

Conference report

Know the past, anticipate the future: Observations on the National Department of Education and the South African History Project's conference, Rondebosch, 2-5 October 2002

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Contrary to the usual way of approaching conferences of this nature, historians as well as subject advisors and professionals from several other fields, had to organise themselves within a matter of days to be able to join in or/and officially participate in the South African History Project (SAHP) conference held in Rondebosch from 2-5 October 2002. The Ministry of Education and numerous parliamentarians co-operated in presenting the event. Some who attended the conference were fortunate to be financially supported whilst others had to rely on the charity of their respective institutions or societies to assist, whereas others simply were not able to make it owing to a lack of funding or other obligations. Approximately 210 participants attended the conference. Whatever the logistical scenario of each participant or absentee, the conference, superbly organised by the Company Conxtions, was otherwise held in style and in essence a continuation of the 2001 Conference by the Ministry of Education, significantly entitled: 'Saamtrek, values, education and democracy in the 21st Century'.

From the 2001 conference a compiled publication, under the editorial supervision of the Minister of Education himself, Prof. Kadar Asmal, and the Executive Director of the Human Sciences Research Council, Mr. Wilmot

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James entitled *Spirit of the Nation*, was launched during the SAHP conference of 2002. A CD titled 'Celebrating our Heritage', that mainly focuses on the South African constitutional values, history and creativity, was handed out to each participant. Though the afore-mentioned publication and CD-content will not be the focus of discussion in this report, historians are strongly advised to obtain a copy, as a number of historical related issues are debated that should all should be taken cognisance of. The focus will rather be to provide a report and to add some personal impressions for especially those who were not able to attend. The report also might serve as a platform for further informed participation by historians and history educators, and even be dealt with in conferences organised by History Societies/Associations in South Africa.

The SAHP- Conference program, 2-5 October

The conference kicked off on Wednesday evening 2 October with an official opening. Conference goers joined to have an outstanding dinner. The keynote speaker was Mr. Trevor Manuel (Minister of Finance). The formal conference proceedings started on 3 October at the Diocesan College, Rondebosch. Prof. Asmal opened the conference. He spoke on the theme of the conference entitled "History, Memory & Human Progress". Then followed an introductory note on 'Whose history, whose memory', delivered by Dr. Shamill Jeppe (UCT) Three respondents followed, namely prof. Bankole Omotso (US), Joan Hambidge (UCT) and Dr. Neville Alexander (UCT). It was an effective way of structuring the session. The same pattern was followed for the rest of the conference. Things went well. There was discipline and people were punctual. All participants, panelists and chairperson's followed the rules.

Jeppe focused in his paper on South Africa in Africa and the history of Africa, together with its rich heritage. This, he explained, was conducive to the teaching of global history from an Africa perspective. On Jeppe's suggestions, Neville Alexander remarked that: 'to choose to teach Africa is an ideological one, in order to build a non-racial South Africa. The process of the African Renaissance is a process of building a South African conscience'. Hambidge added that Africans should learn to speak the voices of the continent and Bankole Omotoso accentuated the importance of defining values within the education of history.

Other themes addressed during conference included:

- *The National Curriculum Statement for History* with Dr. Linda Chisholm (HSRC).
- *African Literature and African History* with the renowned, formerly exiled, Prof. Es'kia Mphahlele as keynote speaker.
- *Genetic research and African History*, mainly presented by staff of the

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University of the Witwatersrand's Human Genomic Diversity and Disease Research Unit. Dr. Himla Soodyall was the keynote speaker.

- *Heritage and African history* with Dr. Janette Deacon from the South African Heritage Resources Agency.
- *Where are our historians?*, chaired by Professor Paul Maylam.
- *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as contemporary history*, presented by Professor André du Toit of the University of Cape Town.
- *History textbooks in the classroom* was chaired by Professor Brian O'Connell of the University of the Western Cape.
- *The teaching of Heritage using museums*, chaired by Mr. Khwezi Kamumlwana of the Nelson Mandela Museum.
- *The practice of History*, with Mrs. Jacqui Dean of the University of Leeds as keynote speaker.
- *Creative teaching and the practice of history* (in using photographs; artifacts; oral history and other audio-visuals) as well as good assessment practice with mainly teachers as presenters exchanging their ideas and experience.
- *History of contemporary music*, presented by Mr. Randall Abrahams of SABC Radio.

Obviously it is always disappointing to not be able to attend all sessions. It was however simply impossible as a result of the parallel sessions that were the order of the day. It is equally disappointing if respondents do not present at least some of their thinking and research on paper. It is hoped the papers of the conference will be published in 2003 as a follow-up on the 2002 publication.

Linda Chisholm mainly discussed the process that resulted in the development of the General Education and Training phase. Peter Kallaway, as one of the respondents, warned against the possible lack of sufficient background on what is actually required for teachers to be able to accomplish by the new system, if they can in fact do it and whether the system also takes into consideration what the teachers already know. Another respondent, David Kgopa, pointed out that some provincial officers at times encountered problems in [providing support to historians. Questions like: 'how do we approach the use of oral history?' or 'how do we make local history local in the classroom?' are still being asked. From the discussion it was clear that educators of history teachers should also be more involved in future.

In the split panel sessions the value of African literature and African history

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were discussed. Particular attention was given to the role of heritage in African history.

Himla Soodyall's paper on Genetic research and African history was history from an unfamiliar angle, but very informative. Soodyal's major proposal was that genetic data should be considered as another 'tool' in the study of history. Genetic approaches provide evidence that can be of value to anthropologists. It can also provide information on the evolution theory.

The use of history textbooks in the classroom gave rise to interesting discussions. Themes were addressed from the perspectives of the writers, the Education Department and the publishers. We can expect to have more books on the market once the FET-process is implemented. Mr. Kader Asmal also promised the audience that there will be a textbook for the grade 12 at the time the FET-phase is implemented on that grade.

Jaqui Dean of the School of Education of the University of Leeds, in a short span of time, tried to inform history educators more on the practice of history. From the response by the audience it was clear that many history educators still grappled with methodological and pedagogical issues that they felt should be addressed in workshops in future.

A multi-disciplinary conference effort in history

Though this conference was part of a bigger process and program to address pivotal issues in the future of history in education, the conference also marked a substantial shift of focus towards history by the inclusion of historical-related thoughts and academic practice of other disciplines in South Africa - at least on conference level, than was ever experienced at any time before. From the approximately 58 key speakers and respondents no less than 18 were from disciplines, other than History and Educationists in their variety of professions. Only 9 of the 11 recognised historians, as part of the 58 speakers, stepped the podium during the conference at some stage with professionals in, among other, in the fields of Archaeology, Anthropology, heritage and museums that also participated and were well accommodated in the conference program.

Against the background mentioned above it is then only ironical that a session was devoted to the theme 'where are our historians?'. After discussing this topic it was decided that each and all who deals with the past, either in writing, preserving or in a lecture situation of some kind, could be labelled as historians. On a more academic note the need for the training of historians to fill the variety of professions available was accentuated, and which the Minister of Education promised to address in future by granting more bursaries to learners who wishes for a training in History. Cognisance also was given to the fact that history

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departments at most tertiary institutions in South Africa experienced a substantial growth in student numbers because of their offering of more innovatively developed courses to serve community and the market.

But, in essence, the inclusion of expertise from the fields of e.g. Drama, Languages, Marketing, Political Science, Genomic Studies, Tourism, Civil Education and Music into a program for history educators, is interesting but not all that easy to apply. For example, the plenary session on ‘The TRC as contemporary history’, presented by political scientists, raised eyebrows. Firstly because the accusation was made that historians did not participate in the actual Truth and Reconciliation Process – to which historians were quick to respond by reminding the plenary panel that the country’s decision makers should be asked to answer this sensitive question. Secondly Prof. André du Toit was opposed in his exposition of the conceptualisation of history and memory in the recording and writing process. Learning facilitators were however asked to use the TRC-report with care in the classroom. One objective was for it to contribute towards the process of providing a platform for a more tolerant society. This is easier said than done, but not totally impossible though, as Prof Phil Bonner rightly remarked: ‘The TRC report does not offer historical explanations’ and therefore follow-up research will have to be conducted.

Shortcomings of the SAHP-conference

General

Dr. Terri Barnes of the University of the Western Cape remarked that some student voices were lacking when the question of ‘Where are our historians?’ was discussed. Though very valid, this question is not new and it was a problematic one in the past too. Perhaps university history departments should invest more in their young upcoming learners. If disciplines like Geology and Zoology can make three to four day practical excursions compulsory, why should we then shy away when it comes to the heartbeat of history debate?

Other shortcomings that became evident from the discussions at the conference were the lack of in-depth knowledge on oral history and the changing assessment process of Curriculum 2005. The status of the practicing of history and history teaching world-wide could also have been a topic to be addressed in order to inform and enlighten South Africa’s educators in history of the successes and difficulties experienced in other countries in order to at least be sensitive to it when dealing with the South African experience.

Academic

Perhaps it can be said that an all-inclusive representative participation of

expertise from institutions in all Provinces in South Africa as panelists or/and chairing sessions was lacking in the SAHP-conference, though it is realized that it sometimes is not possible to do justice to this need when a conference of this nature and size is organised. This point of criticism should, however, be addressed in future to ensure that history educators of all provinces experience a sense of sharing in the ownership of discussions and the shaping of History teaching for the future on a national level too, instead of experiencing a sense of being ignored for whatever reason. In essence expertise from a variety of institutions in the Western Cape counted the total majority in the sessions organised with the Witwatersrand University being well-represented. An effort was made to include at least four history teachers from the FET-level, namely one each from the following Provinces: Western Cape, Gauteng, Free State and the Limpopo Province. It is a pity that the other provinces sparkled in their absence, basically voiceless, on the podium. Several history educators from all provinces at least attended the conference.

The bonds that bind us

Perhaps some of the most important issues that resulted from the conference were:

- The noticeable spirit of a general revival in enthusiasm and hope among conference attendants for the teaching of history in South Africa in the present and in future. Contributing to this hope and enthusiasm was the Minister of Education, Mr. Kader Asmal's, lively and active presence, and promises he made. One is the financial support for the training of historians/history teachers from the next financial year he referred to with the same vigour as he has recently announced for those educating as teachers in Mathematics and in Science. To those teaching history this statement, of course, was music in the ears because for so long the battle was to provide substantial 'proof' to the uninformed that history simply is part and parcel of all spheres of human life. It also accentuated the quest for close cooperation between the policy makers related to history issues and academics of whom some, more than often, appears to be simply ignorant of development on ministerial level that they should have participated in or responded on. Involvement is pivotal to ensure that quality prevail and the learner eventually benefit from an optimal input by all in the field of history. The other promise of Mr. Asmal was that more conferences in history will result from this SAHP-conference with the financial support from the Ministry for which he is responsible.
- Eagerness and sincerity with which participants looked into issues with

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the aim to improve on their didactical approach or to be informed to make a difference in the sector they deal with on a-day-to-day- basis.

- Also more than ever before in any gathering of historians,¹ the conference was presentative of the South African population. There was a sense of responsibility history in respect of the teaching of history. It is considerations like these that will in future bring together historians and history teachers.

What's new?

Many introductory papers offered a fresh approach and insight into issues that history educators were challenged with for at least the past two decades. This includes the crucial need for implementing more history from an African perspective and of Africa. Hopefully the newly transformed curricula on FET-level will ensure that this focus is getting compulsory attention in learning programs long due. The theme 'genetic research and history' was revitalizing to the history debate, and it was suggested that educators of history should take cognisance of the very important role genetics have played in, for example, migratory patterns and the key role of Africa in these.

With new technology equally having being introduced in the past 25 years, the needs for the way in which sources are used in the education of history underwent some transformation. Some insight into examples were provided as some food for thought, though the Minister rightly remarked that not even technology can compete with enthusiastic history teachers, who will find other ways of dealing with technological constraints they might experience. History teachers, on the other hand, raised their concerns on the issue of 'so much to do... if we only had time', with so many aspects that can be covered in teaching history – this complex task appeared to them to be overwhelming. A plea was made for reduced content to explore the possibilities of the additional branches to history, like oral and local history, with more efficiency in a learning situation, as it seems quite evident that one key foci of the SAHP conference was to seek for a vitality injection into history from other fields and disciplines, and to effectively explore local museums and heritage sites more often as part of the learning process. Another issue related to these concerns was the complaint raised that too few history educators on tertiary level are involved in the didactical training of history teachers. This is valid but not a totally new issue.

¹ The concept 'historians' is used in this context as a wide variety of role players in many fields and professions that directly or indirectly deals with history-related content or/and issues.

As long as History Departments on HET level believe that a portion of their students do not enter the education profession, there will be ignorance about this matter. Let us not forget that a substantial number of students in the past, trained by History departments have indeed become History educators.

The lack of books available for use on Africa was another complaint. Although a number of books are available, others are simply out of print. The possibility of obtaining Unesco publications was discussed. In this regard Mr. Asmal shared his excitement of having successfully arranged with Unesco to utilize their publications on Africa in South Africa without additional costs. The printing of copies for utilization in South Africa will be done in the country. This should probably be seen as an interim, as South African historians and expertise on Africa should rather develop publications on Africa from a Southern African perspective. Perhaps a group effort, with the aid of the necessary funds, might be what is needed to motivate History experts on Africa in Southern Africa to take up the challenge.

In the closing session of the Conference Mr. Asmal was outspoken on past practices in the writing of history in South Africa as 'the history of the lion'. He also referred to past writing in history and the practicing of history in South Africa as having being too international. To assist History teachers he also mentioned that an advisory national committee might be developed in future to assist educators of history in the development of teaching material.

Apart from the several history workshops for teachers that will be organised before the end of the 2002 school year, the SAHP plan more provincial conferences for 2003, and a national conference again as soon as April-May 2003. I went away from the conference, realizing that there is still much to be done to achieve a closer, healthy academic relationship between FET and HET educators of History. They can learn so much from each other. The classroom utilization of the many, many scientific articles from the pen of South African historians is one example of how a closer co-operation is possible. Hopefully historians and history educators will get to understand that the developing and creating of acceptable standards in the lower educational levels with regard to history teaching are the responsibility of both.