

Citation for Mary Burton, honorary graduand, Rhodes University, 2020

By Paul Maylam

Sixty-five years ago, in 1955, an organisation, mainly comprising middle-class white women, was formed to engage in various forms of non-violent anti-apartheid activity. This was the Black Sash – an organisation that Nelson Mandela once called ‘the conscience of white South Africa’. Fifty-five years ago, in 1965, a new member joined the ranks of the Black Sash – Mary Burton, who has remained associated with the organisation to this day.

She did not grow up in South Africa and so did not experience the racist indoctrination and socialisation that afflicted so many young whites during the apartheid era. Born in Argentina, attending schools in that country, Brazil and later Switzerland, in the process becoming multilingual, with a proficiency in Spanish, Portuguese, French, German and English.

Marriage to a South African, Geoff Burton, brought her to Cape Town in 1961 – the year after the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and other organisations, a time when white supremacy was entrenched and the apartheid system being tightened – all this a huge culture shock to 21-year-old Mary Burton, soon to be utterly dismayed by the complacency of whites and their ignorance of the desperate plight of black South Africans.

So began almost six decades of activism – starting out driving a bakkie to deliver soup to impoverished communities in the Cape Flats. Then came membership of the Black Sash and full involvement in its various activities – in particular protesting against repugnant apartheid legislation, addressing key issues affecting black South Africans and rendering advice to them.

Her first protest was in Kalk Bay after it had been proclaimed a white group area – joining about 100 other women, holding placards, demonstrating against a proclamation which was devastating for the local fishing community. The enforcement of residential segregation through the Group Areas Act would be a major area of involvement for Mary Burton and the Black Sash – regularly attending the public hearings of the group Areas Board, vigorously challenging its decisions – a relentless, but often thankless, endeavour. Then there were the iniquitous pass laws. Mary remembers going to the pass law courts ‘where people were processed through like a sausage machine – a case every two minutes: found guilty and endorsed out’, forced to leave an urban area and move to a life of misery in a resettlement area in an impoverished bantustan. Black Sash advice offices would offer guidance and support to those afflicted by the pass laws.

She recalls, too, visiting the migrant labour hostels in Langa – ‘they were terrible places’, she says. ‘Just terrible’ – the cramped quarters, often with whole families living there, contravening the awful apartheid law.

In the turbulent, violent 1980s she was joining protest marches – being among hundreds who in 1985 marched to Pollsmoor Prison where Mandela and other ANC leaders were incarcerated. Also attending the funerals of slain activists – she remembers in particular the funeral in Cradock of Matthew Goniwe, murdered by the apartheid security police in 1985 – this was ‘an absolutely galvanising moment’ for her and other Black Sash members who attended the funeral.

The colour and gender of Black Sash activists may have protected them against heavy repression from the apartheid security apparatus. But there were ordeals – Mary Burton herself arrested in 1985 after the march to Pollsmoor Prison. And they could find themselves caught between two stools, being criticised from the left for not being sufficiently radical while facing ongoing hostility from the government.

The story of Mary Burton’s life is one of constant involvement in a range of endeavours – finding time to complete a BA degree at UCT in the early 1980s; serving as president of the Black Sash from 1986 to 1990; appointed as the Western Cape electoral officer for the first democratic election in 1994.

Then came the nomination to serve as one of the seventeen members to sit on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – initially reluctant to accept the nomination, believing herself not to be tough enough for the task, only to be told by Albie Sachs that she had to accept the nomination. So accept she did, but would feel uncomfortable with the high salaries paid to commissioners, leading her to donate a chunk of her salary to the Black Sash and to a fund from which reparations would be paid to victims of apartheid.

For two years she listened to the harrowing testimonies of these victims, deeply unsettled by their terrible stories – so many of them – and thinking that each story did not really receive the attention it deserved. And later, realising that many had not had the chance at all to tell their stories, Mary initiated the Register of Reconciliation to give people that chance. In the same spirit she joined a group of citizens in 2000 to launch the ‘Home for All campaign’ which called on white South Africans to acknowledge the privileges that apartheid had accorded them, and to take some action to contribute towards a new society.

Today she is fully aware of South Africa’s need for government to be more efficient, honest and accountable, but she retains a positive belief in the potential of the country – ‘its resources’, she says, ‘are big enough for all of us to live peacefully within it. It is our task as South Africans to acknowledge this

reality and develop policies and practices...to ensure that these resources are equitably shared on the basis of fair opportunity...’.

Many honours have been bestowed on Mary Burton: the Order of Luthuli in silver, conferred by President Mbeki in 2003; the Order of the Disa, from the Western Cape government in 2004; the Reconciliation Award from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in the same year; a UCT honorary doctorate in 2011.

Today Rhodes is proud to honour Mary Burton. In her endeavours she has been guided by a sense of what she calls ‘an empathetic consciousness’, seeing this as an essential prerequisite for the long-term survival of humankind. It is with this consciousness that she herself has, for almost sixty years in South Africa, striven tirelessly and courageously for social justice, human rights and reconciliation.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Mary Burton the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.