

TRIBUTE: MARTIN ELGAR WEST

Val,

Paula and Magnus, Adam and Shela

Alexander and Philip, Liam and Luke

Martin's family members

The President of Convocation, former Vice Chancellors, Vice
Chancellor, Professors Emeritus, colleagues, and friends of

Martin West

This is an extraordinary occasion. It signifies the importance to any living institution of one individual, someone who devoted his adult life to its wellbeing and advancement, especially its transformation in a radically changing political context. I am both honoured and humbled to have been asked to deliver this tribute.

I know that every single person here will have their own particular memory or set of thoughts about what Martin West meant to them. I have read hundreds of the emails which have poured in in response to his death, from a hugely diverse group of people in age, location,

culture, religion and discipline. Martin touched each one of them at some stage, and towards the end of this tribute I'll read extracts from a few such messages, to give a sense of how much his life impacted on a very large number of people.

My objective this morning is to reflect on elements in his life, to attempt to discern what it was that made him such a great man:

in the words of so many, such a *mensch*.

In preparing this appreciation, I have been considerably assisted by the 166-page memoir which Martin wrote in his retirement. I was privileged to read it last December, and again in the last few days, and it gives rich insights into his formative experiences and his views on many subjects of importance to a university and more broadly, all recounted in Martin's characteristic style. It is an enormous sadness that the manuscript remains incomplete: the last poignant words being "next: the reses"...

The title of this memoir (he is careful not to style it an autobiography, relying on the wise advice once given to another by David Philip) encapsulates much of what Martin West personified. It is One West, One Bullet, the origins of which provide an excellent opening to my account.

In the mid-1990s, there was a student march on Bremner, complaining about living conditions in one of the residences. As usual, Martin as DVC of student affairs, was sent out to meet the crowd, to make a brief

speech and to accept their demands. He discovered a relatively good-natured group with the predictable placards, including one which read, in a variation of the then PAC slogan, One Student, One Tap. On his appearance, a student with a mischievous grin started chanting “One West, One Bullet” a slogan rapidly taken up by the whole group. That incident gave Martin immense pleasure, and he often told this story subsequently, with his customary dry wit and self-deprecation, but methinks also with some satisfaction, even pride.

With Adam’s encouragement, I will quote from this memoir from time to time, using Martin’s words, as if he were here.

I did not encounter him as a student on this campus in the 1970s, but came to do so on my return in 1987, through three avenues:

- through Val, who was a final-year LLB student in my first full year teaching Administrative Law, and who frankly terrified me at that stage, in the very kindest way, through her incisive questions and plain speaking;
- through discussions with Martin in advance of the hugely significant role he played in giving expert evidence on behalf of those convicted of internal security crimes during the trial of the Upington 25, a long-running and critical involvement which saw him returning to an old stamping ground, the northern Cape, and

which no doubt played a significant role in the eventual lifting of all the death sentences imposed;

- but most meaningfully, through the cricket field of a Sunday afternoon, as members of the UCT Staff Cricket team, of which Adam will say more. Martin had been part of that team from the outset, and he recounts many aspects of its match records and related activities in his memoirs. My own role in the team was exceedingly small: but the vision of Martin's measured and very short run-up to bowl his utterly crafty and frequently effective slow left-arm spinners will remain with me always, as also Adam's intermittent appearance at the age of about 13, putting most of us to shame.

There was one institution on campus where departmental affiliation and status mattered not a whit: the Staff Cricket Club, a motley group of staff members plus some hangers-on. This was the most varied group of people I ever encountered at one time at the University. Its composition ranged from the Vice Chancellor to a few janitors, and included several Professors and lecturers from all parts of the campus, a Nobel laureate-to-be, a sprinkling of postgraduates and some administrators, including on occasion the Registrar. We were all united in our diversity by our love of cricket, if not in our proficiency: we ranged in ability from a couple of people of near provincial class through some good club players to a veritable colony of rabbits.

I naturally came to know Martin much better over the past 20 years, especially during the last decade of his tenure at UCT, when we were both members of the SLG.

Like every institution and individual in this country, UCT faced huge pressures for change, both before and after 1990. Martin was integral to the institutional response, both before and after that year, although his influence after his elevation to the office of DVC in 1991 is naturally much greater and more enduring.

As part of a new team of DVCs appointed simultaneously, with Mamphela Ramphele and Wieland Gevers, Martin brought to bear his long experience in student politics and journalism, including the administration of the NUSAS scholarship scheme in the 1960s, which had often caused him to clash with authority, both on and off campus. He had also served as a Head of the Department of Social Anthropology and a leader of the Staff Association in the 1980s, and had chaired the Student Sports Council / SATISCO in the difficult years of the 1980s in which non-racial sport was asserting itself in tertiary education. These experiences prepared him at least to some extent for the demanding portfolios of student affairs and “industrial relations”, which were given to him from the outset.

Much more important, though, I think, were his childhood and school educational experiences, in which the liberal but modest family circumstances from which he came made him know what it felt to be an

outsider when he found himself amidst the unquestioning relative wealth of his fellow pupils at Bishops. [Adam will say more on this.]

At tertiary level, Martin cast around somewhat aimlessly at first, but then found his niche in social anthropology, which remained his intellectual and collegial home for the rest of his life. He was a member of surely the most remarkable honours class ever at UCT, and probably internationally. Taught by the “young, very sharp, funny and irreverent”

Mike Whisson, the class had five members in addition to Martin:

“John and Jean Comaroff, ...already displaying the intellectual brilliance which led them, via... London and Manchester, to Distinguished Professorships at the University of Chicago as among the pre-eminent anthropologists of their generation; Sally Frankental, whose career included a Ph.D. and a senior teaching position in anthropology at UCT; James Leatt, ... at the time Methodist minister in Simonstown, who went on to a Ph.D. in religious studies, being a Professor in the Graduate School of Business teaching business ethics, before becoming a deputy Vice Chancellor at UCT and then Vice Chancellor of the University of Natal, [and on other, who made little impact in the field. Odd man out was Gerald Stone, a bright and eccentric clinical psychologist doing the course for fun.”

Furthermore, two periods of Martin’s life and research for his anthropology degrees exposed him to an extraordinary diversity of humanity in this country. I refer to his months spent (as part of the research for his MA thesis) among the impoverished sections of Port Nolloth in the northwest Cape, including his attempts to survive as a kreef-fisherman.

Almost immediately after that, in the first years of his marriage to Val, his research into African independent churches in Soweto, exposed him to a world which was largely closed to almost all white South Africans. It was then that he was offered an archbishopric by one of the subjects of his research, an anecdote that he loved to recount, but it was then too that the full ghastliness of legalised racism surrounded him at every turn.

Martin's term as a DVC saw him within a few months being embroiled in trying to defuse the workers' strike and student solidarity of September 1991, which captured news headlines when the trousers of the Dean of Arts caught fire as he attempted to dismantle a burning barricade. Martin was centrally involved in all the interactions with the trade union leadership, the workers and the students, often rather terrified at the risks that he had to undertake, yet doing so with courage. It is clear that already his ability to listen, to fire off a quick riposte, to defuse a situation with humour, and to see the human qualities and condition behind the mask of the defiant striker and militant student, were to be the trademarks of what is often called his "management style". More strikes followed in later years, but none as confrontational as that first one, and he was able to facilitate settlements in them all.

However, it was the student portfolio which was Martin's main preoccupation and his forte. It was mesmerising to see him in action,

engaging with student leadership through thorough preparation, consummate communication skills, verbal acuity, and the employment of his legendary sense of humour to persuade, cajole and finally reach agreement with the SRC and other student groups. In this manner he bridged the gap between management and students, allowing students to feel valued and respected: they felt that they could really talk to him, that he would listen, and that he would bargain in complete honesty. He was certainly capable of the strategic use of a tough stance, where necessary, but also appreciated the value of a quick apology, a lesson taught him at a very young age by his mother. He also learned valuable tactics which he put to good use:

“I was beginning to learn that student protests followed a pattern. Discussions on strategy and tactics were often held quite late into the night, so the revolution at UCT rarely started before 9 a.m. and we usually had an hour or two in the morning before things began.”

His overall strategy in negotiating with students can be summarised as follows: good gathering of intelligence; respect and politeness; never losing one’s temper; the cultivation of personal relationships; taking the students seriously; and never failing to produce food at meetings!

And of course the use of humour and anecdotes:

“This propensity to jest about serious matters was a cross that all the people who reported to me had to bear. I confess that I also favour anecdotes as a means of imparting advice - and sometimes just for amusement, if only my own. I took it as a compliment when an SRC

member meeting me for the first time said "Prof, I hear you have a lot of anecdotes. Could you tell us an anecdote, please?"

We will hear next from one such student leader of the impact that Martin had at that stage, but there are many tributes to this aspect of his work at UCT from other students who dealt with him, some of whom have gone on to high office, such as our Auditor General. One such leader from 1991 writes: "Prof West became the man that black students believed that they could do business with". And another that he was "always respectful, never heavy-handed, but firm", and yet another that he "opened up space to think, breathe and relax".

As a result, together with the generally high calibre of student leadership on campus in those years, which Martin freely acknowledged, UCT experienced perhaps less destructive a process of transition over the 1990s and the early 2000s than might have been the case, despite massive changes both within its bounds and in the higher education landscape nationally. This is a vital legacy which Martin bequeathed to this institution.

The VC has spoken of Martin's lifelong association with and commitment to UCT. There is no doubt of that: he loved the place, with all its faults and quirks, or maybe because of such characteristics. While he served formally under four VCs, the longest period was spent as number two to Njabulo Ndebele, from 2001 to 2008. After the upheavals of the

1990s, the University needed a period to catch its breath, to restore some stability and become accustomed to new ways of doing business, and Martin was absolutely key to the achievement of this state of affairs. He revelled in the role of senior DVC, exuding what one person has described as a “calmness derived from never taking life seriously”. This role had its hugely challenging incidents, especially when they centred on the conduct of senior members of the university, but he was in his element at such moments.

Part of his manifest success as a leader at UCT was attributable to Martin’s incredibly deep and refined understanding of the academic condition, and of the importance of the academy to the establishment of a critical-minded freedom of thought in the wider body politic. He was determined to do all within his considerable intellectual capacity and argumentative skills, leavened with his understated but ever-present sense of irony, to establish and maintain this freedom.

He could wax lyrical on both the strengths as well as the foibles of academics. Allow me to quote a select few sentences from OWOB on this issue, which Martin records as welcoming advice he gave to a newly-appointed Dean:

One well-known definition of the academic staff of a university is a group of people loosely aligned against the university's parking policy. This is only a trifle unfair, as the academic staff are never a group (more of a shifting coalition), and would never be tied down to a single issue. They escape easy classification [and are thus prone to caricature by friend

and foe alike. My caricature is from the friendly side, from one who has lived amongst academics for most of my life.

I started with a list of characteristics of homo academicus, the average academic. The list included that they were] highly-critical individualists, combative, sometimes anarchical, territorial, self-interested, allergic to management in general and in particular hostile to being managed. [They often show more allegiance to their discipline than to their institution, and have a wilful ignorance of the University and faculty regulations.] They are tardy with deadlines (except for their grant applications). If they can be cajoled into faculty governance, they are largely unsuited to the committee system in place, and they can infuriate any right-thinking administrator with their ability – common to many people of high intellect -- to hold two contradictory points of view either simultaneously or serially and to argue for either or both with equal passion. They are skilled moaners, and they privately believe that the administration is largely unnecessary, and is too expensive. [They could do without a Dean whose inflated salary would be better spent on research or equipment, and if they had to have one it is better for the Dean to be seen and not heard.

My advice was in the form of an extended joke but with serious undertones.]

And later:

“I didn't frighten my dean by saying it upfront, but] all academics are slightly crazy! You have to be to go through the hoops to become one. Being an academic is more like a vocation than a job, and few people set out to be academics from the start. Normally it is an option which grows upon you as you become more and more involved in your discipline.

To manage academics might be called an oxymoronic lost cause (in the nether regions of the old Arts Faculty departments where they still understand parts of speech), but call it what you may, trying to manage academics is an impossible task. You attempt it at your peril. It is, as the phrase goes, like trying to herd cats - it simply cannot be done.”

And finally:

“An academic has not done their job if they cannot find anything to criticize. After all to be free of any criticism is to imply faultlessness, 100% - something not attainable, unless perhaps by yourself, and then only on a very good day!”

So Martin had a profound understanding of the people among whom he worked, from every sector of the university, by each of which he was held in great respect. However, while intensely loyal to and proud of UCT as an institution, this was not an uncritical devotion. In private he frequently expressed great frustration and impatience with certain practices and even people, yet he always respected them even as he sought to change them. Hear his words about aspects of business at UCT:

“UCT normally leaks like a particularly coarse-grained sieve and one of the favourite jokes among academics was that the only way to keep anything confidential at the university was to put it up on the notice-board. The University in my experience never does anything simply if it can find a more complicated way.”

Particularly in modern times, some may question why one would want to serve a single institution all one’s working life. Martin recognised that view, but explained his own choice of career as follows:

“In general it is a bad idea to stay in one institution for so long. It can be stultifying on both sides, and inimical to necessary changes, in both the individual and the institution. The saving grace for me was that I did many different things and played many different roles at UCT over the years, in different parts of the institution. Universities are often seen as monolithic structures, and while this may be in part true, the fact is that they are also highly complex and internally diverse.”

Martin was at least fair to and interested in every person whom he met, no matter their background or their particular discipline. That much is again abundantly clear from the very diverse range of staff, students and others who have written to express their appreciation of him and their sadness at his death. But for present purposes I'd like to single out four areas from which he took particular joy, and which to some extent owe their institutional vigour to his managerial patronage.

Firstly, the University Library. Martin was the DVC to whom Joan Rapp reported throughout her long and transformative tenure as Director.

During those years, the services offered and the fabric of the Library changed remarkably, such that it is one of the gems within the University today. Some of this must of course be the coincidence with the rapid development of electronic resources, and the role of Joan and her team should never be underestimated, yet Martin was clearly very pleased with his stewardship of this critical sector of university life.

Secondly, the Ushepia programme, funded by Carnegie, Mellon and Rockefeller, and involving academic exchanges between UCT and select universities within southern and east Africa. Anyone who has witnessed the consistent stream of doctoral graduates across the sciences and humanities at UCT over the past 15 years or so will have no doubt as to

the value of that programme, which Martin ran from its inception until his retirement. Again, the number of heartfelt expressions of sadness at his death which have arrived in the past two weeks from across Africa bears complete testimony to how they regarded Martin's leadership in the programme.

Thirdly, many people have in their tributes drawn attention to the transformation of University graduation ceremonies over the past 20 years or so, from a stuffy, formalistic and "proper" occasion, to the colourful and exuberant yet dignified celebrations which we are privileged to attend today. Again, while this may not have been Martin's idea or doing entirely, he entered into the spirit of such occasions with complete enthusiasm, and many people associate him with these changes, which have certainly assisted in the transformation of this University.

And fourthly, Martin's appreciation of the fine arts and his absolute love and enjoyment of the performing arts are defining aspects of his leadership at UCT. Together with Val, he was frequently and over many years to be seen at the Baxter and the Little Theatre, or wherever music, drama and dance were being performed by members of the university. He was of course an accomplished pianist (Elgar was his middle name!),

but his devotion to the performing arts in this manner was more than significant.

I have gone on long enough. I mourn the untimely curtailment of Martin's life: Val and he deserved a longer and more serene retirement after his extensive labours. The onset of Parkinsons was particularly distressing for him and those close to him. I salute Val in particular for her resolute and loving care.

We will miss Martin enormously, the loss tempered by what remains of him in the fabric and daily practices of this University. His legacy is to be seen in the impact which he had on so many over such a long period.

In times of institutional stress and fracture, we should recognise and applaud loudly all those who, like Martin West, have given unstintingly to the common good, not seeking a reward other than the knowledge that they had done their best to improve the human condition wherever they encountered it, no matter its origin or appearance.

Let me end with a few words selected at random from the hundreds of tributes which have reached the family, often through the good offices of Jenny Boyes, who worked so closely with Martin as DVC:

- “Martin served UCT with absolute dedication, consistency, integrity, honesty and humility”
- “ A kind, thoughtful and clever man who had no hubris and wore the robes of his office with dignity alongside a light touch”
- “principled and generous”
- “ a gentleman and a mensch”
- “ a great servant of humankind”
- “his contribution was discreet sensitive and unseen”
- “ a man of deep insight, scrupulous thoroughness, great vision, mischievous with anecdote, and enduring fair-mindedness of purpose”

We salute Martin West, an institutional treasure and an outstanding human being.

Thank you

Hugh Corder

25 July 2015

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are taken from Martin West’s unpublished memoirs, entitled **One West, One Bullet.**

