

City of Pietermaritzburg (1995–96). “In front of an ordinary man there was an extraordinary woman” is how her husband put it. Mayor Omar Latiff described her as “a true civic-minded

hero of Pietermaritzburg. The Mandela project of creating a rainbow nation will sadly miss her positive energy.”

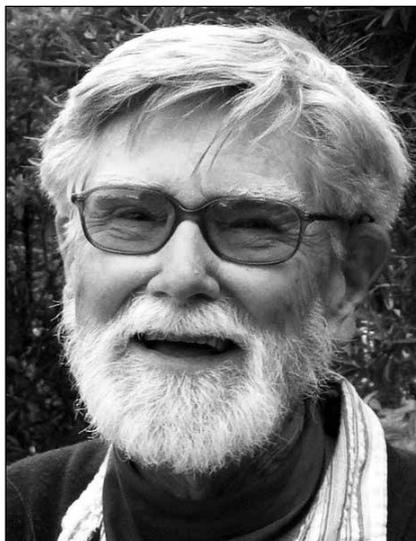
ROBERT HASWELL

Michael Menne Martin (1927–2015)

PROFESSOR Emeritus Michael Menne Martin, the former Head of the Department of Microbiology and Plant Pathology (1977–1987) at the then Faculty of Agriculture, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, passed away peacefully aged 87 on Friday 27 February 2015, surrounded by his family.

He was born on 6 November 1927 to the Reverend Walter Martin (Anglican Archdeacon of Durban) and Theresa Egner (a classically trained concert pianist), and spent much of his youth in St Thomas’s vicarage in Durban. After completing his BCom part time in Durban, and realising that this was the wrong career choice, he left the country and worked on a farm in Canada. The intolerable cold drove him to Vancouver, where he worked as a postman before being awarded a bursary to study at the Faculty of Agriculture in Pietermaritzburg.

He completed his BSc (Agric) at the University of Natal, and as there were no local virologists, he undertook his Masters in the Department of Virology at the University of Wageningen, Netherlands. This was converted into a PhD after his return, and he was subsequently appointed as the local departmental virologist. His PhD, which was awarded in 1976, focused on the



Michael Martin

Purification and Electron Microscopy of the Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus. Interestingly, the current incumbent of the virology post at UKZN, Dr Gus Gubba, also studied tomato spotted wilt virus for his PhD.

Martin was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Natal in 1958, serving as a Senior Lecturer during the 1960s and being made a full Professor in 1977. He was Head of the Department of Microbiology and Plant Pathology from 1977–1987, succeeding Professor Susarah Truter who had started the Department in 1955.

His subsequent research interest was in the field of plant immunology, specifically on how systemically acquired resistance was initiated and transmitted in plants in response to viral infection. In the meticulous studies that he conducted with the assistance of Mrs Lynne Goudswaard, he was 30 years ahead of the field. In the last 10 years, various breakthroughs have been made on this topic, and we now know that there are several forms of systemic plant resistance, including one specific for viruses. Martin was delighted to discover that the latest developments tied in remarkably well with his earlier innovative research.

He introduced the study of plant disease epidemiology at the University of Natal, based on the ground-breaking works of Dr J.E. Vanderplank, an alumnus of the University and a South African plant pathologist who pioneered this field globally. As a result of this foresight, UKZN is the only university in South Africa that offers two undergraduate courses in plant disease epidemiology. He had the exceptional intellect to understand and lecture in two very different fields – virology and epidemiology – and to recognise their parallel importance.

His Plant Pathology lectures were a bit of a “curate’s egg”, as he lectured from the knowledge stored in his remarkable brain, without notes, which made them a little disorganised.

What made these lectures special was that they were delivered with passion, spontaneity and a sense of curiosity, which gave the students a glimpse into the real world of Plant Pathology, into the unknowns and fascinating questions facing plant pathologists, with all the opportunities and possibilities that they presented. He inspired many of us to pursue plant pathology as a career.

Prof Martin was an intellectual and a gentleman, gentle of nature and spirit, and an extraordinarily kind individual. His love of nature and music were recurring themes throughout his life, with flowers bought for the garden being considered “an investment in beauty”. He was truly egalitarian, one who attached no importance to status, race, title or money. As a religious and deeply spiritual person, he expressed his beliefs in the most positive way, by living his faith in his daily life, and in his engagement with the world and his fellow human beings. He was married to Melloney (nee Morton) for 58 years, and they had four children: Marian, Carrin, Viviene (Kartsounis) and James (married to Lisa del Grande), and four grandchildren.

A memorial service took place on Saturday 7 March at St Peter’s Church, Pietermaritzburg.

MARK LAING, FRITS
RIJKENBERG, MIKE WALLIS
and CARRIN MARTIN