

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

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spoken by the University Orator

Professor J. V. O. REID, M.A., BM., B.Ch.(Oxon.), F.R.C.P.(Lond.)
in presenting
PHILLIP VALLENTINE TOBIAS

to the Chancellor at the Graduation Ceremony
held in Durban

on the 26th April, 1980

Mr Chancellor Sir,

I have the honour to present for the degree of Doctor of Science, Honoris Causa, Phillip Vallentine Tobias.

Phillip Tobias was born and educated in Durban; leaving Durban High School as Dux, matriculating with several distinctions, and going on to Witwatersrand University to take first and honours degrees in Science, and medical degrees, receiving en route several scholarships and prizes. His environment in the science years was a particularly exciting one, many of the Tecturing staff going on later to chairs and fame; at the head was Raymond Dart, the man who described and named Australo-pithecus africanus, and visiting weekly to lecture was Dr Robert Broom. Even as a student he was engaged in significant anthropological research, and the first of his writings appeared before he finished his medical training.

He was appointed lecturer in the Department of Anatomy under Dart a year after graduating, senior lecturer a year later, and after a further seven years, including a year at Cambridge, Professor at the age of 34 in succession to Dart.

Now some twenty years further on as the latest step in this rake's progress he is Dean of Medicine at his University.

Between these years lie a tremendous amount of work; voluminous publications, extensive travel and great honours. The work is in several related fields: paleoanthropology first and foremost, physical anthropology, anatomy, genetics and embryology. The work on man's ancestors and their relations derived from exploration at many sites. His first speleological venture, as a student, was at Makapansgat; he has worked in many places, such as Taung but particularly at Sterkfontein, visited many, and studied the findings of many - most notably hominid remains from Olduvai in Tanzania which have been entrusted to him since the first discovery there of Australopithecus in 1959. His work on the Olduvai remains gained him a D.Sc. in 1967. Like the subjects he studied, he has evolved, to become a major authority on the very ancient human inhabitants of Africa.

His work in physical anthropology began at the time of his first academic appointment, as a participant in an expedition to study the Kalahari Bushmen, the San people who have been a favourite subject of study ever since, both for him and the wide range of scientists who then moved into the field he opened up. But Hottentots, Griqua, Tonga, the Bantu-speaking and all other negroid peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa have been a fruitful source of physical anthropological work and writings. In 1956 he founded the Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, becoming President or Chairman of it for the next twelve years.

His anatomical work emerged in his dissection manual; embryology and genetics were the subject of his highly acclaimed Ph.D. thesis on the chromosomes of the Gerbil and studies on <chromosomes were a continuing source of interest. The publications emerging from all this present a formidable array. They totalled 381 at the end of 1978, and since in recent years they have averaged over 20 per year, one can safely conclude that some 400 writings have appeared over his name. There must be few scientists the compilation of whose bibliography has justified a research project in fulfilment of a Diploma in Librarianship, as his has.

Travel has taken him to all parts of the world, as bursar and travelling fellow, examiner, visiting professor and eponymous lecturer. Honours have come in profusion in other ways too - in election to scientific societies across the world, to office in many, and in medals - the Simon Biesheuvel medal, the South African medal, the Senior Captain Scott medal, the Rivers Memorial medal. He was named one of the "Four Outstanding Young Men of South Africa" in 1966, and was President of the Royal Society of South Africa from 1970-72.

Such is a bare recital of his life story, a quantitation of achievement. The major contribution he has made, that for which a scientist will be best remembered, is argued. His meticulous description of fossil hominid remains, particularly crania, for the proper ordering of the descent of man through

Homo habilis is the claim of the palaeo-anthropologists. His

pioneering of anthropometric, anthroposcopic and i-lore recently genetic studies of the San and Negro peoples is the claim of the physical anthropologists. We shall need to leave it to Homo futurus to decide.

The man Phillip Tobias is known to a wide audience because of his popularity and authority as a speaker, and to many specific audiences for his intense interest in their concerns; to students above all, to those interested in education, to historians of medicine, and of course to audiences far and wide concerned in his scientific studies. Those who know him well enjoy his strong sense of principle, his preparedness to be outspoken when occasion demands, and his sense of humour. His fearless fight for equal opportunities for all people, irrespective of race, has been an inspiration to his younger colleagues and students. We at this University especially are familiar with his great concern for African medical education. All reel under his energy and drive, especially the four secretaries whom he keeps constantly busy, and those he writes notes to, dated and timed at 3.15a.m. When one learns of his interest also in the theatre and music, in old and new books, stamps, and Africana, there is an inclination to wring one's hands and despair for ordinary mortals. No wonder, it has been said, that he hasn't had time to get married; no wonder, one might observe, that he has not of recent years had time to shave in the mornings.

We are glad that this University, in the city of his birth and upbringing should be the first to award him an honorary

degree, 24 years after Raymond Dart. He left it with several distinctions, he returns to it with many more to receive another, the highest we have to offer. Somewhere in the shadows beyond this congregation one senses the shuffling of small toothy man-like beings, lifting backward-curving fingers to rather hairy ears and peering with deepset eyes to catch the mood of these words and to sense the feelings of this audience, puzzled by what is going on but nodding in satisfaction at the man that helped give them their historic place in our ancestry, but particularly in his, communicating to each other by thick monosyllables their delight, after all their struggles to survive, in what they have produced.

On behalf of this shadowy company and this University, I have the honour Mr Chancellor Sir, to request you now to confer the degree of Doctor of Science, Honoris Causa, on

Phillip Vallentine Tobias.

