

Friends, we are gathered together this morning in this solemn place and on this solemn occasion to pay our last respects and final tribute to Rolf Braae. By the nature of things only one amongst us, Anna-Grete, can remember him as a faithful and devoted husband, and two, Martin and Karen, have tender memories of him as an exemplary and caring father. To the rest of us he was an open-hearted and considerate friend, a cheerful colleague, a hard working collaborator on projects or committees, or else a professor for whom nothing was too much trouble where the true interests of his students were concerned.

I speak to you today not in my capacity as a public persona, the Vice-Chancellor of the university to which he gave sixteen years of loyal and committed service, but rather simply as one who was proud to be counted as one of Rolf's friends.

The basic facts of his life are easily told. Born in Dunfermline, Scotland, he attended school and University in Copenhagen, where he graduated in electrical engineering. His first post was with the Copenhagen Telephone Company. Emigrating to South Africa in 1948 he took up employment with the SAR as a telecommunications engineer. He moved into academic life in 1956 when he was appointed a senior lecturer in electrical engineering at the University of Stellenbosch. He came to Rhodes in 1963 as Professor of Applied Mathematics. As computers came to the fore, like so many electrical engineers and applied mathematicians, he was one of the South African pioneers in this new field.

These are the bare and chief salient facts, but we must look to the man behind those facts. The key word is service as contrasted with private aggrandisement. His whole working life was devoted to service industries or to teaching. Even in his first job in the closing years of World War II he was active in the Danish resistance movement, the first of his many extra-curricular activities, and also indicative of the courage which he displayed right to the end.

It was characteristic of Rolf too that the bulk of his writing was in the service field of text-books, in the first instance text-books in Afrikaans for his Stellenbosch students, and thereafter further texts on matrix algebra and vector analysis.

His commitment to service and to the wider interests of the community really came to the fore during his years in Grahamstown. He was on the V G School Committee for nine years and on the Albany School Board for four. A stalwart committee member of the Grahamstown Music Society he was an accomplished pianist and rehearsal accompanist for Gilbert

and Sullivan productions. He was chairman of the Grahamstown Historical Society, and was the prime mover in organising the outing to Alicedale exactly a week ago, to commemorate the centenary of railway service to Grahamstown. It was a great disappointment to him that he was unable to go on the trip. He was deeply moved therefore when the festive train stopped virtually outside his house and the good wishes of all on board were conveyed by loud hailer.

If I may be permitted some personal reminiscences, I came to know Rolf well in the early seventies because of our mutual interest in the teaching of Computer Science. I acted as external examiner for the Rhodes courses and on several occasions he was a thesis examiner for some of my postgraduate students. I was immediately struck by his conscientiousness and by his deep concern for each of his or my students as an individual. His papers were always meticulously set and scrupulously fairly marked. At a series of annual conferences for computer science personnel from all the universities, held at the Golden Gate, we became firm friends. In that idyllic setting we shared many hopes and aspirations, for ourselves, for our students and our respective universities. Because of our close understanding he gave me a great deal of personal encouragement when the time came for me to consider putting my name forward for consideration for the position I now hold.

My family were able to experience at first hand too his great interest in and special way with children. He cared about them and they knew it. Our elder daughter, Margaret, for example, was so taken with Rolf when they first met that she did an extraordinary thing for a shy young girl. She went and fetched her autograph book and asked him to sign it. He did so very simply and directly "From Rolf Braae, your friend in Grahamstown". He always showed a keen interest in her subsequent progress. Right up to the end, when she represented Rhodes in the radio quiz "Varsity Versus", he listened to all the broadcasts. He was concerned with her as a person, Rhodes as a team and the organisation of the quiz, as such contests were one of his special interests. Our younger daughter Angela, too, had reason to be grateful to him. When we came to Grahamstown he went to great pains to choose out a suitable piano for her, and always wanted to know how her music was progressing.

His interest in older people too was equally deep, and he had a special place in his heart for them. The staff in his department were particularly in his mind during the months of his last illness. On the occasions when I was able to visit him or talk with him on the telephone his first concern was not his own predicament, but the extra burden his enforced absence was placing on his department. He was constantly trying to think of ways in which he could be of



assistance to them and to the students, even from his sick-bed. He always took an enormous interest in new members of staff, and did all he could to smooth their path and to make them feel welcome and at home as soon as possible.

Rolf was a civilised and cultured man and a gentleman in every sense of these words. A scientist by training he had an extensive command of literature and history. Widely read he was also blessed with an excellent memory which he put to good use in organising quizzes and general knowledge competitions. He always had an interesting analogy or apposite quotation from A A Milne, Beatrix Potter, Lewis Carroll or other such author to contribute. He never pushed himself to the fore, but as in the biblical passage of the wedding guest sought the lower seats. It was a source of great gratification to himself and his colleagues that he saw service as Public Orator and Dean of the Science Faculty, alas in both offices for all too brief periods.

In the face of the great events of life such as birth and death, when the finite aspects of our existence touch the infinite, we do not measure accomplishments or make comparisons amongst human attainments by any finite yardstick. We think rather of the biblical parable of the talents. If ever there was a man who cultivated his talents to the full, and did not leave them buried, that man was Rolf Braae. Of him it can truly be said "Well done good and faithful servant : thou hast been faithful over a few things. I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Nothing was too small for Rolf to care about. He was a man for all seasons, a friend of town and gown, young and old. He finished off all that he had to do. On Tuesday he wrote letters to thank people who had visited him. One such was to my wife and myself. He left nothing undone but he has left a great gap behind - in his family, in the University, in Grahamstown and in other centres where he has left his mark.

We all mourn his passing while giving thanks for his fine life of service and example. All our lives are the richer for having known Rolf, and this is the true heritage and memorial that he has bequeathed to each one of us.

We extend to his wife Anna-Grete, to his children Martin and Karen and other members of his close family our deepest and heartfelt sympathy.

*Desk Henderson*

10 September 1979