

GRADUATION ADDRESS OF PROFESSOR DENNIS BRUTUS

Friday 17 April, 18:00 - Faculty of Humanities

RHODES GRADUATION 2009

Chancellor Prof. Jakes Gerwel and Mrs. Phoebe Gerwel
Vice-Chancellor Dr. Badat and Mrs. Shireen Badat
Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Development
Prof. Peter Clayton and Mrs. Louisa Clayton
Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic and Student Affairs
Prof. Sizwe Mabizela and Dr. Phethiwe Matutu
Distinguished members of the Administration and Faculty – and guests - of Rhodes University, as well as the most important people here: you students

Let me express my sincere appreciation to the University for conferring on me the Honorary Degree of "Doctor Litterarum (honoris causa)".

I am humble and grateful to receive this honor from Rhodes University, which has a long and distinguish record of scholarly, academic, and creative achievements.

My association with Rhodes dates back to the days when I was student at Fort Hare. We traveled up to Grahamstown as part of a debating team on the vexed issue of leaving the British Commonwealth.

Later I worked with academics at Rhodes and also with the National English Language Museum on the publication of some of my poetry and that of Arthur Nortjie, perhaps our country's finest unsung poet. He was one of my prior students, and tragically died at Oxford University. I donated some of my papers to the NELN.

On a more personal note: I spent some of my boyhood in Grahamstown and I was educated at Saint Mary's Catholic Mission on Raglan Road. We were close to a hill which dominated the town and which we knew as Makaanaskop. It was the centre of resistance by Africans during the colonial wars. Makana, leader of the resistance in 1819, ended up on Robben Island after the battle of Egazini ("Place of Blood") and died there. The fierce resistance that Makana sparked compelled the British to embark upon the 1820 invasion of English settlers. Moreover, many people referred to Robben Island, during the time I was in prison there during the 1960s, as Makana's Island. I respectfully suggest, it could be appropriate to consider naming this university in honour of a true hero of the people, Makana.

Notwithstanding his association with the Rhodes scholarships at Oxford University and with the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, the name Cecil Rhodes is not universally honoured. He is in many respects regarded as one of the great Empire-builders, responsible for more looting of African resources, geopolitical chaos, destruction of indigenous culture and durable white racism than any other settler in history.

That name aside, I am honoured to receive this distinction from Rhodes University. But it must be known that the march of my activities has centered on controversial issues: so it is not unlike for me to use this opportunity to raise one fresh controversial issue and invite your consideration.

My respect for Rhodes University and its contribution to scholarly and academic development of our country remains of course undiminished and I am grateful for this opportunity to join a distinguish community of scholars.

Yours Sincerely
Dennis Brutus

Poems by Dennis Brutus

Read upon receipt of the degree of Doctor of Literature (DLitt) *honoris causa*,
Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 17 April 2009

Longing

Can the heart compute desire's trajectory
Or logic obtuse with semantic ambiguities
This simple ache's expletive detonation?

This is the wordless ultimate ballistic
Impacting past Reason's, Science's logistics
To blast the heart's defensive mechanism.

O my heart, my lost hope love, my dear
Absence and hunger mushroom my hemispheres;
No therapy, analyses deter my person's fission:

My heart knows now such devastation;
Yearning, unworded, explodes articulation:
Sound-swift, in silence, fall the rains of poison.

1960, Port Elizabeth

Nightsong: City

Sleep well, my love, sleep well:
the harbour lights glaze over restless docks,
police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets

from the shanties creaking iron-sheets
violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed
and fear is imminent as sound in the wind-swung bell;

the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks;
but for this breathing night at least,
my land, my love, sleep well.

1960, Port Elizabeth

Examining shaky foundations*

When conditions are so unseemly
even the blind are made aghast
and police are firing rubber bullets**
in defense of the indefensible
it is time Messers Makgoba
and Mandela and others of your ilk
to reassess your gains and efforts -
more importantly, reassess your
measuring rods, question your values

Respectfully I offer, you cannot construct
an edifice on dishonest roots
cannot hope it will stand:
structures built on shards
or crumbled fragments of tortured bone
must, of necessity, crumble

Structures built on deceit and lies,
such structures cannot survive:
in the harsh light of everyday
under scrutiny they will
not survive

Bring out from padded rags
those covered lies, deceptions
deceits, distortions, misrepresentations
all contrived to preserve the myths
heroic mythology of our unsullied cause

Dig out the shabby skeletons:
jaunty Sol Kerzner with his handy 'copters
and that ready wad to shut inquiring eyes
the Koornhofs who could bend apartheid laws
licentiously, lubriciously:
Brett Kebble's multiple ambidexterities

There is no way to build a truthful narrative
if you begin your tale with a tissue of lies:
fabrications, deceptions, contrivances
striving to preserve old inequities
striving only to secure your share
of those same inequities under a gloss
of iconic virtues and integrities
carefully nurtured to complaisant media
complaisant handmaidens of their
corporate lords

We may aspire in our dreams
for the Nile, the Mountains of the Moon,
storied wisdom from the Valley of the Kings***
but Southward headed we may slosh

through Antarctic iceflows - worse
gurgling in Kakpype of Kwazekele beach: ****

To Begin: let's name the criminals:
DeKlerk and Koornhof, Kebble, Oppenheimer,
Let us begin a new, a clean beginning
one true, respecting the people's hope
for a different better world:
or let us else make an end
and no more talk of human rights

Let us, at least, be truthful to ourselves

* Poem prepared for the conference on 'Reconciliation and the Work of Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Dialogue', Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg, 2-3 April 2009

** an attack by Durban police on UKZN students protesting socio-economic injustices, in which a blind student – amongst a dozen others - was injured by rubber bullets, 23 March 2009

*** currently in educational circles, the wisdom of Egypt, and of the Valley of the Kings, is being touted

**** Kakpype = shitpipes: Port Elizabeth sewage pipes emptied into the area where black people were allowed to swim in my youth

3 April 2009, Durban

Take out the poetry and fire

Take out the poetry and fire
or watch it ember out of sight,
sanity reassembles its ash
the moon relinquishes the night.

But here and here remain the scalds
a sudden turn or breath may ache,
and I walk soft on cindered pasts
for thought or hope (what else?) can break.

1962, Port Elizabeth

Sharpeville

What is important
about Sharpeville
is not that seventy died:
nor even that they were shot in the back
retreating, unarmed, defenceless

and certainly not
the heavy caliber slug
that tore through a mother's back
and ripped through the child in her arms
killing it

Remember Sharpeville
bullet-in-the-back day
Because it epitomized oppression
and the nature of society
more clearly than anything else;
it was the classic event

Nowhere is racial dominance
more clearly defined
nowhere the will to oppress
more clearly demonstrated

what the world whispers
apartheid declares with snarling guns
the blood the rich lust after
South Africa spills in the dust

Remember Sharpeville
Remember bullet-in-the-back day

And remember the unquenchable will for freedom
Remember the dead
and be glad

1973, Chicago

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