

HONORARY GRADUATE

Michael Conway O'Dowd

Michael Conway O'Dowd embodies all the attributes of which both town and gown can be proud. He is a man of intellect and compassion who has sought his career fulfilment in the free-enterprise system. His singular contribution to South Africa and all its peoples lies in his inspired and creative distribution of some of the fruits of the business world to a remarkable spectrum of social endeavours.

Born in Johannesburg in 1930, he was schooled at St John's College and came to Wits as a first-year student in Arts in 1947. When he graduated, he had left an indelible mark in this university's annals. In 1950 he obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree with a double first in his final year. Three years later he graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Laws *cum laude*, gaining 13 out of a possible 15 distinctions, and was the winner of the Society of Advocates' Prize. Ancillary to this illustrious academic performance was a period of office on the Students' Representative Council from 1948 to 1950. He served as Vice-President in 1949 to 1950. A few years later he was elected President of NUSAS.

From Wits he joined the Anglo American Corporation, where he has been ever since, rising through the ranks of trainee, assistant manager, manager and alternate director to a directorship in 1987. Today we seek to honour Michael O'Dowd, not so much for any of these positions but rather in his capacity as Chairman of the Anglo American and De Beers Group Chairman's Fund Educational Trust, a position he has held since 1974. This fund has been a catalyst, the support and the security for a wide range of innovative and far-reaching interventions in social upliftment. It has funded projects large and small in every corner of our country. People with initiative, vision, commitment and enthusiasm have been supported in activities as diverse as education, from pre-primary to tertiary; agriculture - household gardens to large co-operatives; income generation and self-help; and a full range of welfare work. The support has been for individuals, small groups and large organizations, including many of this country's universities. The drive and the vision behind the activities of the Chairman's Fund are Michael O'Dowd's. He has brought his unique intellect to bear on the problems of our country and has encouraged bold and even outrageous initiatives through his passion for education and social upliftment.

His commitment to these ideals is manifest in his numerous extra-curricular activities. Michael O'Dowd has shown particular interest in and concern for both secondary and tertiary education. He has served on the Council of Education, Witwatersrand; the 1961 Education Panel; the Boards of Governors of three schools - St Mary's, St Martin's and St John's (of the Council of which he is now the Chairman); the English Academy of Southern Africa; the Association of Private Schools; the De Lange Commission; the Free Market Foundation; the Human Sciences Research Council; the South African Council for Education; and the Institute of Directors. In these various organizations he has held or holds high office. He has had long service as a member of the Council of this university, also of the Councils of the Universities of the Western Cape and of Fort Hare. None of us who serve with him can ever be in doubt of the attention he pays to the kilograms of agenda papers he receives from our different institutions.

It is not only his attention to detail but also a deep concern for the correctness of the principles and the logic that mark his contributions to our deliberations. 'The vision is easy; the devil is in the detail.'

His understanding of the complexities of human society is unique and is backed by an insatiable appetite for new insights in politics, history and economics, particularly in their relationship to each other and to contemporary affairs. Michael O'Dowd has been described variously as 'a man of the most sensitive and exceptional mind', 'a quite formidable intellect', 'a person who can be relied upon to cut through the waffle', 'highly sensitive to problems which his employees may face', 'extremely good at developing young talent'.

It is important to be specific about how these attributes have nurtured initiatives in this university. A variety of departments and disciplines have been encouraged or enabled through the beneficence of the Chairman's Fund. Areas of support have ranged from medical research and improving hospital facilities to law, business, engineering, the arts and the social sciences. The enterprises have ranged from child-minding in townships to community health in rural areas. Start-up funding for the Wits Rural Facility epitomized his willingness to gamble with the unknown when those around him counselled caution.

Michael O'Dowd's close affinity with education is of course characteristic of a man who might with the slightest pressure at the right moment have entered academic life full-time. He has distinguished himself in public lectures and seminars, and indeed as a writer covering fields as diverse as economics, history, education and politics.

Anglo funding has always been backed by access to the wisdom, insights and personal support of Michael O'Dowd, both on the steering committees of the projects supported and at a personal level to the staff.

We shall not be the first university to honour Michael O'Dowd. He received an honorary degree from the University of Natal in 1991. We choose this occasion because, as he has within the past months stepped down from his position on Council, we can signal also our gratitude and appreciation for his distinguished period of service on that body, and also his membership of Senate as a representative of Council. The University takes great pleasure in conferring its highest distinction on Michael Conway O'Dowd, the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.