished himself on several fronts. He changed the way scholars thought about Afrikaans literature; he transformed his own university, intellectually and institutionally; he served with distinction for five years in the office of President Mandela; and he continues in various capacities to shape higher education in this country.

These achievements were wrought by one born the seventh child in a family of ten on a sheep farm in the Kommadagga district of Somerset East. Armed with only basic schooling, his parents were determined that their children would fare better. Seven became teachers. The young Gerwel received his primary schooling at a farm school, his secondary schooling at the London Missionary Society's Memorial College, and he matriculated from Paterson High School in Port Elizabeth.

Jakes Gerwel registered at the University College of the Western Cape, then a three-year-old product of *apartheid*. 'Bush College', as it was belligerently known, was a desolate campus of prefabricated buildings, sand paths and Port Jackson bush. Despite the dire surroundings and earlier yearnings to study science and medicine, Gerwel completed a BA in 1967 and an Honours degree in Afrikaans-Nederlands, awarded *cum laude*, in the following year.

The young graduate lectured at Hewat Teacher Training College for eighteen months before eagerly accepting a bursary from the Belgian government to read for a Licentiate in Germanic Philology at the Vrije Universiteit of Brussels. On his return he taught Afrikaans at Grassy Park High School before rejoining his tertiary *alma mater*. In retrospect, his acceptance of a lectureship in Afrikaans-Nederlands at UWC in 1972 was momentous, for it marked the beginning of over twenty years of service and leadership at that university.

In 1979 Gerwel received his Doctorate in Literature and Philosophy, *magna cum laude*, from the Vrije Universiteit. The degree was awarded for a dissertation entitled *Literature en Apartheid* - a work that still is widely recognised as both pioneering and authoritative in the corpus of Afrikaans literary criticism and the sociology of literature.

His academic career continued in an upward spiral: Senior Lecturer in 1976, Professor and Head of Department in 1980 and, in 1982, a relatively youthful Dean of the Faculty of Arts. In 1984 UWC obtained full institutional autonomy with Professor Richard van der Ross as Rector. Three years later, on the retirement of Van der Ross, Jakes Gerwel became rector of UWC.

He rapidly signalled his intention of charting a bold new course for the institution. In his first

months in office he presided over a conference entitled *Building a People's University: The Challenge of Transformation*. Many of the issues aired at this gathering were reworked in the address delivered by Jakes Gerwel at his installation as Rector in June 1987. The address was entitled 'The Ideological Context: Responding to the Democratic Left.' It was delivered during a state of emergency imposed by the P W Botha government and against a backdrop of intense political conflict in the Western Cape. It asked what sort of intellectual project was appropriate for the university in the context of popular struggles for the fundamental transformation of the racial and political order. In a famous phrase, Gerwel proposed that UWC should become "an intellectual home of the Left" and he proposed a stance of critical alignment with the democratic movement.

The next few years were hectic, heady and memorable. UWC, created for the education of the people classified as coloured, now saw the proportion of African students rise dramatically and became the fastest growing university in the country. The changes in the size and composition of the student body were accompanied by new academic directions and institutional commitments. Gerwel identified three areas in which UWC could make a major contribution. The first was academic development. Instead of seeing academic development programmes as additional and separate endeavours, UWC pioneered the infusion or integration of AD with the rest of the curriculum. The second focus area was to grow postgraduate numbers and to develop research capacity at an historically black university where these had been shallowly rooted. The third initiative was to conduct policy research in areas such as economic planning, human rights law, education policy options and primary health care.

By 1994, Gerwel has already signalled his intention to stand down as Rector and to resume a career of research and reflection. This inclination was interrupted by his appointment as Director-General in the office of the President and Secretary to the Cabinet. For the next five years, Professor Gerwel was an unobtrusive but ubiquitous player on the stage of this country's political redefinition. His international diplomatic role in finding a legal outcome to the impasse over the Lockerbie tragedy was widely hailed. For five dramatic years Jakes Gerwel was present at the making of history: many of us hope that he will find the time and space to review these events in print.

Professor Gerwel moved again at the end of Mandela's presidency - and decisively back into higher education and research. He was elected Chancellor of Rhodes University; he accepted a joint appointment as the Nelson Mandela Professor of the Humanities at the University of Cape Town and UWC; and he took office as Chair of the Council of the Human Sciences Research Council. These interlacing involvements ensure that Jakes Gerwel remains one of our leading public intellectuals: as academic and administrator he has left an indelible mark upon South African higher education.

It is with great pride and pleasure that the University confers upon Gert Johannes Gerwel the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.