

## **An Interesting Piece of Stocktaking**

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This exchange of letters between two historians, both reflecting on their experiences in the teaching, practising and supervising of History at the point of their retirement at 65, must ring bells in the minds of those who have had similar experiences. It interests me as one who worked on the other side of the linguistic fence.

At the level of teaching, both contributors flinched under the heavy hand of “Trekboer” Van der Merwe at Stellenbosch, whose top-down teaching methods on the assumption that his lectures reflected the historical truth, seemed excessive even if based on Rankean methods of research which, however, they learnt to respect. Ranke directed historical method at English-speaking universities too, and at the University of Cape Town (UCT) we set much store on lectures to define the range of the syllabus, I hope, without similar insistence on the sanctity of their content, for tutorial classes of twenty or more could not achieve to focus contact between tutor and student minds. At Rhodes, we found we could handle groups of six first-year students weekly and groups of two to three of third-years twice-weekly (for parallel courses), with fortnightly essays of a maximum of 2 000 words at all levels. It was much easier under those conditions to “judge horses” when examining students, and as external examiner at UCT for twenty years after going to Rhodes, I sometimes sensed that from insufficient personal attention they did not always recognise quality. But I doubt if this is still true today.

Both contributors who had enjoyed the good offerings of Stellenbosch (notably the stimulus they received from the study of Huizinga) were clearly excited by changes in approach at other institutions whose staff they joined after graduation. Henning at the University of the Orange Free State (UOFS), began to broaden his focus to include African history, which led to his choice of a race relations topic at the doctoral level and to his *Geskiedenis van Afrika* which was the first major work of this range in Afrikaans. Piet was drawn into modern world history and the philosophy of history, in a way which suggests that Ranke still held a strong hold on his thinking, and that this drew him into modern German theories of historiography through the work of Floors van Jaarsveld, Jorg Rüsen and others. In each case they were appropriate reactions to the changes taking place in the world of historians, from the challenge of Marxism, Annalisme, Oral History,

People's History (not quite the same thing as *volksgeskiedenis*, for it had class implications) and Contemporary History, followed by the diversionary attraction to Post-Modernism.

Floors appeared as somewhat intimidating to both men. I can understand this. My first contact with him was on the *South African Historical Journal*, of which we were both sub-editors under Tienie van Schoor. Floors was touchy. When I teased him during our Wits conference by suggesting a new biography of Paul Kruger written by an English-speaker, he buried his face in his beer. Later, however, while we were holding our South African Historical Society (SAHS) conference, I think at UCT, Floors (who had resigned from the Society) spoke at a Genootskap meeting, also in the Cape, when he argued strongly against the idea of a *derde vryheidsoorlog* on the ground that it would be foolish for the Afrikaner to get trapped in that line of thinking. Although he had written politicised textbooks and his major work, *Van Van Riebeeck tot Vorster*, he seemed to have reached his Damascus road, and from that time onwards I felt drawn towards him. Shortly before his *teer en veer* experience I had lunch at his home, during which he said he was going to go against one very popular notion of the Great Trek, and this had been picked up by a Sunday newspaper. I was present to witness the dignified way in which he reacted to his ordeal. We often corresponded after that traumatic event.

His resignation from the SAHS was over a point of principle not handled in any detail by our two authors: the membership of the SAHS, which began as a whites-only organisation. I noticed with interest what Henning and Piet have to say about tensions which existed between Afrikaans and English-speakers in the Society, which was probably unavoidable, given the politics of South Africa at that time, which is not to brand Afrikaners as plain reactionaries or *Engelse* as politically pure, but on our side we did not want to belong to a whites-only professional body, nor did a substantial number of Afrikaans members, and together we managed first to get membership for Surendra Bhana from the segregated University of Durban Westville, and by slow stages to bring in coloured and African members as well. We held our first conference at a "black" university, namely at the University of the Western Cape in 1975 and that was a great moment for History in South Africa because the Society held together through the apartheid years, and gradually built up a new image of History at South African universities, which matched up to changes overseas, thanks largely to the growth which has been linked to the editorship of the *Journal* under Johannes du Bruyn. It was a pity that the number of contributions in Afrikaans diminished, but this must be

attributed largely to the fact that our publication was now being read more widely outside South Africa, and that the scholarly level of other journals with Afrikaans contributions grew.

*The Oxford History of South Africa* is given some attention by the two speakers. It was an interesting project to become involved in, and clearly its impact was considerable, even if blunted by the most immediate emergence of the Marxist challenge. Clearly the book did make an impact on an Afrikaner readership, even if *Vyfhonderd Jaar* proved a counter-attraction. I however doubt if *The Oxford History* was as influential in that respect as the bilingual *Illustrated History* of Cameron and Spies. On one point the debate about *The Oxford History* is told incorrectly: Leo Kuper, who wrote the chapter on African Nationalism in Volume II insisted on using, and announcing his use, of banned sources in order to challenge official censorship. The editors, preferring to make sure that the book was published, decided to eliminate his article, but leave blank pages in its place, and this happened. Subsequently it was decided to reprint the volume with the chapter included. This also happened, but the book was never banned.

Looking at the scene today, I sense that there has been a wonderful change in the new approaches to the subject. There is still a danger that history can be captured by interest groups and turned once more into a vehicle for propaganda; but we are at the point where it is no longer easy to use history in order to distort the past to change the present. Standards of discourse have been promoted in educational policy and we must hope that these will bear fruit. We can thank Piet and Henning for an interesting piece of stocktaking.