

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to present for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature (honoris causa), John Britten Wright.

There sits on the shelves of our library here at UCT, and on the shelves of libraries throughout the world, a remarkable set of volumes. They do not have a catchy title of the type promoted by publishers' agents. But the five volumes (and a sixth is on its way) of *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples* is as sensational as they come. At least they are to historians, Zulu linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists, as well as to lawyers and land claimants. And they should be so to all South Africans who are concerned about how our past has been shaped.

For they contain conversations held between James Stuart, an official of the Natal colonial administration, fluent in Zulu, with hundreds of Zulu-speaking men and women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: men and women who lived through some of the most turbulent times in the history of KZN, and indeed of our region as a whole, men and women whose memories extended back to the time of Shaka. These conversations are a unique resource for understanding the events, and ways of thinking, of South Africans from the point of view of its indigenous inhabitants at a time when the onset of the Mineral Revolution was making its cataclysmic impact on the people of our country. It is well known that such voices rarely appear in the historical records, certainly not before the era of mass media or mass political organisations. As we know, history is too often told from the perspective of elites, of those who dominate the production of written sources. The *James Stuart Archive* is a powerful alternative to such perspectives.

John Wright is the man who has given us access to these extraordinary conversations. Together with Colin Webb, a former professor of history and dean of arts at this university, he began in the early 1980s to meticulously transcribe, edit and translate these records. Colin Webb died in 1992 but John Wright continued the mammoth task alone, and the last volume has just been published. It is rare to find a scholar of such sensitivity, not only to language but also to the people who used it, of such patience and such tenacity and – most rare of all in academia – of such overwhelming modesty.

John is driven by a passion to bring the story of South Africa's pre-colonial and early colonial past to light, and in particular to hunt behind the myths and stereotypes that pervade the representations of pre-colonial Africa, especially in the KZN region. At a time when many of our students – and many of our fellow citizens – now think that South African history began in 1994 – or at most in 1976 – this is a critical passion to have and to celebrate.

The *James Stuart Archive* is only one, albeit the major, product of John Wright's passion. He has produced a range of books and articles that have seismically changed our understanding of the pre-colonial South African past, often stepping into dangerously controversial waters, such as challenging the centrality of the Mfecane and Shaka. He has worked with and across the disciplines of history, linguistics, anthropology, archaeology and gender studies with meticulous scholarship. He is *always* curious about new approaches, subjecting them to rigorous interrogation, taking them on board wherever productive. As a teacher for many years at the University of Natal Pietermaritzburg, and more recently at Rhodes, Wits and here at UCT, he has transformed the ways of thinking of countless students, ranging from anxious and uncertain first-year undergraduates (who, in the best traditions of the Scottish-inspired ideas of university education that SA once inherited, he believes it is the particular responsibility of the professor to teach) – ranging from them to seasoned post-doctoral fellows. And it is a sign of the recognition of the value of his work that school curriculum

designers used his chapter in the recently published *Cambridge History of South Africa* to structure a key section of the new SA senior school history curriculum. That is indeed an achievement that few academics can claim.

And there is more, though this is perhaps less well known in the academic world. Together with this probing, interrogating, critical intellect lies something of the romantic, for this is a man who is captivated by smooth jazz and growling blues music, and who (I am told) has a wonderful voice of his own.

John Wright does not shout his achievements from the rooftops or in the media. But he is a man of immense scholarship, of empathy and intense humanity, who has quietly, but fundamentally, changed our understanding of the South African past and who has in particular brought the complexities and richness of pre-colonial Africa to light. These, Vice-Chancellor, are qualities that universities need to value most, and ones that UCT certainly recognizes through the awarding of this degree.

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, John Britten Wright.