OBITUARY

Walter Oakley West (1930-2007)

Oakley West was born in Stutterheim in January 1930, although his secondary education was at Pretoria High School for Boys. He took his Transvaal Secondary School Certificate in 1947.


Between 1964 and 1968 Oakley was Cartographer/Draughtsman in the Geological Department of the Anglo American Corporation in Johannesburg. During this period he obtained his Diploma in Production Engineering from the Witwatersrand Technical College. In 1968 West joined the Department of Survey and Lands in Gaborone, Botswana, where he remained until 1971. In that latter year he graduated from the University of South Africa with a B. Com. (Admin.) degree.

Oakley West joined Rhodes University in 1972 as Cartographer, based in the Department of Geography, where he was to become the most valuable and highly respected member of staff. In 1979 he completed his Honours Degree in Geography at Rhodes, and in 1983 took his M. A. for a thesis entitled ‘A review of developments in cartography with special reference to cartographic education and training in South Africa’. During the 1970s he presented papers on cartographic education at conferences of the South African Geographical Society, and published on the same topic in the South African Survey Journal.

Oakley West was the back-room boy who designed many of the maps that graced publications by members of Rhodes University for over a quarter of a century. Professor Rodney Davenport’s magisterial tome: South Africa, a modern history, for example, included numerous examples of Oakley’s cartographic genius. Towards the end of his career he worked on The geomorphology of the Eastern Cape, and took great delight in the new challenges posed by the production of block diagrams and geological sections. Under his leadership the map collection in the Geography Department was curated to the highest standards, and was an asset not only to the University but to the academic and professional community throughout the country.

When the new building for Geography was being planned, Oakley worked hand in glove with Professor John Daniel on the plans, spending many hours of his own time on that exciting task. He also guided the development of the photographic section of what came to be known as GeoCart and, together with John Keulder, ensured that services of the highest quality were provided for the Rhodes community.

Generations of students remember Oakley West with the greatest affection: he was never too busy to talk to them, to counsel them and to help them with their studies. In many ways Oakley was a father figure. He was a gifted teacher as well as an outstanding cartographer and, when he was given the opportunity to present courses in his speciality, he did so with absolute confidence and enthusiasm.

In addition to his work within Rhodes University, Oakley worked tirelessly for his church. He was a member of Trinity Presbyterian church and did much to ensure that it was one of the most popular and respected places of worship in Grahamstown among Rhodes students and staff. Oakley and his wife, Shirley, were pillars of Trinity.

When I joined Rhodes as Professor of Geography and Head of Department I found Oakley absolutely supportive. I had the highest respect for his advice: he knew the strengths and weaknesses of the staff, the politics of the University, the students of the Department. He also knew where support, or otherwise, was likely to come from within southern Africa. He was a friend and I had implicit trust in him. His portion of the Department ran with the utmost harmony and he trained his staff in cartographic skills of the highest level.

Above all, Oakley West was a Christian and a gentleman: there is no higher praise that can be made of any man. To his widow, Shirley, and to his sons: Gerald, Roger and Stuart, I extend my deepest sympathies and those of my colleagues at Rhodes University. At the same time I rejoice, as I know his family does, that Oakley West has now passed to the life eternal in the company of his Maker.

Colin A. Lewis.