

# Michael de Lisle:

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BY MARK HENNING

Some pupils at St Martin's College or Waterkloof Preparatory School would have regarded Michael de Lisle, their Headmaster, as an austere, unemotional man with a military bearing who did not suffer fools gladly.

Others would have experienced a softer side to him – solicitous of their needs, erudite, faithful and honest. All would have noticed his rigorous self-discipline and passion for organisation and planning.

None would have known that even in his 91st year, privately he would remain the adventurous young boy who had learnt to love the flowers and mountains of the Cape.

## A gentleness of spirit and tenacity of purpose

The soldierly bearing was understandable. Having lost his father when he was 12, he attended Bishops Diocesan College in Cape Town, matriculating shortly before the outbreak of World War 2. Scholarships had enabled him to attend that school and he was driven to show that he was a worthy recipient, winning many awards. University beckoned, but war was declared and de Lisle had no doubt of his obligation. Captured, he was a prisoner of war in both North Africa and Italy. It is the duty of a soldier to try to escape, and this he did, surviving with the help of Italian villagers who sheltered him, although to do so was to put their lives at risk. The South African writer, Uys Krige, had had a similar experience. He wrote an essay, *Salt of the Earth*, to pay tribute to the peasants who had recognised common humanity as being as important as life itself.

When the war was over, De Lisle went to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar and became a teacher. For his pupils, says his son, Peter, life would not always have been easy or fun, but they would have learned to think deeply and to rise to challenges.

During the 1960s and '70s – difficult times for schools – my wife and I were invited to join regularly for dinner, the Heads of other independent schools for boys. These became very special occasions – formality disappeared and we were simply Michael and Marybeth (St Martin's), Anton and Ann (St Alban's), Jan and Rosalie (St John's) and Sheila and me. At these dinners, we learnt more of De Lisle – scholar, soldier, teacher, artist, poet, priest, husband and father. And, always at his side, Marybeth, with a gentleness of spirit and tenacity of purpose – beautifully described by their daughter, Daphne, at the funeral service.



Michael de Lisle

## Priesthood

Michael and Marybeth de Lisle retired to his beloved Cape Town where, as an ordained priest, he led parishes for 30 years. The impact he had in this venture was no less than it had been in church schools. John Gardener described him as being tough – physically and mentally, assertive and definite in his views. He was, however, too complex a character to pin down with labels. For his daughter, Helen, he was formidable, with a highly trained intellect, but with a passion to serve others. According to Daphne, he could be stubborn and impatient, but welcomed reassurance and acknowledgement. Gardener recalls the congregation singing the hymn *Trust and Obey* and then being told of De Lisle's unhappiness at the prominence given to these two virtues. For this priest, love and caring for others were more important. Gardener wrote a new version, which pleased him.

There is no space to write of his great contribution to the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC), an association of Headmasters and Headmistresses of independent schools and to the development of the role of governors. He is best captured in the title of Krige's essay *Salt of the Earth*. ❀