

HONORARY GRADUATE

Phillip Valentine Tobias

Phillip Tobias was born in Durban on 14 October 1925. He was educated at schools in Durban and Bloemfontein, matriculating in 1942 from Durban High School with four distinctions. From 1943 until the present time Phillip Tobias's academic life has been exclusively devoted to the University of the Witwatersrand. Registering as a medical student in 1943, he obtained the degree of Bachelor of Science in Histology and Physiology in 1946, and a first-class honours degree in Histology in 1947, and qualified Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in 1950. In April 1953 Tobias was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on a thesis entitled 'Chromosomes, Sex-cells and Evolution in the Gerbil'. Thus, in under a decade, Phillip Tobias had accomplished the equivalent of four undergraduate degrees and a doctoral degree from this university. Later, on the strength of publications making a distinguished contribution to the advancement of knowledge, he was awarded the higher doctorate, Doctor of Science. In 1951, upon completion of his medical degree, Phillip Tobias was appointed a Lecturer in the Department of Anatomy. He was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1953, a position he held for five years before being appointed Acting Head of the Department in November 1958. In 1959 he became Professor and Head of the Department of Anatomy, succeeding the eminent Professor Raymond Dart, his mentor, who early on had recognized the brilliance of his pupil. Over the years Tobias has paid devoted tribute to Professor Dart's outstanding qualities. Phillip Tobias retired from the Headship of the Department of Anatomy and Human Biology in December 1990 and from a full-time position in the Department in 1993. Throughout his illustrious career he has exemplified Francis Bacon's aphorism, 'Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man'.

During his 32 years as Head of the Department of Anatomy and Human Biology, Phillip Tobias served for three years as Dean of the Medical Faculty and was a member of the University Council for fourteen years. In addition to the many thousands of medical students and allied medical students who passed through his hands, almost 50 research students have carried out doctoral and magisterial research under his supervision. In addition to those from South Africa, these postgraduate researchers came from Italy, Canada, the United States of America, Britain, Portugal, Czechoslovakia and Mexico.

As a teacher of undergraduates, Tobias was superb. His lectures, meticulously prepared and delivered in his melodious voice, so expressive of the natural cadence of the English language, were attended with eagerness and deep enjoyment by his students.

Tobias's researches have covered both palaeo-anthropology and the human biology of the living peoples of Africa. The human biological studies on the living include researches on the Kalahari San (Bushmen), the Tonga and Batwa of Zambia, numerous other black populations of southern Africa, and the secular trend towards higher or lower average adult stature in diverse populations in Africa and elsewhere. He was the first to demonstrate that the secular trend was not universally positive, as previously thought, but populations in the developing nations of Africa and elsewhere showed either an absence of secular changes or a negative secular trend. Phillip Tobias is perhaps best known for his research on fossil hominids and human evolution, which have excited him ever since. As an undergraduate student, he organized and led expeditions to Sterkfontein and Makapansgat in the Transvaal. He has studied and described hominid fossils from Indonesia, Israel, Libya, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia. He would perhaps list his most important researches as those on the hominids of East Africa, most notably those of Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania, where he worked with L S B Leakey and J R Napier. They recognized, described and named the new species of *Homo habilis* in 1964. His work on the Olduvai hominids led to numerous publications, including three major works on *Australopithecus (Zinjanthropus) bosei* (1967), the evolution of the hominid brain (1971), and a two-volume tome on *Homo habilis* (1991). In 1966 he initiated a long-term excavation at the dolomitic limestone cave deposit of Sterkfontein near Johannesburg, which has continued for close on a quarter of a century, making it the most sustained excavation of a single site in the world.

Phillip Tobias's erudite work has been accorded international recognition from many quarters. In 1987 he was awarded the Balzan International Prize for Physical Anthropology. He has received honorary doctorates from ten universities - in Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom (Cambridge) and South Africa - and numerous other honours, awards and medals. In addition, in 1992 the President of South Africa bestowed upon him the Order of Meritorious Service (Gold) for his service to the country. His published works number in excess of 800 items, including 163 books, monographs and chapters in various works. He has been the recipient of honorary fellowships, memberships and associations of over twenty scientific associations and academies of the highest standing, including the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, the American, Canadian and Israeli Associations of Anatomists, the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the Geographical Society of Lisbon, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and the Royal Society of South Africa. In May this year he was unanimously elected President of the International Association of Human Biologists, which has some 7 000 members worldwide.

Phillip Tobias's contributions to international scholarship are immense. It must be remembered that much of his work was undertaken at a time when South Africa was viewed as the pariah of the international community. There can be little doubt that Tobias has received numerous offers to continue his academic career in more enlightened political environments, but such is his love of South Africa, and in particular of this university, to which he has given such dedicated service ever since he passed through its portals fifty years and more ago, that he chose to fight the evil of apartheid from within the country. His campaigns against the imposition of restrictions on academic freedom within South Africa and his unrelenting pursuit of justice for Steve Biko have been recognized both nationally and internationally. Of importance, too, is the fact that he was nominated no fewer than three times for a Nobel Prize during these desperate years.

It would give an inaccurate picture of Phillip Tobias the man were the warmth of his personality, his old-fashioned politeness to all, his compassion, his reverence for life, his respect for the dead, and his broad cultural interests overlooked. His many public lectures and addresses over the radio and on television have enthralled audiences for decades. They have been infused with humour and a typically generous appreciation of the value of the contributions of others to his special disciplines. His lifelong fascination with English literature and the English language has always lent charm to his communications, whether written or oral.

Recognition must also be given to Phillip Tobias's early contribution to student affairs, in which he played a most significant role, especially in the leadership of the National Union of South African Students in the years of its greatness and in his unstinting support for it in its later years of struggle against the forces of repression.

Finally, mention has to be made of his founding of and constant support for the Institute of the Study of Man in Africa.

The fifty years that Phillip Tobias has spent within this university form a record of academic achievement both nationally and internationally which mark him as one of South Africa's greatest scientists of the twentieth century. How just and fitting it is that the University of the Witwatersrand should bestow on one of its most distinguished sons the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.