

HONORARY GRADUATE

Robert William Charlton

Robert William Charlton was born in Johannesburg in 1929 and has spent most of his life in the city. After matriculating at St. John's College, Johannesburg, he obtained the degrees of Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery from the University of the Witwatersrand. He served his internship at the Johannesburg Hospital, and then spent three years in Europe and Britain. He attended postgraduate courses in Internal Medicine at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, London, and at the University of Edinburgh. After achieving the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, he returned in 1957 to take up a post as a registrar in the Department of Medicine of the Johannesburg Hospital and the University of the Witwatersrand. On completion of the registrarship he joined the full-time specialist staff of the Department in 1961. His thesis for the degree of Doctor of Medicine was accepted by the University of the Witwatersrand in 1963.

In 1967 Robert Charlton was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Experimental and Clinical Pharmacology of the University of the Witwatersrand, and part-time Senior Physician at the Johannesburg Hospital and he was elected to the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh in 1968. In 1969 he was awarded the Carnegie Travel Grant to study the teaching of pharmacology in the United States.

After serving as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in 1978 and 1979, he was appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University in 1980. In 1983 became Vice-Principal and in 1988 Vice-Chancellor and Principal.

Professor Charlton is the author or co-author of more than 100 scientific papers, several chapters in multi-authored books and co-author of a definitive book, *Iron Metabolism in Man*. His initial interest in iron metabolism was awakened by his association with Professor Tom Bothwell and over the years they developed a strong and productive research partnership, in which the pathogenesis and consequences of two major public health problems, dietary iron overload and nutritional iron deficiency, were delineated. The work was recognised internationally and some of the findings have influenced current international policies.

Professor Charlton has served on a number of councils. In 1971 he was appointed a member of the Medicines Control Council, and from 1976 to 1981 was its Chairman. As such he carried the responsibility for ensuring the safety and efficacy of all the medical products sold in the Republic. Professor Charlton also served as a member of the Councils of the Johannesburg College of Education and the Technikon Witwatersrand, and of the Johannesburg Hospital Board. For three years he was the Chairman of the Coronation Nursing College Council. He served with distinction on the South African Medical and Dental Council as a representative of the universities. Particularly noteworthy were his efforts through the South African Medical and Dental Council to ensure that action was taken against the medical doctors who conspired to cover up the death of Steve Biko. This dogged restatement of issues of principle was a piece with his own adherence to what he believed good and right.

His choices of career and of research field are both indicative of a care and social conscience not explained simply by academic interests. Scholarly brilliance has been matched with genuine concern for those suffering from conditions associated with poverty.

He also served with distinction on the Committee of University Principals, often participating in important delegations which made representations to the government ministries. He chaired the Finance Committee of the Committee of University Principals from 1991 to 1996 and was the Chairman of the Committee of University Principals from February 1992 to January 1993. As Vice-Principal of the University he was the chief mover in the acquisition, planning and rebuilding of the old showgrounds into the present West Campus.

During the ten years that Professor Charlton served his Alma Mater as Vice-Chancellor and Principal, the Apartheid state underwent many changes, finally becoming a democracy in 1994. While the University community rejoiced in these events, the institution then had the task of giving practical effect to the ideals it had over many years so vigorously expounded in theory. And the buzz word became transformation.

It has been fashionable to deny that Wits has transformed. But the evidence does not bear this out. Wits has changed radically over the past ten years. It is no longer the institution that Robert Charlton inherited. It has opened its doors to those previously excluded and sought to make all students and staff - academic, administrative and workers - part of a different institution. The University, under Robert Charlton's leadership, addressed hard issues - government interference, student funding, residence accommodation, and representivity in academic and administrative staff. It has addressed these issues honestly and openly, reflecting the Vice-Chancellor's commitment to openness, tolerance and democracy, and his insistence on the right of everyone to be heard.

Of course there were problems and crises. He faced the worst of political turmoil which spilt over into the universities, once the State was no longer a focus of authority against which to wage the struggle. Robert Charlton succeeded in holding the institution together, and giving it a new character without sacrificing the values upon which the University is founded. This demanded great personal courage, wisdom and judgement. Throughout this period he also maintained his commitment to excellence in learning, research and scholarship.

This quiet and self-effacing man was also prepared to sacrifice years of well deserved retirement to take on a further term of office, when it was evident that the University needed him.

His devotion and that of his wife, Margaret, to the University is well-known. Stephen Anderson who worked with him for years as Chair of Council, has said: 'It is his total dedication to Wits for the greater part of his life that I would highlight, both as a distinguished medical academic and later as a successful administrator and leader. He has given of himself unstintingly, always putting the University and its interests before self, often at the price of criticism, and certainly with considerable personal sacrifice.'

In recognition of Robert Charlton's contributions to medical knowledge, his vigorous and courageous defence of academic freedom and university autonomy, and his courageous, patient, accessible and always honourable leadership of our university, the University confers upon this true son of Wits its highest accolade, the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*