

**In Memoriam:
Vale Leonard Thompson (1916-2004)***

Leonard Thompson, who was a member of the History Department at UCT for about fifteen years, has died at New York aged 88. During the nine years in which we were together in the Department I got to know him well, and to respect him in many ways: for his clarity of thought and deliberate ways of speaking and writing, and his thoroughly helpful research supervision which I knew at first hand. His tennis - an Oxford half-blue I think - was well beyond my class.

At that time he stood out as the most original member of the history staff. Students appreciated his lecturing skills. His wider role as a leading member of the university staff was noteworthy. Often referred to as "Highbrow" Thompson (to distinguish him from a colleague nicknamed 'Eyebrow') he was very active in two important fields during the late 'fifties and 'sixties. He chaired the Academic Freedom Committee during the later stages of the fight for university autonomy when UCT demonstrated against the enactment of the obnoxious university segregation bill, and we established the T.B. Davie Memorial lecture and produced the first of the two books of dedication. His chairmanship of the SHAWCO committee led to a broadening of SHAWCO's activities beyond the health field into night-school education, and was made effective by a very good partnership between Leonard and the new director, Arnold Matthews.

Leonard had seen war service in the Royal Navy, and used to regale us with the story of how he and the commander of the destroyer on which they served (who later commanded the General Botha at Gordon's Bay), took a wise decision not to go after the Bismarck before support had arrived.

As a historian, Leonard had first studied under Michael Roberts at Rhodes, and later cut his researcher's teeth with a MA thesis on Indian indentured labour in Natal (1952). Armed with an Oxford degree obtained before the war, Leonard displayed skills learnt in the Oxford History Faculty with a scholarly book on The Unification of South Africa, which Clarendon accepted and produced in time for the half-centenary of Union. (He was a staff member in the UCT History Department at the time.) He was at home with the constitutional rigour which this study demanded. The topic also made wider sense in a department which ran service courses in constitutional history and law, and that at a time when the South African government was itself monkeying with our own constitution in the interest of keeping apartheid on track.

But it must be said that by that time Leonard's interest was mainly in the history of Africa. Many historians were still arguing in Rankean terms that African history was no subject since 'darkness is not a subject of history'. But when on leave in 1953 Leonard had set up a good relationship with Roland Oliver and John Fage of SOAS,

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who were then engaged in writing a History of Africa for Pelican. Work was in hand for the establishment of the *Journal of African History* in London. Leonard put together a book *African Societies in Southern Africa*, the papers of a conference which he had convened at Lusaka in 1968. By that time he was already in America, having left UCT for Duke, and later UCLA and Yale, in 1964. But before leaving South Africa he and Monica Wilson, then UCT's professor of Social Anthropology, had prepared the ground for the *Oxford History of South Africa*, which was published in two volumes in 1969-71. Behind it lay a graduate seminar which they launched, attended by Wilson and Carstens (Social Anthropology), Thompson and Davenport (History), Simons (Comparative African Government and Law, CAGL), Robertson (Economic History), Inskeep (Archeology), Westphal (African Languages), Wells and Singer (Medical School) among others, to discuss the broadening of African studies to include African History. Enough historical resources were not yet available, nor would be until there were sufficient texts to take African history beyond the study of cultural structures resulting from anthropological fieldwork - a limitation from which the *Oxford History* suffered. The training of historians in fieldwork needed the lead of pioneer specialists like Jan Vansina whose *Oral Tradition* appeared only in 1962. The first genuinely historical studies of individual African chiefdoms in the sub-continent appeared only in the 1980s, through research done mainly at SOAS, UCLA, UCT, Wits, Rhodes and Natal. But Leonard Thompson, in close competition with Peter Sanders, was ahead of the field with his biography of Moshoeshoe, *Survival in Two Worlds* (1975). An African History undergraduate course was started by Eric Axelson, Thompson's successor to the chair in 1963; but it did not attain the required degree of penetration until Robin Hallett took it over after 1965. While at Yale, Leonard later produced a *History of South Africa*, identical in pagination and matching in elegance the History of C.W. de Kiewiet (1941) which he always admired, but making it clear from his chapter headings that the African presence was the focal point of his interest.

Leonard's last service to South African history was the setting up of the Southern African Research Project with Ford money at Yale. SARP provided research experience for many scholars from South Africa until its termination from lack of funds in the mid-1990s, and I can endorse the quality of its seminars and of the graduate programme which Leonard ran. SARP helped to safeguard links between South African scholars and the outside world which had been under threat since the UCT Academic Freedom Committee had had to face the threat of an academic boycott in the early sixties.

For the range of all Leonard's achievements it was fitting that UCT honoured this pioneer of African history in this country at the end of his career with an honorary doctorate.

T. R. H. Davenport
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