

# **Distinguished Senior Research Award Lecture**

**4 May 2010**

**Professor Laurence Wright**

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Heads of Departments, colleagues, students, members of the Wright family, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome to this Distinguished Senior Research Award lecture, which at Rhodes recognises excellence, innovation and dedication in research by academic staff. This evening's research award lecture is given by Professor Laurence Wright of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa.

Laurence was born in Bulawayo, in what was then Southern Rhodesia, and educated at Gifford and Milton High Schools. He chose Rhodes as his place of study thanks to some good friends who were a year ahead of him and, having embarked on their tertiary education studies at Rhodes, regaled him with talk of how much they were enjoying themselves.

Laurence signed up for a Bachelor of Arts and in his third year majored in English and Economics. An unusual but not unheard of combination of subjects in which he was equally proficient, his choice of an Honours course was to prove a difficult one to make. So he went to discuss the matter with Professor Guy Butler of the English Department, who looked at the ceiling for a long time, chewed his spectacles, and then began doodling on the pad in front of him, before saying very slowly, "I think it is often a good idea in life to do what you think you will most enjoy". Wise words from the Professor which made the choice incontestable and Laurence continued with English studies.

During his time at Rhodes he became a member of two Student Representative Councils, one more notorious than the other for political protest and other forms of creative disruption . . . .

He later departed for Warwick University on a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue his Master's degree and where he narrowly escaped being

taught by the controversial 1970s author, feminist and activist, Germaine Greer. His Master's dissertation was on Shakespeare, after which he went on to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, to do a Doctorate on nineteenth century ideas of culture, studying writers like Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill.

After a spell working as a book-stamper and shelver for Hillingdon Borough Libraries outside London, where he became expert at telling the British public how to rid their attics of bees, where to go for advice on breastfeeding, and how to conduct do-it-yourself divorces, he married Madeleine and returned to South Africa in the turbulent mid-80s to a teaching post in the Rhodes English Department under Professor Van Wyk Smith, where he worked for six happy years as a lecturer and senior lecturer.

During this time, his research work earned him Rhodes Joint Research Committee Grants, the Alan Macintosh Travelling Fellowship awarded by the

ISEA and the Human Sciences Research Council Grant for specialised Research Abroad in 1988 and 1989.

He was subsequently appointed Professor and Head of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa, the ISEA, in 1990, where he has been ever since – despite several efforts by other universities to lure him away.

His first ISEA office was the Common Room of Oriel Annex, much to the disgust of its former inhabitants. The rest of the Institute was housed next door in the present Psychology Clinic, while the Publications Officer worked across the road in what is now the Day Care Centre. This made working together as a team something of a challenge, so Laurence's first task was to secure better accommodation for the Institute, which he did in collaboration with then Vice-Principal Roux van der Merwe, Professor Paul Walters and Mr Ken Robinson of the Drama Department.

St Peter's Building, which had narrowly escaped demolition a few years previously, was restored and reconfigured to house the Institute, the Dictionary Unit, and the Rhodes Museum, which later made way for RUMEP, the Rhodes Maths Education Project. The new complex opened in 1992.

Under his leadership the ISEA developed an Adult Literacy Unit, which serviced a network of classes offered in the rural areas around Port Alfred, Alexandria, Paterson, Fort Beaufort, Peddie and King William's Town; produced text books for English Second Language learners; started a creative writing programme; wrote a career-path educational programme for the leather and footwear industries (in collaboration with the Leather Research Institute); and started offering workshops in Afrikaans, English, Xhosa and Sotho, to secondary school teachers to help them understand Outcomes Based Education.

From 2000, these workshops developed into courses, which eventually became the accredited

ACE and BEd programmes which the Institute offers today under the auspices of the Faculty of Education.

In 1995 Laurence was a Visiting Researcher at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon and in 2001 he was a Visiting Researcher in the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. He has also been the recipient a various research awards by the CSD, the NRF, PANSALB, and the Oppenheimer Research Award which have enabled him to further the work of the ISEA through his own work and that of visiting foreign scholars.

Also during this time, he has chaired a multilingual celebration of language and literature called Wordfest. Led by Prof Chris Mann, it started with a pilot programme in 1998, and has since grown to become an important component of the National Arts Festival. The ISEA is also involved in publishing and there are few institutes in South Africa which sustain three long-standing academic and creative periodicals. *New Coin Poetry* was

founded in 1964, *English in Africa* in 1975, and *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* in 1987. All three publications have a wide international impact, thanks to the growth over the years of a substantial network of electronic publishing and distribution partnerships, and are archived in major national and international databases.

In a professional capacity, Laurence has been involved with various committees and councils over the years. He has served in a number of capacities for the National English Literary Museum and the Grahamstown Foundation, on the Board of Governors for the National Arts Festival, and is currently Chairman of 1820 Settlers National Monument Trust and serves on the Council of the English Academy of Southern Africa. He has also been a co-opted member of the English National Language Body, served on the board of the Molteno Project and chaired its research committee informing the implementation of a programme of language teaching and learning in black primary schools.

Having served on the Executive Committee and as President, he was made Honorary Life President of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa in 2002. He is further a trustee of The Shakespeare Educational Trust Fund. He was also project leader and senior editor of the Shakespeare Schools' Text Development Project from 1990 to 2000 which produced the Macmillan Communicative Shakespeare Series, an innovative series of texts directed to students for whom English is an additional language.

The ISEA was founded as a research institute with a "distinctly practical bias", focusing mainly on applied research and implementation projects. Nevertheless, staff members are naturally keen and are encouraged to pursue their individual and collective research interests, which currently include educational research, literary and cultural studies and the writing of poetry.

Laurence's own research publications range from Shakespeare to J M Coetzee and R L Peteni; from South African language and language-in-education

policy studies to Victorian prose and poetry; from the Xhosa Cattle-killing to South African railway poetry.

Work currently in press includes an article entitled "Third World Express: Trains and revolution in South African poetry"; a chapter on 'The Good Companions', a pioneering South African theatre company led by women during the Second World War for a book on *Shakespeare and Women*; a chapter on "Irony and Transcendence on the Renaissance Stage" to be published in Belgium; and an edited volume on the spread of Shakespeare in Australia and New Zealand, which will appear in Poland.

He also heads the international Spread of Shakespeare research and publication programme, which includes scholars from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, and which has to date produced upwards of 25 accredited research publications.

Laurence's personal research output includes 9 edited books, 16 book chapters, 75 research articles, and 34 theatre and book reviews. He is an editorial referee for 13 national and international journals, and the managing editor of three periodicals. He has guest-edited two issues of international journals, and has given 10 plenary conference addresses and public lectures.

Laurence was elected to the South African Academy of Science in 2009 and is currently writing a book about Shakespeare in South Africa.

It is my pleasure to introduce Professor Laurence Wright whose lecture is entitled "Learning to be Original".