

## **PROFESSOR DAVID NORMAN BEACH: A TRIBUTE**

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IT IS A GREAT honour to have been asked to pay tribute to the life and work of our dear friend, and colleague, Professor David Beach, who passed away on 15 February, shortly after presenting his inaugural lecture, which is published in this issue of *Zambezia*.

David Norman Beach was born in the Midlands, in England, on the 28th of June, 1943. His family moved to Nairobi when he was eight and they lived in Kenya for four years. They returned to England for two years, before moving, once more, to Bulawayo, in 1959, where they lived for two years, then they came up to Salisbury, as it was then.

David went to Prince Edward School prior to being awarded a Beit Trust Scholarship, that enabled him to attend the University of Cape Town in 1962, where he majored in History. He won class medals for History during his undergraduate days and was awarded the B.A. General degree in 1964. In 1965, he completed the B.A. Honours programme in History and returned to Rhodesia and enrolled at the University and studied for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education, in 1966. After teaching in Que Que for a year, he registered for his Ph.D. studies in 1968 and was awarded his doctorate in 1971. His potential was recognized by the department, which engaged him as a part-time tutor whilst he was doing his research. After a brief spell as a temporary teaching assistant, he was awarded a Faculty Research Fellowship in November 1971 which was subsequently renewed until 1976. In September of that year, he was appointed as a Lecturer in the History Department. He was promoted to a Senior Lectureship in 1983 and to the rank of Associate Professor in 1989.

David was a very distinguished historian who wrote seven books on Shona history, one of which was written specifically for the school textbook market. He also wrote a primary history of the world outside Africa. At the time of his untimely death, David Beach had 63 publications to his credit. An internationally renowned expert on pre-colonial Zimbabwean history, David's research is highly regarded by his peers and through his scholarship, his name will last forever. As the Acting Dean of Arts, I had the privilege of steering his application for promotion to a full professorship through the University Promotions Committee in 1992. This was an easy task as the accolades flowed freely in his assessors' reports. One summed up his achievements thus:

In the long term . . . Professor Beach's major achievement will be to have rescued the traditional histories of Shona dynasties from the

erosion of time, and all future generations of Zimbabweans will be indebted to him.

Another lauded his achievements thus:

As to quality and international 'visibility', he has a strong international reputation . . . That reputation is based on the care with which he conducts research, the measured claims he makes for the importance of the results, and in some publications the pioneering aspects of the research.

The third highlighted 'his methodological sophistication and rigour' and stated that:

His strong sense of the relevance of the past, particularly for the training of young minds, has led him to maintain . . . a delicate balance between the academic audience, whose professional standards he utilizes so carefully, and the popular audience for whose edification, and hence benefit, he also writes. He brings the University of Zimbabwe great credit and recognition. He unequivocally meets the University's stated standards for promotion to professorial grade.

David in many ways epitomized the best qualities of a true scholar: his devotion to duty was legendary — he is the only person I know, at the UZ, who felt guilty about taking the weekend off, whilst on contact leave! When in Lisbon, he was always waiting at the door, when the public library was opened and he was almost invariably, the last one to leave. His discipline was awesome, as those who attended his inaugural lecture can testify. David had mapped out the course of his research for the next ten years! He was a gifted teacher, who could fill his students with enthusiasm. But, above all, his meticulous attention to detail, his scrupulous endeavours to gauge the merits of disparate sources and his willingness to allow the facts to speak for themselves are the qualities that allowed him to write history that has withstood the test of time. He was deeply contemptuous of those who manipulated the data to suit their own designs. David's integrity in both his professional and personal life is one of his most outstanding virtues.

The University of Zimbabwe has lost one of its most dedicated scholars, in its greatest hour of need. A man of his accomplishments could easily have found a better paid post in Europe or America or other parts of Africa, but, besides his devotion to Gill, his heart was firmly rooted in Zimbabwe. Research and teaching were his greatest gifts, but he was always available and helpful, when asked to assist administratively. His generosity in sharing ideas with others — a rare quality in the academy! — will be sorely missed, as will his principled and courageous stand in Senate and his passionate defence of academic freedom and autonomy and the inalienable right of academics to be not just consulted, but listened to by an administration which seems determined to undermine

rights and procedures which have evolved over time *and served the institution well.*

David's friends will miss their gracious host, whose energy and enthusiasm was infectious and whose zest for life and whose devotion to Zimbabwe were constant challenges to the pervasive atmosphere of doom and gloom. David's unique drive, determination, humour, particularly his capacity to mimic accents and his loyalty will always be a source of inspiration. His sunny smile and optimism cheered us up enormously. David's interests were varied, his knowledge was not restricted to history — he was also very knowledgeable about trains, photography, music, science fiction and astronomy, to name but a few. He had a remarkable capacity to relate easily to people from different walks of life.

And thus, in the midst of our great sadness, lies a great sense of gratitude for the many gifts David bestowed on us. It is so sad to lose him so suddenly, at a time when Zimbabwe desperately needs more people like him: people prepared to live their lives on the basis of principles that transcend self-interest; people who are prepared to apply themselves wholeheartedly to the task at hand; people with a highly developed sense of justice; people with a genuine interest in other people and their welfare; people who understand and respect different cultures and perspectives; people who are conscious of their strengths and weaknesses and try to maximise the positive; David Norman Beach epitomized these qualities.