

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL



Laudation

written and spoken by the University Orator

Professor C O GARDNER, BA(Hons)(Natal), MA(Oxon)

in presenting

MALCOLM EDWARD SUMNER

to the Chancellor at the Graduation Ceremony

held in Pietermaritzburg on

Saturday, 12 April 1997



Mr Chancellor,

An honorary degree is a strange thing. For all other university degrees, the candidates work very hard in a strictly targeted way, and when they succeed, the degree arrives as a long-hoped-for and well-deserved reward. But an honorary degree comes, usually, as a bolt from the blue. A university writes to a favoured candidate, and asks him or her to be kind enough to allow the university to award a degree for which no specific work has been done.

It must seem all too good to be true! I am told that honorary degrees are not often refused.

But of course a person has to be very distinguished to receive the offer in the first place. Maybe no work has been done for this specific degree, but a very large amount of impressive and influential work has been done before that -- so much, in fact, that no more was needed.

What sorts of people receive honorary degrees? Broadly speaking, there are two categories of recipient: those who have distinguished themselves and enriched the country or the world in some area of public life, and those who are very eminent in their own academic field.

Professor Malcolm Sumner, who stands before us today, is an outstanding example of the latter type of recipient: he is brilliant in his field or fields. Yet to put him in category B is not quite satisfactory: as I shall try to show, he is no mere silent researcher. He has carried his subject and his ideas round the world in such a way as to have become something of a public figure.

Malcolm Sumner is a local lad. He took a first-class BSc Agriculture degree at this University in 1955 and immediately became a lecturer in Soil Science. He then took an MSc Agric with distinction. After that he went to Oxford University in England where he obtained a doctorate in 1961. Then, after a postdoctoral fellowship in the Netherlands, he returned to this campus. In the next sixteen years he became in succession senior lecturer, associate professor, professor and head of department, and dean elect.

But by then, 1977, he had become a well-known soil scientist. He had done a great deal of research, published many journal articles, given papers at many conferences, supervised many postgraduate students, won several national awards, and had twice been a visiting professor at American universities. He may well have felt that South Africa had little more to offer him. Besides (as I happen to know, and I am sure he won't mind my saying) he was no lover of the government of the day, and certainly didn't relish the notion of his teenage sons having to get ready to fight for apartheid in Namibia.

So he took up a professorship in the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences at the University of Georgia in Athens, USA. From almost the moment that he arrived in the USA his career began to blossom and bloom in a remarkable way. The importance of the various pieces of research that he was doing was soon recognised, his publications list grew rapidly, and he began to be in demand as a keynote speaker at conferences, as a visiting professor or lecturer (speaking particularly in graduate enrichment programs), as a member of the editorial board of significant journals, as a member of numerous committees, and as a consultant. At the latest count he has to his credit two books, four edited books, 31 book chapters and 204 journal articles. He has won prestigious prizes, including senior awards from the American Society of Agronomy and the Soil Science Society of America, of both of which bodies he has also the honour of being a Fellow. In 1991 the University of Georgia gave him its highest honour by making him a Regents' Professor.

One of the most striking features of his importance in the world of the soil sciences -- certainly to those of us at the University of Natal who catch a glimpse of him here from time to time -- is his travelling around the world. He has given invited seminars at no fewer than 94 universities and research institutes, in the USA, Canada, Central and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australasia, the Pacific Islands. He really seems to shoot round the globe like a space shuttle. I think we can feel honoured and pleased that we have managed to land him for the duration of this ceremony!

Now as an orator I have a choice. Should I attempt to say a little about Professor Sumner's precise scientific concerns, or should I say a little more about him as a person? The disadvantage of the first procedure would be that most people in this hall might not know exactly what I was talking about; and one of those people, alas, would be likely to be me. So I shall speak about the man. But there is one point that I would like to make about his research interests (although it is also a point about him): all those who work in his field are struck by his range and versatility, by the fact that he has moved easily from soil physics, to soil chemistry, to agronomy, and seems willing and able to spot a valuable new research possibility, and then to do the required work himself, in any of these areas.

He himself is admired and loved by his friends and colleagues as something of a phenomenon and as a character. He is (as one would expect) extraordinarily dynamic, and he also works at tremendous speed. Though he has done so much research and teaching, and spoken on so many important occasions, and travelled so much, he seems to be constantly available to others. Research students mill about his office at the university, and yet, one colleague has claimed, he takes no work home in the evenings! I personally refuse to believe this. When does he get all his research written up?

He is known too for his constant good humour, his total lack of artificiality or pretension, and his large voice. "You hear him long before you see him," said one ex-colleague. "In the old days," said

another, "if you wanted to know whether Malcolm was in the Agriculture building, and if he was where he was, you just kept quiet for a moment and listened." Now that restless energy, that joviality and that voice, which various Maritzburgers used to be proud of, are known and respected in appropriate places in Nebraska, in Bangalore, in Uppsala, in Sao Paolo, in Queensland, in Nanjing. "But underneath it all," said another colleague and friend, "I think he is a quiet, almost introverted person." It may well be so.

Has he had a chance to inject much of his energy and expertise back into his old country? He has given seminars here and at Stellenbosch, and was in 1994 Visiting Professor at Vista University. Has the new government made use of his services? I am not sure. But it is a pity if it has not.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to bestow the degree of Doctor of Science in Agriculture, *honoris causa*, on Malcolm Edward Sumner.

