A TRIBUTE TO DAVID WEBSTER

Eddie Webster

We are gathered to pay tribute to our colleague, valued teacher and friend, David Webster.

From time to time in the history of opposition to apartheid in our open universities, there has arisen from within our ranks men and women who have had the courage to transcend the narrow confines of the established role of university teacher. By their combination of theory and practice they have been able to go beyond the 'ivory tower' and engage directly with the struggle of the majority for democracy. By challenging racist practices they have threatened the apartheid system. David Webster was such a man.

But David was different. He was different in two ways.

Firstly, David did not come from a comfortable liberal background. His father was a miner and David was brought up in the Copperbelt in colonial Northern Rhodesia. But unlike many graduates of working class background David did not develop a narrow careerism. Instead he chose the difficult path of an activist academic. What does this mean? For David it meant that he fused the role of anthropologist with that of active engagement with the struggles, the sufferings and the hopes of ordinary people, both black and white. David was no common-room politician pronouncing on the struggle from a distance; nor was he an opportunist trying to make money out of the anti-apartheid struggle. David's involvement in these struggles was, as he himself has said, always a personal, grass-roots experiential thing, rather than a fully intellectual one.

David's first anti-apartheid act was in 1965 at Rhodes University. I remember it well as we were students together at that time. It was the period of high apartheid, and the Grahamstown City Council had banned blacks from watching — let alone playing in — the Rhodes First rugby team. We were outraged and organised a dawn to dusk sit-in on the library steps. It was the time of the civil rights movement in the South and we sang freedom songs such as WE SHALL OVERCOME. David's hero at the time was the liberal civil-rights campaigner, Bobby Kennedy.

But these were dark years for opposition in South Africa. Despairing liberals turned to acts of individual violence, others emigrated or became apolitical businessmen. David was fortunate to join the staff of Wits in the early 1970s as a new generation of academics began to develop a radical criti-

que of the very core of the apartheid system, the exploitation of black labour. Although David's PhD had been on the traditional anthropological topic of kinship his field work had taken him to southern Mozambique where he had been exposed to the effects of migrant labour. Arising out of this field-work David wrote his widely quoted article on underdevelopment and migrant labour in Mozambique. This led him to explore related issues such as the social history of tuberculosis and the social causes of malnutrition.

David's reputation as an anthropologist grew rapidly both here and abroad and in 1976 he was invited to lecture for two years at the University of Manchester, the leading department of anthropology in Britain.

This period overseas was to prove a turning point in David's life. We all noticed the change in his personality and his priorities when he returned to Wits in 1978. But it was the detention of some of his students in 1981, in particular Barbara Hogan, that was to catapult David into the role that led to his tragic assassination on that fateful May Day morning.

I suggested at the beginning of my talk that David was different in two ways. The first was his social background. The second was that, unlike most people who go through a temporary phase of radicalism while students that rapidly fades with age, David's commitment to change deepened as he got older.

Initially David tried to bring his colleagues with him. In 1981 he formed CADS — the Conference of Academics for a Democratic Society — as a pressure group designed to persuade the university to become more involved in community issues. In a statement of principle for CADS he wrote:

> We must be prepared to broaden our concept of education beyond the boundaries traditionally imposed on it: the boundaries of ivory towers and scholarly monasticism. We have to understand that education is that which enables people to take control of their own lives. We are thus involved in a social practice which is potentially a major force in the struggle for a just and democratic society and we must face up to the consequences of that involvement.

CADS failed to win much support from his colleagues. David was deeply hurt by the dismissive attitude of some. It was only recently that he began again to interest himself in the politics of the university, as Wits began to demonstrate a new awareness of the relationship between university and community. It was during this period of renewed intellectual creativity that David was to write his most relevant work — his close monitoring of the growing repression and violence in South Africa.

'Assassinations', he wrote, 'are used as one of the methods of controlling government opposition when all other methods such as detention or intimidation have failed. It is a very rare event indeed when such assassinations are ever solved'.

It was also recently that David began to write academic articles again around his research on ethnicity and gender in a KwaZulu border community. Those who have read them see in David's latest work a new maturity that benefits from his political engagement. Who knows what this new phase in David's life would have led to?

I had the privilege of spending an evening with David a week before he died. He described the confrontation he had had with the security police that afternoon at a detainees 'tea party'. He had had to intervene on behalf of detainees' families when police and soldiers harassed and disrupted the tea party. I was struck by the significance of his mediating role and how powerful his quietly spoken manner must have been in that situation. Perhaps his unassuming and gentle manner ironically posed the greatest threat to the violence of apartheid.

The university has quite rightly called for his killers to be punished. Many observers believe the finger points squarely at an element within the system itself. They have noted that those responsible must have had information about David's personal life. This information could only have been gained through intense and systematic surveillance, by bugging his telephone and following him.

But no amount of punishment will bring David back. The best tribute we as university academics can make to David is to take more seriously the challenge he made to us to become academics for a democratic society.