

## Mr Morris Langlo West AO

The degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) was conferred posthumously upon Morris Langlo West and accepted by Mrs Joyce West at the Arts ceremony held on 6 April 2000.

### Citation

Chancellor,

Today we honour Morris Langlo West, AO, Bachelor of Arts, University of Melbourne and honorary Doctor of Letters, University of Western Sydney.

When Morris West died on 9 October 1999 at the age of 83, he was at work on his last novel which he judged to be his best. His career as a writer began in 1945, and in those 54 years he published over 30 works.

He graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1937, and taught languages and mathematics in schools in Tasmania and New South Wales. He was a member of the Christian Brothers, but in 1939, before taking his final vows, he left the Brothers, and entered the AIF as a Lieutenant. He spent 4 years as a cipher officer in Darwin, and was briefly private secretary to W.M. (Billy) Hughes.

From 1944-45 he was publicity officer at a Melbourne radio station, and from 1945-54 was founder and managing director of Australia Radio Productions. West left Australia in 1955 to pursue a career as a writer. In Naples, he met Father Mario Borelli, and observed him working among the slum urchins. *Children of the Sun* (1957) which reflects that experience, and West's concern for the poor and the rejected, brought him to the attention of a wide audience.

In 1959, after 6 months as Vatican correspondent for the *Daily Mail*, he published *The Devil's Advocate* for which he won several prizes, including the Royal Society of Literature Heinemann Award. It was the first of many prizes and honours including, in 1978, election as a Fellow of the World Academy of Arts and Science and the Dag Hammarskjöld Institute Grand Collar of Merit. He was made an Officer in the Order of Australia in 1997.

Morris West's novels rapidly became best-sellers. He is a story-teller with a mission. His narrative art compels attention by its simplicity, its romantic interest, suspense, and its steady pace towards an often unexpected conclusion. But these attractions serve a serious purpose, which is to draw attention to social problems, political machinations and moral dilemmas. He had a talent for anticipating and seeking the meaning of major events. *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (1963) coincided with the papal elections; *The Ambassador* (1965) is an account of the politics of the Vietnam War; *Eminence* (1998) asks questions about what kind of Vatican and Pope is needed for the 21st century, and raises the delicate issues surrounding the tenure of the papacy.

His writing belies a view expressed by some of his critics that popularity is inconsistent with high seriousness. Underlying the story-telling power of his fiction was scholarship, wide experience of the world, reflection on the obligations of people to their fellows, and a passionate conviction of the need for reform within the Church. His success was to entertain his audience while leading them to serious thought.

As time went on, his deep concerns about what he saw as the growing gap between the Church and the needs of its people darkened his writing. But his devotion to his faith was sustained despite his anxieties about the spiritual welfare of the Church's community. The suffering, oppression and imprisonment of so many in South America, exemplified for him the need for the Church's intervention on behalf of all people. The message of *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, it has been said, is for the Church "to show its human and compassionate face, not hide it". In 1994, he drew attention to the fact that the Code of Canon Law declares that "in the community of the faithful, the supreme law is the welfare of souls".

In the autobiography *A View from the Ridge* (1996), he reviews his life at a point where he is in danger of leaving it, facing all its mysteries, conflicts, passions and convictions. His subtitle, "the testimony of a pilgrim", summarises a life devoted to learning on the road, witnessing, and interpreting for others.

His unfinished novel is based on the life of Giordano Bruno, 16th century scholar and priest, who was burned at the stake for heresy. Bruno's death was a tragedy brought about by men of faith persecuting one of their own spiritual community for expressing his beliefs. While he was working on this book, West wrote a short piece on language: "To maintain our dignity as human beings, we must continue to communicate, we must debate, discuss, disagree and debate again, because to all of us there comes a time when debate is no longer possible and we depart alone into a great silence." No great novelist departs into silence, least of all Morris West.