

John de Villiers (1934–2007)

(Address at Professor De Villier's memorial service)

We are gathered here today to honour the memory of John Matthew de Villiers, who died on Sunday April 29th after a brief illness. Assembled here are John's widow, Valerie, and their son Matthew and his wife Elspeth, and other relatives and friends. Oliver, their second son, is not here: lying in a coma, as he has been for seven years, he is undergoing his own special grief.

We are here to offer our sympathy to the close family, to the wider family, and to all those who mourn John's fairly sudden death.

This speech in honour of John has been compiled in Pietermaritzburg, where John and his family spent many years. We have had input from members of the family and from a number of John and Valerie's friends and ex-colleagues. All of the many e-mails and phone-calls that have flowed in have shown the very deep affection and admiration which people had for John.



John de Villiers

Among the many things to be said about him as a person (and everyone has made this point) is that he was remarkably pleasant, generous and gentle—a true gentleman in every sense—but that he was also reticent and humble, never a person to push himself forward. Indeed some of our contributors said that, as John was often so quiet, in some respects they knew more about Valerie than they did about him! He was also a deeply committed family man, devoted to his wife, his sons, and his grandchildren, Henry, Missy and Bella. He and Valerie would have celebrated their golden wedding next February.

But of course he was also a highly intelligent person and a profound thinker and worker in the areas of the intellectual life in which he chose to operate. He was in all his intellectual and creative work original, probing, energetic: a perfectionist, a person who did things fully and properly, and carried them through to their conclusion.

A remarkable person like John is a very great gift to the human race. We all feel that deeply. Those who were closest to John feel it with a painful mixture of grief and pride.

Some of his great qualities will be illustrated in a brief sketch of his life.

John was born in Graaff-Reinet in December 1934. He went to the Union High School there, and then did a B.Sc. at the University of Cape Town. In 1957 he was appointed as a lecturer in Soil Science at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. By then he had worked at soils and irrigation research in Pretoria and spent time at Delft in the Netherlands studying the use of aerial photography for the interpretation of soils; this was part of his work, with others, on the great Tugela Basin project. In 1958 he married Valerie Werdmuller, an opera singer whom he had met in Pretoria. Not long after that he achieved his Ph.D. at the University of Natal.

John was an extremely distinguished and influential soil scientist. His ex-colleagues have compiled an impressive list of his research and his publications, and have stressed that he soon became well known in his field not only nationally but internationally. One person, who later came to Pietermaritzburg as a lecturer, tells how he sought John out in 1983, because of his reputation, when John was working at Reading University as a part of his sabbatical work at Oxford.

Suffice it to say that John was notable especially in the field of soil classification. A contributor adds: 'He was also perhaps ahead of his time in terms of his recognising the environmental impact of mining and the need for adequate rehabilitation measures to be put in place. His document on the soil materials suitable for rehabilitation and the subsequent land uses to which the area could be put is still the Bible of the major mining houses, over 25 years since he wrote it.' But this is not an academic gathering, so it wouldn't be appropriate to go into too many details about John's academic achievements. They are available for anyone who would like to see them—though they had to be searched for a bit, as John in his modesty was not the kind of person to flash his CV around.

Perhaps one might say a little about his movements and activities. He did post-doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin. The family moved for some years to what was then Rhodesia, where he was invited to set up the department and later the faculty of Agriculture at the University in Salisbury (as it then was). He was recognised for his achievements by the government. In 1979 he was appointed to the Chair of Soil Science at his *alma mater* in Pietermaritzburg. This meant that he had to spend a good deal of time at his desk, but (as one of our contributors says) 'He was never a desk man, preferring the classroom and the field. When in his office he worked from a large conference table surrounded by papers and reference material. He struggled to delegate, which kept his two wonderful secretaries very busy following up on him.' Another contributor tells us how quietly enthusiastic, hard-working and meticulous but also how relaxed and cheerful he was, especially in the evenings, on these field excursions with staff and students. On such occasions another important characteristic of his, not mentioned so far, came strongly to the fore: his lively and often impish sense of humour.

He was admired as a lecturer and as a speaker at scientific congresses, and also appeared on many radio and TV broadcasts in South Africa and abroad. At one point he represented South Africa on a NASA planning session for satellite photography, and worked with Werner von Braun and Neil Armstrong. He was disappointed to be prevented by the then regulations, in the 1980s, from attending a Soils symposium in India, as he had a great admiration for India. He also served for many years on the editorial board of *Geoderma*, one of the top world journals in Soil Science.

As head of department he showed his fairness, his kindness but also the right degree of firmness. It wasn't surprising, then, that he later became the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, and that was the position that he held until he retired at the end of 1994.

In those years of being one of the top academics of the University he was invited to take on other important functions. While the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for the Maritzburg campus was absent John acted in his place, and he accompanied him on a study tour of the United States to pick up ideas for the University's momentous transition into the new era.

After his retirement as Dean, what did he do? This is one of the remarkable mo-

ments in his life. He decided to become a first-year student, working for a B.A. degree with an emphasis on Fine Art. Having been a university dignitary, though always a quiet and unshowy one, he worked beside students more than 40 years younger than him. One has to ask how many people would have the qualities of character required to do this. He got on well with staff and students, was enthusiastic as always, and was of course a very good student. The sudden switch to the Arts was surprising, but not wholly so. Many people had remarked on his beautiful use of English. Like many other people, he recognised the other side of his personality, but he had the courage to follow it through. He focused on Fine Art, and distinguished himself. Members of the staff of the Visual Arts Centre speak of his quietly passionate dedication and his creativity as a ceramicist and a sculptor. He did a post-graduate diploma in Fine Art and got an exceptionally high mark.

One of his striking achievements was something that enabled him to bring together his allegiances to the Faculties of Agriculture and the Humanities. He created a beautiful mosaic clock, in delicately muted colours, depicting a breakthrough event in the history of the Agriculture Faculty, when a Dr Hunter managed to avoid awkward regulations by importing from England two sheep embryos within the uterus of a rabbit doe. The rabbit and the sheep embryos are handsomely depicted in the mosaic. John donated the clock to the Faculty on the occasion of its 50th birthday, in 1998; and there it hangs for all to see. One of his many motives for producing the work was, incidentally, his feeling that students had a bad tendency to be unpunctual!

Then seven years ago there occurred another striking event, a tragic one this time. John and Valerie's son Oliver had a terrible accident, which left him severely disabled, in what is called a 'locked in syndrome'. They decided to leave Pietermaritzburg in order to be close to Oliver. John's continuing and totally uncomplaining devotion to Oliver has been another remarkable sign of his quality as a person. He was able to carry on with his artistic work, however, and he exhibited in several galleries in the Cape.

One of his ex-colleagues in Soil Science concludes his tribute as follows: 'John de Villiers' roots were in the Karoo. He was among the best to have been nurtured in South Africa. He knew and loved the African landscape. We can truly celebrate the knowledge and understanding we have gained from his work.' One must add too that he has made his contribution to South African art, and to the lives of everyone who has had the privilege of knowing him.

Now John has gone from us. We mourn him, and we salute him.