

## **Herinneringe: Diegene wat my besiel en beïnvloed het**

## **Reminiscences: Those who inspired and influenced me**

### **I've been inspired and influenced by so many**

*V.C. Malherbe*

So much in my life seems to have “just happened”. Asked now who inspired and influenced me, I have followed a trail way back to my parents. They surely exerted a powerful influence on their two children: we both studied politics, both became writers.

I grew up on a farm in Maryland, just north of Washington DC. Family members, my father included, had served in the state legislature. It seemed the most natural thing in the world – when droughts, blizzards or pests were not our priority – to talk politics at breakfast, lunch and dinner: county, state and international, in more or less that order. We listened faithfully to radio broadcasters Lowell Thomas and Fulton Lewis Jr – one suave, the other edgily displeased with FDR, our president. These habits were formed before we got wind of the view that politics is a “dirty game” and (with religion) better not discussed in company.

Our mother weighed in when it came to language: no “real good”, “sure am”, or (heaven forbid) “ain’t got” for us. Dad, who was southern where she was northeastern, could not resist the odd “hickish” remark, just to tease her. As hope faded that Tom or I would shine by singing, playing the piano, drawing, dancing, or winning sport or beauty trophies, prospects narrowed to vocabulary (“word power”), the odd spelling bee and the art of writing a fair sentence. English teachers approved, and a modest skill was rewarding in the other subjects. In these ways, and others not recounted, my parents both inspired and influenced.

In 1952 I married a South African. By then I had a BA (Politics and English) and no idea what I might do with it. We lived in Natal where Paul’s father was vice-chancellor of the university and his mother engrossed in the province’s history – especially the Voortrekker part of it, a weak third fiddle to Brit and Zulu. Happily, I had joined an exuberantly political family. Public figures were revered or denounced in pithy terms, with much by way of first-hand anecdotes. Among them were full or part-time historians (all, I hasten to add, respected): Leo Marquard, Edgar Brookes, Alan Paton, C.W. de Kiewiet, Eric Axelson, Jean van der Poel, Sir Keith Hancock. My father-in-law, E.G. Malherbe, had written a history of education in South Africa. But this is to jump way ahead: historians were not of special interest as yet. They were one cohort only of the parade of inquiring, brainy, achieving – yes, inspiring and influential – individuals who passed through my parents-in-laws’ open house.

Paul worked for Standard Vacuum Oil – in time Mobil Oil, and then Engen. In 1965 the firm moved us from the Durban refinery to head office in Cape Town. Our children, Paul Jr and Louisa, were fast becoming independent and I enrolled at the University of Cape Town for a Secondary Teachers’ Diploma. How influential that

would prove to be! With my university major not a school subject, I feared I was stuck but the administrator who took my details had an instant solution: “Never mind! We will count it as history.” With those words – though I could not know it – my future was launched. In the meantime, we had bought a house. “Rooi Dak” had been the home of noted historian, Eric Walker, and not long after, he returned for a visit.

In the 1960s, married women were not eligible for permanent posts – especially if history and English were their subjects (maths and science stood a better chance). Armed with my diploma, I hoped to teach but was jobless when the ’67 school year started. In the second quarter came an opening: history, at a girls’ high school in Rondebosch. The job entailed eight classes, drawn from all five standards, and required a mark each month, based on two pieces of marked work for each of some 225 pupils. Add the fact that all I knew of South African history was what I’d heard from the Malherbes and their numerous guests! Head-down work is the abiding memory. The following year – different school, same pattern – was less traumatic, thanks to some teaching under my belt. I was feeling let down by my profession but the experience produced an idea and for that I was grateful.

The idea was not original: would not we, like history teachers in other school systems, find it helpful if the treaties, letters, diaries, ultimatums referred to in our dry-as-dust textbooks were assembled in a handy format? At Maskew Miller I met old-style publisher, Mr Nicol (Scribner’s Maxwell E. Perkins was the prototype). Non-committal but not discouraging: Mr Nicol had the recipe by heart and sent me home with a measure of hope. I can’t remember how it happened that I asked Professor Arthur Davey of UCT’s Department of History to read and comment on my manuscript. Out of kindness, he gave me the help I needed and that went far with Mr Nicol. Maskew Miller published *What They Said 1795–1910 History Documents*, in 1971. Davey and Nicol: they made a big difference.

*Eminent Victorians in South Africa* followed. The Strachey masterpiece, which graced a bookshelf in my first home, was inscribed to Dad by our mother – presumably before she knew him well as he was not that sort of reader (he would have been “tickled” by her error). Where Strachey used his subjects to define an era, I simply wrote of famous Britons who, for diverse reasons, visited South Africa. It was high time to study history, and how to write it, formally. That began to happen in the 1970s.

Explorers of the past are deeply influenced by the present in which they live – its culture and its politics. When, post a master’s degree, I resumed research and writing, “resistance” by colonised peoples (many newly independent) had become a focus. Archaeologists and anthropologists questioned some of the interpretations, and an inter-disciplinary approach to South Africa’s past gained traction. From time to time there was space for something I have always enjoyed: recording the stories of the elderly. UCT established a Centre for Popular Memory. Greater interest was taken in school histories: the products of schools are, after all, what arrive in tertiary history classrooms. It’s rewarding to share discoveries and theories in the human sciences with children, who grasp complexities if they can be presented in plain language. New texts encouraged all ages to explore their neighbourhoods, interview the people around them, question what was put before them.

## *Herinneringe/Reminiscences*

I've deliberately not referred by name to the living. I've been inspired and influenced by so many exceptional and generous people that a list would look something like a phone book. A historian's life is not all hugs and kisses but starting as I did – late and from an oblique angle – has kept me in a comfort zone: no negatives, all plusses. As for youthful ambition, it was vague at best but I've found out that history is where politics end up, and there seems to be no end to writing.