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South Africans must rise
to defend the rights
they fought and died
for, says Siphosiso Pityana

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Farewell to hotelier like no other

David Rawdon said farewell to his staff after a bottle of his favourite sparkling wine. Then he quietly 'went upstairs', writes Tony Jackman

MATJIESFONTEIN seemed arrested in time last week as devotees arrived to mark the passing of hotelier David Rawdon. Yet there were few tears; rather, a sense of gentle celebration of a life lived full and long, of having achieved it all, leaving no room for regret.



PICTURE: WIKIMEDIA

GRANDEUR IN THE KAROO: The Lord Milner Hotel in Matjiesfontein, resurrected by redoubtable hotelier David Rawdon, who died last month.

Matjiesfontein always seems frozen in the late Victorian years, when the Scot James D Logan, the "Laird of Matjiesfontein", built it as a spa for wealthy Europeans.

Logan's time came and passed, and for many years Matjiesfontein was forgotten, then in the late 1960s a new "laird" arrived in the form of the hotelier Rawdon, and soon the village, having slumbered in decline since the 1930s, awoke to a new dawn.

It is a place like no other, and Rawdon was a hotelier like no other. It should be no surprise that Rawdon eventually settled at Matjiesfontein. Rawdon's in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands was and remains quaint and pretty, but it was only ever going to be the start of the David Rawdon story.

Lanzerac in Stellenbosch remains the quintessential winelands boutique hotel, but that was never made by Rawdon in his mould. The Marine in Hermanus, which like many other places was decorated by David's hand, still holds reminders of his taste and style.

But in Matjiesfontein he saw something he recognised. He saw what Logan before him had made, and he knew how to bring back its faded grandeur, and to make it the place once again that people would come from far and wide to see.

And we did, many times, and here we were once more, but now with Matjiesfontein's second laird gone.

Rawdon died there on Friday, August 13. "He would," as someone observed last week of the great practical joker, "go and die on Friday the 13th."

Late that afternoon, soon after 5pm, Rawdon had called John Theunissen to his cottage. John is now Mr Entertainer at Matjiesfontein, the man in waistcoat and dickybow who tinkles the piano in the Laird's Arms and guides visitors on the red London bus tour of the town that takes all of 10 minutes.

But when John first encountered his future employer, he was a bold strip of a lad who walked right up to Matjiesfontein's new owner, who in those days trotted around the village on his horse, and said with a broad grin that Rawdon came to love, "Can I look after your horse for you, sir?"

Some four decades later, their final conversation took place late that Friday afternoon in Rawdon's cottage near the river. He called John closer, hugged him, and said, "Big boy, I'm going upstairs. Keep your smile."

John Theunissen and other loyal colleagues have become part of the fabric of Rawdon's business, as much as they and their kin were part of the town long before the Midlands dentist's son had ever heard of the place. We guests may come and go, flitting into the village and out again, but these people are born to its earth, moulded by its crisp sunshine. The portents are good, though, for the business's future, with Rawdon's favoured nephew Jonathan Rawdon being the chosen one who will guide the village from now on.

Everyone has their David Rawdon story. One Matjiesfontein veteran, Sally Dalglish, reminisced over dinner last week about the man's 50th birthday party in 1974 when "we girls had to be flappers and he made us parade around the pole".

This with a flick of a hand towards the famous ornate pole at the centre of the dining room.

"My God, he could give a party," said Sally. "He was going around with a silver spoon putting caviare into everyone's mouth."

Rawdon's Matjiesfontein Christmas night dinners were legendary, with tatty decorations trimming the dining room, eccentric candleholders, and the entire staff parading in from the kitchen, snaking between the tables while singing, "We will make you fishers of men", with one holding aloft an enormous flaming Christmas pudding.

Rawdon was an inveterate practical joker, known to arrange sausages and potatoes on his dinner plate with nonetoo-subtle suggestion and then call a waitress over to clear his plate.



Eulogy: Prof. Benjamin Rawdon delivers a eulogy with a backdrop of a painting of David

PICTURE: TONY JACKMAN

Rawdon had been an old Matie, and one friend from his Stellenbosch University days, Turkey Robinson (Rawdon called him Kalkoen), was among those eulogising at last week's memorial service.

One day at Lanzerac, Robinson found Rawdon in uncharacteristically disconsolate mood.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Kalkoen, it's not gonna work," he said.

He'd been to the bank that morning, and the numbers were wrong.

"He said, 'If only someone could take a match to Lanzerac...' It had a thatch roof. I got the impression Dave was telling me to light that match."

Not inclined to do that, Turkey went to bed that night.

"In the middle of the night, Dave came to my room and shook me awake.

" 'Kalkoen!' he shouted, 'Don't do it!'"

What happened? Rawdon sold up, and went to Matjiesfontein, and we know the rest of it.

The last person the old man had spoken to that final Friday afternoon had been Raymond Crawley, whose 35 years with Rawdon he recalled emotionally during last Thursday's tribute in the town's pink chapel. Years ago, Rawdon had asked Raymond to "promise that you will look after me" when he got older. It was, said Raymond, "a joy" to do so.

Asking Raymond to wheel him into the sunlight on Friday, August 13, he turned to Raymond and repeated what he had said to John Theunissen. "I'm going upstairs."

Let David Duncan Rawdon, the second Laird of Matjiesfontein, have the last word.

Two nights before he died, one Matjiesfontein veteran told me, Rawdon sat in the bar and used a sword to sabrage his last bottle of Pongracz.

As the bottle neck soared to the ceiling, he declared: "This hotel is for my people."