

**100 Years Old and Still Making History:  
The Centenary of the Department of Historical Studies at  
the University of Cape Town**

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**Introduction**

Observing institutional birthdays is not something academic historians readily undertake nowadays – their training makes them habitually wary of the constructed nature of such events and of the self-preening which usually accompanies them. All too often such occasions become part of a celebration of an invented tradition of origins, in which founders' days are 'seized on with alacrity for displays of pageantry, where, with high-ranking officials ever present, the narrative inevitably extol[s] ... supposed progress and virtues'.<sup>1</sup>

However, commemorating a centenary is perhaps in a different category, for doing so has long roots in Western culture, dating back to the Biblical Jubilee, the Roman Catholic Church's first Holy Year in 1300 and the veneration of the decimal system by the European Enlightenment. This makes marking a centenary seem quite natural, so easing the discomfort of historians with such an occasion. Moreover, when, as in the case of the centenary of the foundation of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) chair of history in 2003, the original event also signalled the inception of history as a university discipline in its own right in sub-Saharan Africa, the inducement to commemorate this step is difficult to resist. Added to this, 100 years is a meaningful timespan for reflecting on an institution, being long enough for a degree of historical perspective but short enough to permit the voices of some of the actors to be clearly heard too, perhaps once and – thanks to the tape recorder and video camera – forever. In a centenary year, therefore, both a microscope and telescope can be employed to good effect.

It was with such ideas in mind that in 2002 UCT's Department of Historical Studies contemplated its coming centenary and decided not to let it pass unnoticed.

1. L. Witz, *Apartheid's Festival Contesting South Africa's National Pasts* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2003), 12.

### The UCT History Department in Historical Perspective: Foundation

The Department had been founded at UCT's pre-1918 predecessor, the South African College, when its first professor of history, the 27-year old Scot, John Edgar, was appointed in February 1903. His appointment came as the culmination of a four-year struggle by the College's professor of English and philosophy, Henry Fremantle, to have such a chair created. His motives and those of the professors who opposed his initiative shed a revealing light on the intellectual and educational history of the Cape Colony at the beginning of the twentieth century and make it necessary to modify any pat ideas about the automatic acceptance there of the latest thinking from Britain. As Ivor Goodson has perceptively pointed out, curricula and their contents are 'the products of previous and ongoing struggles, within and between subject communities.'<sup>2</sup>

As a Victorian liberal, newly arrived from England, Fremantle was convinced that a 'scientific' knowledge of each other's history was the best antidote to the Boer-British enmity then engulfing South Africa. '[T]he teaching of history can alone shake the confidence in narrow and untrue theories which is so powerful for evil in this country', he proclaimed with assurance.<sup>3</sup> To succeed, a post-war South Africa had to be built on a stable foundation, free of Boer-British racial animosity. A professor of history's influence, he declared, would therefore be

one which it would be most desirable to have exerted as soon as possible, and by all means before the people of South Africa begin to settle down after the close of the present war ... Whether we are Republicans or not, we can hardly fail to realise that a popular Republicanism founded on ignorance both of South Africa and of general history is likely to be a rickety and ruinous structure which no nation can inhabit with security.<sup>4</sup>

However, such a vision was not shared by many of his fellow professors who still saw history in terms reminiscent of mid nineteenth-century English academic thinking, as a lightweight subject lacking academic respectability or rigour, an adjunct to literature, constituting 'no special or definitive study, but ... part of that general mass of things, which every gentleman should know'.<sup>5</sup> After his proposal had encountered yet another rebuff along these lines from his colleagues in the College Senate, an exasperated Fremantle noted in his diary, 'A foolish Senate

2. I.F. Goodson and S.J. Ball, *Defining the Curriculum Histories and Ethnographies* (London, 1984), 3.
3. 'Study of History in South Africa', *South Africa*, 53, 681 (11 Jan. 1902), 94.
4. H.E. Fremantle, 'The Prince of Wales Professorship of History at the South African College', *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, 13, 26 (Apr. 1902), 9-10.
5. The description is that of the popular nineteenth-century English historian, J.R. Green, cited in J.P. Kenyon, *The History Men The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (London, 1983), 165.

meeting ... certainly I have one or two prize geese among my colleagues; what a time they can keep up their cackling!<sup>6</sup>

To outflank them, Fremantle shrewdly sought backing for his scheme outside the ranks of academe, from strongly Anglophile local politicians, the press, mining magnates and the biggest prize of all, the heir to the British throne, the Prince of Wales, who agreed to let his name be attached to the intended chair. Building on this, early in 1902 Fremantle launched a high-profile appeal in England for funds to endow the chair – the South African College Senate had vetoed any such fundraising in South Africa. This appeal met with some success and made his colleagues realise that they could no longer be seen to oppose such an eye-catching initiative, which had a royal endorsement to boot. Accordingly, they put the chair of history high on the College's own list of urgent needs when they launched the South African College Development Scheme Appeal later that year, a strategy which quickly elicited £10 000 from a College old boy and former De Beers governor, Frederick Philipson Stow. Literally, with the stroke of his pen, the balance required to endow the chair was made good, and the Prince of Wales<sup>7</sup> chair of history was advertised and filled early in 1903 by John Edgar.

With South Africa's first professor of history thus in position at the South African College – and his appointment was soon followed by that of a second history professor, at Victoria College in Stellenbosch in 1904 – it became easier for Fremantle to press the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH) (which, as the southern Africa's only university until 1918, still laid down the curriculum for all university colleges in the sub-continent) to recognise history as an autonomous university subject. This he and the two history professors accomplished in 1906, with the former proclaiming, 'I would ... treat the knowledge of history as Plato treated knowledge of geometry: "Let no man leave without a knowledge of geometry." Without are dogs & sorcerers ...'.<sup>8</sup>

Though he was not successful in his bid to go further than this and have history accepted by the UCGH as a compulsory subject for its BA (Literature) degree, having it accepted by the UCGH as a university discipline in its own right meant that henceforth it became a standard part of the university curriculum in South Africa as a whole. Thus, when new university colleges were subsequently set up under the UCGH's aegis, history departments were a normal component of their academic structures.

Accordingly, the 15 years after 1906 were years in which history departments proliferated in South Africa: at the Transvaal University College in 1909, at

6. Cape Archives Repository, Cape Town, A 608 (Fremantle Collection), vol. 2, entry for 12 Nov. 1901.
7. In 1913, the chair's title was altered to the King George V Chair of History, to accord with the Prince's new status (and title) after his elevation to the British throne in May 1910.
8. National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSC 15 (Merriman Collection), Box 23, letter 21, H.E.S. Fremantle to J.X. Merriman, 23 Jan. 1903.

Rhodes University College in 1911, at Natal University College in 1916, at the South African School of Mines and Technology in 1917, at Grey University College in 1918 and at Potchefstroom University College in 1921. A clutch of South African history department centenaries therefore lies ahead in the coming years. Fremantle's hope that the foundation of a chair of history at the South African College 'would ... create a powerful and permanent stimulus to the study of history throughout South Africa'<sup>9</sup> was indeed fulfilled.

### Teachings

As for the pioneering South African College history department, which became entirely independent of the UCGH's syllabuses in 1918 when the College gained full university status as the University of Cape Town (UCT), it became a seedbed in which South African history in English was nurtured into an academic discipline in its own right, particularly by Edgar's successor from 1911, Eric Walker.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Edgar was of the opinion that the 'history of South Africa taken by itself is not perhaps a very educative study ... But fortunately for herself South Africa ... has been drawn into the great central loom of European policy',<sup>11</sup> Walker came to conceive of South Africa's history as subsisting in its own right, the product of the interplay of 'Western civilisation, tribal Africa and, to a less degree, theocratic Asia'.<sup>12</sup>

To this conception he gave very real substance both as a teacher and as an author. As soon as his department was able to determine its own syllabus in 1918, he allocated 25 per cent of the undergraduate syllabus to South African history, while in the following two decades his prolific output of books and articles on South African history<sup>13</sup> bore written testimony to this conviction.

South African history aside, the department's teaching in the twentieth century dutifully followed – with a time-lag – in the footsteps of universities in Britain and, to a lesser extent in Europe and the USA, with regard to the kind of history taught. Thus, until the 1960s, political and constitutional history dominated its teaching, with economic history and the history of high culture taught in

9. 'Study of History in South Africa', *South Africa*, 53, 681 (11 Jan. 1902), 94.

10. For the history of the department until mid-century, see H. Phillips, *The University of Cape Town 1918-1948 The Formative Years* (Cape Town, 1993), 32-3, 275-6; C.C. Saunders, 'History at the University of Cape Town: The First Half-Century', *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 57, 3 (June 2003), 129-37.

11. J. Edgar, *The Expansion of Europe During Five Centuries. With Special Reference to South Africa ... Part I. For the Junior Certificate* (Cape Town, Pretoria, Durban and Pietermaritzburg, 1910), preface.

12. E.A. Walker, *A History of South Africa* (London, 1928), vi.

13. For details of these, see C.C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past Major Historians on Race and Class* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1988), 112-15; K. Smith, *The Changing Past Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Johannesburg, 1988), 121-31.

separate departments. In all of these the history of Europe loomed very large in providing the content.

Very tentatively – and not without opposition from staff with a more traditional outlook on academic history – these foci began to expand gradually from the 1960s. Not only was this a reflection of the emergence of new, broader ways of conceiving of the past among academic historians in the English-speaking world, but it also signalled a dawning awareness of the importance of understanding the history of Africa and Africans, against the background of the gathering winds of change in the continent in general and of Sharpeville in particular.

Consequently, in 1964, Walker's successor-but-two, Eric Axelson, a specialist on the Portuguese in Africa, introduced the first university course in South Africa on African history, an innovation creatively extended in the 1970s and 1980s by Robin Hallett's dynamic teaching, which put particular emphasis on indigenous agency. Courses on urban history, slavery, social history, oral history and the history of modern revolutions were developed against the backdrop of a South Africa in acute social and political turmoil and the Marxist challenge to liberal historiography; South African history was re-conceived to give more weight to the experience of the underclasses whose history was ignored by most textbooks of the time; and even the department's venerable 'Outline of the History of Western Civilization' first-year course – introduced by Walker in 1923 and later dubbed 'From Adam to Adolf' by generations of students – began to undergo a gradual change. In 1982 its traditional, exclusively Eurocentric focus was slightly widened to 'Europe in World History', and a decade later to 'The Making of the Modern World', an innovative course on the making of the Atlantic World of Europe, the Americas and West Africa.

From the mid 1980s, a combination of the growing influence of a new generation of staff in the department, a more flexible academic framework at UCT, the impact of changing intellectual trends in Europe and the USA and the ongoing revolt against apartheid in the country-at-large, accelerated the changes of the previous decade. Tellingly, the three professorial inaugural lectures delivered between 1977 and 1987 all focussed on practising history in a time of crisis, 'where', as Basil le Cordeur put it in 1986, 'the past seems to bear down so relentlessly upon the present'.<sup>14</sup> To Colin Webb, the King George V Professor from 1976-1982, an appropriate response to the tumultuous environment of the time was a department 'whose work on the past is quickened by its responsiveness to the present',<sup>15</sup> while ten years later Colin Bundy prefaced his inaugural lecture on 'History, Revolution, and South Africa' with the standpoint that 'it would be

14. B.A. le Cordeur, *The Power of History UCT Inaugural Lecture, 6 August 1986* (Cape Town, 1986), 1.

15. C. de B. Webb, *History in a Time of Crisis UCT Inaugural Lecture, 1 September 1977* (Cape Town, 1978), 10.

difficult, not to say derelict, to present an inaugural lecture which failed in some manner to address contemporary issues from the historian's vantage point'.<sup>16</sup>

Courses thus proliferated in a host of new fields which spoke directly or indirectly to the past in the present: the history of work, cultural history, women's history, contemporary history, public history, film and history, medical history and environmental history, all of which offered yet wider visions of what constituted history. To these the incorporation of the Departments of Economic History in 1992 and of History of Art in 2000 added two further disciplinary dimensions to the department's range of teaching. To recognise the latter's inclusion, in 2000 the Department of History was renamed the Department of Historical Studies, an outward – and perhaps a postmodern – sign of one of the department's hallmarks in recent decades, adaptability and a willingness – some felt an overwillingness – to innovate.

### **Teachers, Teaching and the Taught**

The nearly 50 historians on the permanent staff who taught these courses in the department during the century from 1903 reflected the dominant racial and gender patterns of the wider South African academy in the twentieth century. Almost 75 per cent were men – until the mid 1980s exclusively white and today still predominantly so – while those women who were appointed usually filled middle and more junior positions. No woman has yet reached the rank of full professor in the department, though in 1962 the King George V Chair was offered to the long-serving Jean van der Poel, but she turned it down.

An Anglicised Afrikaner, Van der Poel was one of the very few Afrikaners to serve on the staff. Apart from a handful of Oxbridge-trained Englishmen, the overwhelming majority have been English-speaking South Africans, nearly 50 per cent of these graduates of UCT, with most of the rest being products of the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Rhodes and Natal, whose history departments were similar in composition and liberal ethos to UCT's. However, a number of these South African appointees had gone on to do postgraduate degrees in Britain or North America before joining UCT. The basis of how these teachers taught remained little changed in 100 years.

The formal academic lecture and the essay were the staples of undergraduate teaching from the start, but from the 1940s they were complemented by small-group tutorials which became a distinctive hallmark of history teaching at UCT. This intensive, 'at-the-coalface' brand of teaching consistently gained approval from students over the years and was one of the reasons why, since 1992, members

16. C. Bundy, *History, Revolution, and South Africa* UCT Inaugural Lecture, 17 June 1987 (Cape Town, 1987), 2.

of the department won eight UCT Distinguished Teacher Awards, a record among UCT departments.

The students at the receiving end of this teaching remained socially uniform for much of the department's first century, becoming increasingly diverse only towards the end of the period, both racially and career-wise. Until the 1980s the bulk of the 4000+ students who majored in history were the children of middle-class whites, who went on to become high-school teachers of history, underlining the significant multiplier effect well beyond the department of what was taught there and how it was taught. From the 1980s, as racially restrictive, apartheid-decreed admission policies at UCT eased, they were joined by a growing number of Coloured and African students with similar career aspirations. However, with the faltering of history as a school subject from the 1990s, the career paths pursued by the reduced number of history graduates expanded to include film-making, the heritage and tourist industries and broadcasting. What the effect of the exposure to history at UCT has been on the tens of thousands of students who took just one or two courses in the department on their respective ways to other careers (a category which has grown exponentially since UCT's academic restructuring in 1999) can only be surmised.

### **Taking History beyond the Lecture Room**

From the 1960s the department strove hard to extend the public understanding of the past, in keeping with the fresh notions of history crystallising within its more formal syllabi. Historians like Leonard Thompson, Rodney Davenport, Eric Axelson, Robin Hallett and Colin Bundy used the medium of extramural lectures and UCT's Summer School to very good effect to do so, while a series of workshops on the history of Cape Town between 1978 and 1993, as urban revolt swept through the country, exposed large and enthusiastic audiences to novel ways of seeing the history of the city and all its residents. Complemented by historical walks around vanishing District Six, Cape Town's original waterfront, Observatory, Woodstock and Maitland, these popular workshops opened the eyes of many Capetonians to the presence of a rich and diverse history in their own backyard, away from the main tourist sites, and convinced them of the validity of an all-embracing urban history as a subject for serious academic study.

The establishment of the Western Cape Oral History Project (expanded in 2001 into the Centre for Popular Memory), an initiative spearheaded by Colin Bundy in 1984, was another bid by the department, amidst the intensifying struggle against apartheid, to take history beyond the classroom and give voice to those whose histories had been excluded from mainstream accounts of the past. *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town* (2001), edited by the Centre's director, Sean Field, was a first fruit of this project in book form.

Probably the way in which the department contributed most to influencing the public's ideas about the South African past has been by forming a congenial intellectual and social environment in which research, writing and film-making by staff and senior students have been able to take place.

In some cases such work interacted very fruitfully with teaching in the department, providing rich cross-pollination between teaching and research. Thus, Eric Walker's pioneering one-volume *History of South Africa* (1st edition, 1928) bore the marks of parts having been trialled as undergraduate lectures, while Leonard Thompson's *The Unification of South Africa* (1960) expressly acknowledged the benefit he drew from teaching an Honours course on this topic while writing this book. In similar fashion, the two-volume social history of Cape Town by Vivian Bickford-Smith, Nigel Worden and Elizabeth van Heyningen, *Cape Town – The Making of a City* (1998) and *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century* (1999), drew extensively upon insights from courses in the department on urban history and South African history, while Christopher Saunders' analyses of South African historiography, most notably *The Making of the South African Past* (1988), echoed his teaching in this field.

Other books first took form as theses for a degree in the department, for instance, Rodney Davenport's *The Afrikaner Bond* (1966), Steve Saker's *The South African Flag Controversy* (1980), Brigitte Lau's *Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner's Time* (1987), Mohamed Adhikari's '*Let Us Live for Our Children*': *The Teachers' League of South Africa* (1993), Milton Shain's *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (1994), Jane Carruthers's *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (1995) and Anne Mager's *Gender and the Making of a South African Bantustan* (1999).

A third category of books has been the product of international conferences held under the auspices of the department – Nigel Worden's *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Cape Colony* (1994) and Howard Phillips's *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19: New Perspectives* (2003) exemplify publications which emerged in this way, and they will be joined by Richard Mendelsohn and Vivian Bickford-Smith's *Film and History in Africa*, which is based on a conference held at UCT in 2002.

Indeed, the latter conference marked a highpoint in the department's burgeoning involvement in the field of teaching film and history, in which it was the pioneer among South Africa's universities. As early as 1992 it had begun to get students to 'lock horns with this seductive medium',<sup>17</sup> and soon thereafter senior students began making historical documentaries as part of their degree

17. V. Bickford-Smith, "“Oh Dear, That Viking Is Wearing a Gold Wristwatch!” How Should Historians Engage with Feature Films?" (Unpublished UCT Inaugural Lecture, 23 July 2003), 1.

requirements, an initiative rare in any history department in the world and unique in South Africa.

In its first century, therefore, history teaching at UCT clearly touched many minds directly and indirectly, both on campus and off, and made often significant contributions to shaping varied visions of South Africa's past. At times the extent of these contributions was quite limited, being blinkered by narrow and hidebound perceptions of history in general and South African history in particular; but at other times it has been notably progressive, creative, innovative and forward-looking.

### **The Centenary Colloquium**

It was particularly with the latter aspect in mind that the department finally decided to mark the occasion of its centenary in 2003 by holding a colloquium on 'The Future of the Past in Africa: Teaching and Writing History in Africa in the 21st Century'. By looking both back and forward it hoped to link debates on historical work done and historical work to be done in a fresh and stimulating manner. Ideally, the UCT history centenary would be a rare moment when an array of historians of Africa would stand back from their daily academic tasks and exchange ideas with each other on what they had been about, were about and would be about. As the organiser put it only half in jest at the opening session: 'The colloquium is based on the premise that there is only one thing we historians enjoy doing as much as research and writing, and that is talking about our research and writing!'

The colloquium consisted of ten sessions, nine focussing on one field of history each in which UCT's Historical Studies Department had specialised during its existence, and the tenth on reflecting on what had been said in all the sessions preceding it. Reports of the discussion in each of these form the contents of the ten reports which follow this introductory overview, while two photographs illustrate the two historical field trips which were also, characteristically for the UCT department, part of the occasion.

Overall, the colloquium brought together some 45 historians of Africa (with links to UCT) from South Africa, Botswana, Great Britain, the USA, Switzerland and Belgium, and five visitors from Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and Mauritius. The predominance of South Africanists among the former meant that 'tunnel vision South African style' was a common feature of the discussions. Between 17 and 20 August 2003, they immersed themselves in reflecting collectively on their craft and its future in Africa. From discussion in the nine sessions an overarching paradox became clear, that, while at universities and schools in many parts of Africa history is under siege, at a popular level it is thriving, especially when packaged as heritage. Consequently, a recurring question in many sessions was: 'What is the appropriate role of academic historians vis-à-vis popular representations of the past?' Answers spanned a range of positions, from the standpoint that



‘In the footsteps of history’

Professor Carmel Schrire of the Department of Anthropology at Rutgers University (back to camera) explains to a party of colloquium historians how the oldest recorded human footprint came to be made at a spot just behind them on Langebaan Lagoon. The historians in the photograph are (from left to right): Ms Claudia Gastrow (president of the UCT Students’ Historical Society) and Professors Neil Parsons (University of Botswana), Robert Addo-Fening (University of Ghana), Toyin Falola (University of Texas) and Richard Mendelsohn (UCT).



‘Unearthing the past’

A group of colloquium historians being addressed at the Prestwich Place burial ground by Dr Antonia Malan of the Historical Archaeology Research Group at UCT. The site is thought to have been used from the mid-eighteenth century to circa 1818 for the burial of Cape Town’s underclasses, including perhaps slaves.

academic historians should participate wholeheartedly in popular history as public intellectuals, to that they ought to adopt a position of critical engagement, to that they should put as much distance as possible between themselves and such portrayals of the past.

For many UCT history students who attended the sessions, the open discussions involving a number of historians whose names they knew through print were an eye-opener and stimulus to their own mini-debates. In this respect the colloquium certainly spoke directly to some future practitioners of the profession. At shorter range, there were also those students who were heard to ask if there would be questions on these topics in the upcoming examinations!

The participation of five historians from Africa north of the Limpopo – the original wish to invite ten had had to yield to a limited budget – was of enormous value to the colloquium, bringing as it did a wider, comparative dimension to the discussions of the characteristically insular South Africanists who predominated among the participants. This emphasised one of the most pressing needs for the future of the profession in Africa, that structures are needed to enable its historians across the continent to meet with each other regularly on African soil.

Thanks to the exertions of UCT's Public Relations Department the colloquium was well covered in the press and radio too. The highlight of the latter was that the peak-time 'After Eight Debate' on the national English-language radio channel, SAFM, was entirely given over one morning during the colloquium to a discussion of what history should be taught in schools in Africa, featuring two participants in the colloquium, Professor Toyin Falola of the University of Texas and Associate Professor Rob Sieborger of the School of Education at UCT. As one of those who participated in the programme was the History Adviser to the Minister of Education, it became clear that this programme was also listened to in influential educational circles.

To sum up, the colloquium fostered inter-and intra-continental discussion about the past, present and future practice of history in Africa, in an environment most congenial to the exchange of ideas by an array of historians who do not usually have a chance to discuss such topics formally in academic fora. With characteristic Attic wit, the Nigerian historian now at the University of Texas, Toyin Falola, summed up many participants' opinions of the once-in-a-century colloquium when he declared during the final session, 'If this is how you mark your first centenary, count me in for your second!'