

DAVID NORMAN BEACH, 1943–99

Professor David Beach died of a brain tumour on Monday 15 February 1999. The following is the text of the tribute spoken by Dr M. Z. Malaba at the funeral service in Christchurch, the Anglican parish church in Borrowdale (Harare), before the cremation on 22 February.

An internationally renowned expert on pre-colonial Zimbabwean history, David Norman Beach was born in the English Midlands on Wednesday 28 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 to Bulawayo in 1959 and two years later to Harare (Salisbury, as it then was).

David went to Prince Edward School prior to being awarded a Beit Trust Scholarship which enabled him to attend the University of Cape Town, 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 in history, returned to Rhodesia and enrolled at the university and studied for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education, in 1966. After teaching in Que Que (now Kwekwe) for a year, he registered for his Ph.D. studies in 1968 and was awarded his doctorate in 1971. His potential was recognised 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 school history of the world outside Africa. At the time of his untimely death David Beach had sixty-three publications to his credit. 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 from his referees. One noted, '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.' The second observed, '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: '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 utilises 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's discipline was awesome, as those who attended his inaugural lecture can testify. He 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 his personal life was one of his most outstanding virtues. In many ways he epitomised the best qualities of a true scholar: his devotion to duty was legendary. He is the only person I know 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 to leave.

The University of Zimbabwe has lost one of its most dedicated scholars, in its greatest hour of need. David's loyalty to his department is reflected, in part, by the number of his colleagues and students who attended his funeral. 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 his wife, 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 seemingly determined to undermine rights and procedures which have evolved over time and served the institution well.

We have laid to rest a distinguished scholar, a dearly beloved brother and son, and a loving, considerate and kind husband. David's marriage to Gill was a rare partnership, built on the firm foundation of love and friendship, mutual understanding and support. David's friends will miss their gracious host, whose energy and enthusiasm were infectious and whose zest for life and whose devotion to Zimbabwe were constant challenges to the pervasive contemporary atmosphere of doom and gloom. His varied interests included trains, photography, music and modelling. His unique drive, determination and 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.

It is particularly sad to have lost David Beach 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.