“Of the making of books,” St John assures us, “there is no end”; of the makers of books, however, there is. Today we are gathered in this hallowed place, grieving that David Philip, that most beloved of book makers, will no longer delight us with his quick wisdom and his human warmth and his lively wit. The book that was David’s life is now closed. The final page has been turned. Before our eyes swims the sad word Finis. And we grieve.

And it is needful, it is right, it is good that we should grieve, for our loss is real. David’s death diminishes us all. We mourn today the passing of a truly great book-maker but also, and far more importantly, the death of a truly good man. As every good book enriches its readers, so David’s good life added meaning to ours.

Of course the many, many important and beautiful books which David published will still be giving pleasure and instruction for decades and even centuries to come, but this prospect of a bibliomortality is small comfort to those who have loved and revered the maker of the books himself.

David devoted his life to the making of good books, and his own life was one of the best of them all. This is no hollow assertion. The facts are verifiable and documented. Allow me to recount just a few of them: As a young man fresh down from Oxford David started in the book trade in Cape Town in 1950. Three years later, he joined Oxford University Press (SA) and – by no means incidentally! – pulled off the best deal of his life when he persuaded Marie to marry him and so started a blest partnership that lasted 55 years. He established OUP in Rhodesia, and then at the age of 35 he became the Editorial Manager at OUP in Cape Town.

David was interested primarily in publishing good books that were relevant in the South African context - social, political and cultural. At OUP, he gained great expertise in commissioning publications, book production and design; in book promotion and distribution; in fine typography and high quality printing. He also acquired the skills of establishing and maintaining sound relationships with creative writers, academic and other technical experts, booksellers, printers and journalists.

And he watched, with growing dismay, how the National Party government consolidated its control over every aspect of the physical and, particularly, the intellectual life of the country. To sustain the ideology of apartheid, it was necessary to prevent the transmission of ideas. But there could be no accommodation between censorship on one hand and morally responsible publishing on the other. The choice facing publishers was between confrontation and capitulation. While the larger companies all played it safe and made their money on school textbooks, the small oppositional publishers tried defiance, and paid the price of their boldness. The voices of many, particularly black writers and thinkers, were silenced - by banning, by exile, by death. In 1976 Nadine
Gordimer said "the lively and important group of black writers who burst into South African literature in the fifties and early sixties disappeared from it as if through a trap door."

Nurtured in the old Cape Liberal tradition, David and Marie refused to allow the expression of alternative views to be silenced. Believing in "the truth of the imagination," David cashed his pension and he and Marie launched David Philip Publishers, with the avowed intent to publish "Books That Matter for Southern Africa". It was an almost quixotically courageous venture. Yet in this, as in everything else, Marie was David's partner, not his Sancho Panza.

With so little founding capital, the start of the firm was extremely modest: David, Marie and two others comprised the entire staff. Their business premises were the family cottage in Claremont. Their editing desk was their bed. Their warehouse was their garage. When the firm's first co-publication from abroad arrived and the driver of the delivery vehicle called: 'Bring out your fork-lift truck,' they brought out their wheelbarrow. By themselves.

This set the pattern for the future functioning of the company. Call it "the personal touch", call it "DIY", sing "They Did It Their Way", but their system worked. More than that, against all predictions of failure, they achieved remarkable success in what they set out to do: to make books that made a difference. The Philips' personal integrity and their unwavering commitment to publishing excellence gained and retained the respect and admiration of their clients, their competitors and the intelligent reading public, even though the firm was never exactly awash with cash: for years they lived "from book to mouth". Where, for large publishers, the bottom line determined everything, DPP was guided by worthier considerations. David remarked in 1995, "we have had the freedom to take risks and to be bold – and even eccentric – where we believed the situation demanded it; the freedom from cumbersome committees; the freedom to follow our own publishing instincts – to back a new talent or an original line of thought that we believed in."

His remark neatly encapsulates much of what characterised DPP: risk, boldness, eccentricity, flexibility, instinct, talent, originality, faith – terms virtually absent from the vocabulary of business enterprises anywhere, but key words in determining the success of DPP.

After the Soweto uprising on 16 June 1976, Sipho Sepamla's poetry collection The Soweto I Love was banned. David issued a press statement, saying: "Whether we like what we hear or not, we should at least be able to know how the people of Soweto have responded to these events. Here is the articulate voice of an internationally recognised poet telling us what it is like in Soweto - and the authorities will not let us hear him. Do we realise what is happening to us?" Still, David spoke of his task as a "privilege: "For us, publishing has been a people business." "And," said Marie,"it was fun!"

It was not all fun. They were continually harrassed by the security police. Their books were confiscated, their mail was tampered with, their home telephone number was tapped, their daughter was detained. None of their pain and distress could shake their conviction that the censorship laws and publishing restrictions had to be opposed as fiercely as possible. Gus Ferguson put it explicitly: "DPP carried the flag of liberal democracy in a climate of political barbarism."

And on the cusp of the new South Africa David made no bones about proclaiming again: "The role of an oppositional publisher doesn't disappear just because the government changes. Publishers of
integrity are, or ought to be, endemically independent, always prepared to give voice to criticism of the establishment, always the supporters of freedom and creativity, holding open the doors for discussion and debate."

Another, though less predictable, benefit inherent in the DPP ethos was the Philips’ genuine care for "their" writers. "For us," Marie said, "the best part of publishing has been the camaraderie with the authors whom the crises and excitement of these years have brought into our lives."

David and Marie have been surrounded by books and book people for 50 years and more, and almost all of that time it was in this city, so it is no surprise that so many of the great and the good from the world of books should be here – gathered in shared grief, yes, but oh so proud to have been associated, however marginally, with David and Marie and the noble enterprise that was DPP. Poets, playwrights and prose writers; publishers, booksellers, editors and printers; – and us common-and-garden readers, as well – mourn together, but in our mourning we rejoice in the incalculable privilege and blessing that has been ours to have known David Philip.

Was his life, then, a chap-book, an exemplar of what a Christian gentleman’s life should be? David would have demurred; but then the book-maker is not always the best arbiter of his work. We who have felt his love, who have witnessed his courage, who have known his enthusiasms and shared his passions, we may pass a kindlier judgement than he himself might have done.

At the end of every good book, when the story has run its course and we no longer have that sense of excited anticipation that kept us turning the pages, we look up with regret, wondering: “What next?” However dearly we may have wished it, the Author has not penned a sequel.

So now it is time for us to lay this book aside. As we do so, with great tenderness, we look forward to that great day when all books will be opened and we shall be able to read this one once more. And we shall see David Philip’s name inscribed in the Book of Life, and every letter will be in gold.

Amen.