

HISTORY AFTER APARTHEID

INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED AT RHODES UNIVERSITY
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BA (Hons) (Rhodes) MA, PhD (Queens)



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History after Apartheid

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HISTORY AFTER APARTHEID

When I was appointed to the chair of history at Rhodes I was, of course, very conscious that I was succeeding in what has been for the most part a line of extraordinarily distinguished historians. It is appropriate to say a few words about this distinguished line. History at Rhodes got off to a very good start with the appointment of the first lecturer in the subject in 1911: W M Macmillan - a visionary, a man ahead of his time. Fiercely anti-racist, he had a deep love for Africa, held a vision of South Africa as a single, common society, and argued for the social relevance of historical writing.

In 1935 Michael Roberts was appointed to the chair. A prodigious scholar, who became the authority in the English-speaking world in the field of Swedish history; and a prolific writer, having published at least fifteen books and numerous articles and translations. I believe that a new book came out last year. (I feel honoured by Michael Roberts' presence here tonight).

He was succeeded in 1953 by Winnie Maxwell, who will always be remembered as a great teacher of history. Former students of Winnie's currently hold chairs of history at all five of the historically white English-speaking campuses in South Africa - Wits, UCT, Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Rhodes - as well as other prestigious academic posts around the world. She taught with energy, care, creativity, imagination (and usually with a cigarette in her hand). She had a remarkable ability to make historians out of not very promising material - I consider myself a case in point. I would not be standing here now were it not for her.

As you know, my immediate predecessor was Rodney Davenport, appointed in 1975. Both an outstanding scholar and a man of strong liberal principles, with a deep concern for his own local community. A recent article about Rodney states that he was "more productive and more wide-ranging in his scholarship" than any of his peers in the South African English language universities. Thus from 1935 until 1990 the Rhodes history department was headed by three outstanding scholars, each at the forefront of the profession in the country, and each doing much to maintain the department's reputation for excellence in teaching.

The purpose of my lecture tonight is to consider some possible future trends and issues in the discipline of South African history in the post-apartheid era. Before doing that I need to say something about two influences or traditions that have left a troublesome legacy and require critical examination. I am referring to the two 'E's': empiricism and eurocentrism. Now it is true that both of these have wilted under serious assaults from scholars in the past 25 years. But both remain present in many sorts of texts; both remain embedded in what we might call 'the everyday commonsense view of the world' - so that they continue to constitute a problem.

First, some words about empiricism. I am aware that the title of my lecture, 'History after Apartheid', is ambiguous. I hope that people have not been lured here (or perhaps turned away) by the prospect of hearing a lecture predicting the course of South African history in the post-apartheid era. It is not my intention to engage in a prophetic discourse, following in the footsteps of my Ph.D. supervisor, Arthur Keppel-Jones, who wrote his little futuristic book, *When Smuts Goes*, in 1947 on the eve of the National Party election victory.

The ambiguity of the lecture title arises, of course, out of the two meanings, generally attributed to the word 'history'. We sometimes use the word to denote the actual past itself, or we might be referring to the study of the past, the discipline of history. For some scholars the ultimate task of the historian has been to remove this ambiguity, to merge the two meanings of history - so that the record of the past set down by the historian becomes an accurate record of the past as it actually happened. This was the aim of the well known German historian of the nineteenth century, von Ranke. Von Ranke was a formidable scholar. He published nearly fifty books in his career. Then at the age of 85, virtually blind, he audaciously sat down to write a two-volume history of the world. But the average history student best remembers von Ranke for something that he had said in his younger days: he had said that his task as a historian was not to sit in judgement on the past, but to show "what had really happened", to record history as it really was. He believed that if the historian scoured the documentary sources then an accurate record of the past could be achieved.

Von Ranke left an indelible stamp on the discipline of history. Generations of historians around the world were influenced by him and came to adopt his approach. I believe, though, that his legacy was an unfortunate one - not because of his stress on thorough research, which is commendable, but because of his false presumption that historians can be neutral, impartial, objective. Historians cannot be any of those. And von Ranke himself certainly was not. He was a Prussian nationalist, a monarchist who was opposed to democracy - and those beliefs influenced his historical writing.

Under the influence of von Ranke the empiricist assumption became widespread - that somewhere out there, embodied in documents lying in archives, was a past reality available to be captured by historians. All the historian had to do, to use that awful everyday expression, was "to let the facts speak for themselves". We need to remind ourselves that the sources used by historians contain their own biases and distortions; and they represent only minute fragments of a past that is infinite in its scale and complexity. Moreover, the historians making use of these imperfect sources are fallible beings who will inevitably incorporate into their writing their own values, beliefs, and ideological or theoretical leanings. All historical writing is, to a greater or lesser extent, subjective and value-charged.

The problem is that many people who read history, especially school pupils reading textbooks, fail to see this. In awe of the printed word they read history as if it is a true account of the past. They miss the hidden meanings, the ideology that lies beneath the writing. Thus millions of South Africans have over the years come to pick up distorted assumptions about their country's history, assumptions which have become deeply ingrained and which have served to reinforce the established political order.

This leads naturally on to the second 'E' - eurocentrism. Eurocentric history is not simply history that focusses exclusively on whites. Eurocentrism is rather a matter of denying and negating the history and culture of people who are not white. We all know how eurocentrism has manifested itself in so many South African history texts: South African history begins in 1652; the emphasis on the heroic struggle of whites against British imperialism and black barbarism; blacks appearing in the historical record only as a nuisance, getting in the way of white progress, their history being encapsulated in such phrases as "the native problem" or "the Indian question".

This version of South African history is superbly captured, caricatured, in Dennis Hirson's autobiographical account of his early life in Johannesburg in the 1950s and 1960s, *The House Next Door to Africa*. Please allow me the indulgence of quoting at some length. Parts of Hirson's version run like this:

There are ... stinkwood trees, yellow-wood trees, spittoons and slave bells, white gables and white grapes and brown people whose bellies stick forward and whose bottoms stick backwards and who have arrived from just the other side of the mountains to meet Jan van Riebeeck, the first man at the Cape.

Then the British land, and hand out Bibles, and get everyone to speak English and be free. So the people in the wagons, who were Dutch but are now Voortrekkers, load up with concertinas and coffee and rusks and muskets and Bibles of their own, yoke their oxen, and head north ...

There is no one else on the land they cross, though every now and then they come across a kraal with a black king in it who has a lot of wives lying on floors made of dung and ox-blood. Meanwhile, tribes are marauding their way down Africa, trampling on all the thorns and scorpions with their bare feet and advancing in the form of ox-heads.

Horns of warriors curve across the land with assegais and giant shields, as quietly as grass. Against their onslaught the Voortrekkers hitch all wagons into a laager ...

When it is all over the rivers run red with blood and the Voortrekkers, who are slowly becoming Boers, pick assegais out of their wagons. They make pledges and vows and covenants. The leaders give their names to mountains and cities and public swimming-pools ...

The marauding tribes, who are the cause of Kaffir Wars later become Natives and Bantu, line up for health inspection and go down to work in the mines. Finally there is a Republic, and the whole school gets bronze medals and flags ...

I say this is a caricature - perhaps not such a caricature. Eurocentric versions of South African history have provided an important ideological reinforcement of white racism and apartheid. They draw a firm correlation between whiteness and civilisation, between blackness and savagery. They present racial and ethnic groups as fixed, given categories. They imply that the South African racial order was something natural and normal - indeed, the product of history.

This eurocentrism is commonly associated with Afrikaner nationalism. Indeed, such a view of South African history was integral to Afrikaner nationalism from the 1930s. And it is interesting that many Afrikaner nationalist historians were greatly influenced by von Ranke. At the forefront of these was H B Thom, Professor of History at Stellenbosch from 1937 to 1954, himself a student in Germany in the 1930s. Thom and his followers tried to do two things. First, they worked within the Rankean tradition, seeing history as an objective science. Second, they developed and promoted 'volksgeskiedenis' - that is a history that would reinforce Afrikaner nationalism. The utter incompatibility of these two objectives is starkly obvious. The belief that one could write Afrikaner nationalist history that was objective and scientific seems to me to have been extraordinarily naive.

In this Afrikaner nationalist historical writing one can see a dismal combination - of crass eurocentrism and crude empiricism. However, one must beware of associating this combination too readily and exclusively with Afrikaner nationalist writing. The combination is also to be found in English writing on South African history. Two of the best known early English-speaking historians of South Africa were Theal and Cory. Both worked in the Rankean tradition. Like von Ranke they were prolific producers of history. Both believed that the prime task of the historian was to gather facts. Both were eurocentric in their outlook. Both were influential - generations of school-children came to be fed Theal in their history text-books. And true to the Rankean tradition Theal presumed himself to be an impartial historian. At the end of his career, in 1915, he wrote: "I have striven to write without fear, favour or prejudice, to do equal justice to all with whom I had to deal" - a claim without foundation.

This tendency to associate eurocentric historical writing exclusively with Afrikaner nationalism is part and parcel of a larger tendency - to blame the apartheid system on Afrikaner nationalism. It has often been convenient for English speakers, conservative and liberal, to scapegoat Afrikaner nationalism. In the English quest for self-absolution, Englishness is separated from the harshness of the racial order: the blame for apartheid is cast on to others, while the fruits of the system are enjoyed.

There is no doubt that white supremacy and racism have pervaded the world of English-speaking South Africans for generations. A recent book on eastern Cape history by Clifton Crais

has much to say about the colonial mentality of British settlerdom in the nineteenth century. Crais makes this observation:

From the end of the 1820s Africans were increasingly represented [in settler discourse] as libidinous, uncontrolled, lazy and disrespectful of established authority. The settler, in turn, became what the African was not. In this topsy-turvy process the African became the 'Other'.

The 'Other' - that is, people often referred to in everyday parlance as 'them'. Published in Grahamstown in 1840 was a pamphlet by the Reverend Niven, entitled *Impartial Analysis of the Kafir Character*. In this 'impartial analysis' Niven described the Xhosa as being 'but a few degrees above zero' in the scale of humanity. Others shared Niven's perceptions.

In the twentieth century English-speakers have continued to be closely involved in the making of the segregationist, apartheid order. The first programme of racial segregation - territorial, urban and political - to be formally proposed in South Africa was that put forward by the South African Native Affairs Commission in 1905 - a commission composed almost exclusively of English-speakers. In the first three decades of the twentieth century those most responsible for articulating the ideology of segregation were not Afrikaners, but English-speaking liberals. Although some of them later had a change of heart, they did much to give credence and coherence to racial segregation as an ideology. Much of my own research in the past ten years has been in the field of urban apartheid. I have found that if one wants to locate the origins of urban apartheid one need look no further than Durban - a city whose council and officials have been overwhelmingly English-speaking.

My original starting-point was that much South African historical writing has been bedevilled by eurocentrism. As the country stumbles into the post-apartheid era one might assume that as apartheid is dismantled and abandoned, so too will eurocentrism go out of the window. But eurocentrism lives on, and I am sure will continue to do so. It is still manifested in some historical writing, especially school text-books. And eurocentrism continues to pervade the historical record as it is represented to us through media other than written texts - namely, museum displays, monuments, maps, cultural symbols, public holidays, names of cities, towns, streets, airports, buildings (and, oh yes, swimming-pools). We see eurocentrism every day in the liberal press.

At the same time, though, we do need to recognise that there have been very significant breaks with eurocentrism in the field of history, especially during the past 25 years. Stunning advances have been made in archaeological research. So our understanding of pre-1652 South African history is developing all the time. Historians have produced excellent studies of

precolonial African chiefdoms and states. Colonialism, white supremacy and apartheid have been analysed with a much greater awareness of their destructive impact. Black resistance and protest in South Africa have come to be much more fully researched and documented. We have biographies of resistance leaders, studies of particular organisations. And, more important perhaps, work is being done on the struggles of ordinary people to challenge and confront the deprivation and oppression that apartheid and economic exploitation brought upon them. Indeed, in the past fifteen years perhaps the dominant branch of South African history has been social history. Social historians have tried to capture something of the culture, consciousness and lived experience of individuals and communities in townships, squatter settlements or impoverished rural areas. South Africa's foremost social historian, Charles van Onselen, is just completing a 500-page biography of an African peasant farmer who lived and worked in the western Transvaal for much of this century.

In the field of social history the break with eurocentrism has been so strong that the pendulum has swung to the opposite side - so much so that South African social history written in the critical tradition is now very largely afrocentric. Indeed there is a real need for social historians to start producing critical studies of the white community - I say 'critical', as opposed to the celebratory or antiquarian studies that have been produced over the years.

Now let us turn to the future. What future directions are likely to be taken in South African historical writing? How will a changing political order affect the teaching and writing of history? Under an ANC government will eurocentric school text-books simply give way to afrocentric ones? Will the heroes of yesterday become the villains of tomorrow, and vice-versa? In the meantime, during the transition, when we are expected to have an interim government of national unity, might there emerge a cosy consensus history which can somehow satisfy black and white? And do all these questions really mean that historical writing ultimately has to be shaped by present political and ideological considerations?

These are extremely complex questions which are being debated. I will simply offer a few reflections on them. Let me start by considering the idea that somehow we might be able to construct a consensus history for the new South Africa, a history for reconciliation and nation-building, a history syllabus that can be offered at all schools across the country and will satisfy everybody.

It sounds a nice idea. What might such a history look like? First, most parties will agree fairly easily that eurocentrism must go. So the school text-books will have to be rewritten. But what will the new direction be? The buzz-word seems to be multi-culturalism. It sounds good.

A multicultural approach to South African history would, after all, surely be a fair and balanced one. It would give recognition to each ethnic or national group - so you have a chapter or more on Zulu history, Xhosa history, Tswana history, and so on. Throw in some black heroes, especially from the precolonial past - like Shaka and Moshoeshoe - who were, apparently, powerful, successful nation-builders. Recognise that apartheid was 'a bad thing', and perhaps even identify a few white 'baddies'. Verwoerd will be the obvious candidate for number one 'baddie', with Vorster not far behind. A few more can be added, perhaps even Rhodes.

Out of this may come a suitably sanitised, multiethnic or multicultural version of South African history - a version that will perhaps see us through the political transition and prevent history classrooms from becoming battlegrounds. I believe that right now various educationalists and experts are working on producing such a version. I want to argue very strongly against the production of this kind of sanitised, pseudo-consensus history, which has, I think, enormous dangers. First, a 'consensus' history such as this is just as politicised as any other history. Just as eurocentric history tried to underpin and legitimate apartheid, so will a multicultural history be one designed to promote and support federalism - as each ethnic group must have its own territory and political autonomy, so must it have its own history. Moreover, multiethnic history, just like a federal constitution, could serve to further entrench ethnic categories - so much so that you end up with the opposite outcome from that intended. Instead of a history that helps to build a single nation, you have a history that perpetuates division and fragmentation.

Second, such a version of history will inevitably miss, gloss over and conceal the contested nature of the South African past. It is both impossible and undesirable to try to produce a history that one hopes most people will somehow find acceptable. Historical writing will always be contested terrain. This contestation has to be acknowledged in historical texts; it must not be suppressed. The danger of a pseudo-consensus multicultural version of South African history is that it will deny and suppress this contestation.

If we throw out eurocentrism and reject multiculturalism, what alternatives are there? Maybe the pendulum will swing to the opposite extreme of eurocentrism. Is this not the fear of the average white - that in the new order "they will do to us what we did to them?" That a crude eurocentrism will simply give way to an overwhelming afrocentrism. Will there not be a huge popular demand for a version of South African history that centres predominantly on the twin themes of white oppression and heroic black struggle? In the first glorious moments of liberation will not the people want to celebrate the triumph? And will not historical writing have to reflect this mood?

Certainly historians will have to continue to examine these two important themes - the nature of oppression and the struggle for liberation - as many scholars have been doing in recent

years. But it is crucial that a critical approach to these themes be maintained. A history that is merely celebratory and triumphalist falls into the same trap as eurocentrism and multiculturalism - it denies and suppresses historical debate and contestation. The ultimate danger is that authorised versions of history are produced, versions that simply legitimate the policies and leaders of the ruling party, versions that prohibit critique - as was the case with historical writing in the Soviet Union. I must hasten to add that I have every confidence that a future post-apartheid political and educational order will not suppress historical critique and debate, will not impose authorised versions of the past on the people at large.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet empire we also have to ask about the future of materialist or Marxist historical writing in South Africa. Many would say, no doubt, that it has no future. There is now a common assumption that Marxism is a discredited ideology following the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. It was this collapse which prompted Francis Fukuyama, late in 1989, to proclaim "the end of history" - by which he meant the triumph, once and for all, of capitalism and liberal democracy. I have always been at a loss to know why such an outrageously presumptuous, supremely ill-informed statement should gain such publicity.

I will offer only a few brief comments on this issue. First, there is no doubt that the collapse of communism has represented a major crisis for Marxism (I say collapse of communism - it is not a total collapse - some will tell you that the only two places in the world where communism still survives are Cuba and Pietermaritzburg). However, it is fundamentally wrong to see the collapse of communism as the triumph of capitalism - especially as we see capitalist economies around the world going through serious crises. The socialist ideal, I believe, remains a powerful one.

Second, historical materialism as an approach to the study of the past still has much to offer. Certainly it is true that the crude orthodoxies of vulgar Marxism have largely been discredited by historians. But at the same time there has come to be a growing recognition by the majority of historians that one cannot take economics out of history - in other words, one cannot understand the past unless one situates it in some kind of economic context. It has thus become difficult to write history that is narrowly or exclusively political in its subject-matter. The whole realm of history - whether it be political, intellectual, cultural, social, religious, legal or psychological - is only comprehensible if viewed in relation to material forces in society. You do not have to be a Marxist to believe this, but you would have to acknowledge at least some small debt to the Marxist theory of history.

If one looks at historical writing on South Africa during the past twenty-five years one has to recognise the enormous contribution made by scholars writing in a materialist tradition. Many of the major advances in our understanding of South African society and history have been

derived from the work of such scholars. There have, of course, been debates within the South African materialist tradition, debates which have led to more refined analyses. But there have been few major rebuttals of materialist analysis or significant retreats from that approach in South African historical writing. So I would expect materialist historical writing on South Africa to continue to be influential.

In recent years perhaps one of the main challenges to historical materialism has come from postmodernism. The impact of postmodernism on the discipline of history has been rather belated - especially in South Africa where only a handful of historians have come to be influenced by it. What are the implications of postmodernism for South African historical writing, indeed for historical writing in general? Again a few brief comments.

First, postmodernism carries even further the assault on von Ranke. Rejected out of hand by postmodernists are any claims that historians might make to capture past reality or historical truth. As one postmodernist has said, historical writing produces only "representations mirroring an ever absent reality". And another scholar, Mark Poster, has observed that the tendency in postmodernism is "to regard truth as a multiplicity, to exult in the play of diverse meanings, in the continual process of reinterpretation, in the contention of opposing claims".

Second, postmodernism, to its credit, sustains the attack on eurocentrism. One writer, Robert Young has said that postmodernism "can best be defined as European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world". If postmodernism really can enhance that awareness, especially in South Africa, then its contribution will be significant.

Third, postmodernists reject what are called globalising or totalising discourses. In other words they dismiss grand theories of history, theories which try to encapsulate all of history in a single, comprehensive, all-embracing framework. Historical materialism is specifically targeted here, because the vulgar Marxist theory of history is a good example of such a grand theory.

Fourth, postmodernism has served to blur the distinction between history and literature, between fact and fiction. Historians, like novelists, use language and various literary techniques - and the language used is not neutral, but value-charged. Historical writing therefore has to be subject to critique according to the canons of literary theory.

So, where conventional historians have been concerned with fact and evidence, postmodernists are interested in discourse and the representation of history. Where historians have tried to make sense of the past by imposing on it some order and coherence, postmodernists take delight that history is inchoate, diverse and fragmented.

The great value of postmodernism is that it forces us to ask the question - how do we know what we know about the past? How is historical knowledge produced? How have we come to acquire certain images and ideas about the past? How is the past represented to us, not only

in historical writing, but also in museums, monuments, photographs, paintings, films? These are crucial questions in South Africa where certain images, ideas and assumptions about the past have become deeply ingrained in many people and have served to sustain eurocentrism in all its abysmal forms.

A few words to conclude - perhaps to clear up some possible misunderstandings and to offer some suggestions concerning the future direction of South African historical writing. First, the critique of the Rankean tradition should not be seen as an attack on archival research or the careful use of documentary evidence. Of course historians have to make careful, honest use of evidence. The attack is rather directed against the presumption that through such research and with such evidence the historian can somehow capture past reality, history as it really was.

Second, to reject eurocentrism is not to dismiss the cultural heritage of Europe, but rather to confront any tendency to assume the absolute preeminence of European culture in the world at large. The challenge is to throw off this eurocentric, colonial mentality - a mentality that negates, denies, suppresses non-assimilated culture, relegating it to "the other"; a mentality that lives on in our country and our town. In facing this challenge one could pay heed to some words of the Afro-American writer, Alice Walker. In a recent novel she drew up her own set of beatitudes which I found powerful and inspiring. One of them reads like this: "Helped are those who are enemies of their own racism: they shall live in harmony with the citizens of this world, and not with those of the world of their ancestors, which has passed away, and which they shall never see again". I particularly like the idea of being an enemy of one's own racism, because implicit in that is the humble recognition that there is some degree of racism in all of us.

So one of the tasks of historians in South Africa will be to continue the project, under way but far from complete, of eradicating eurocentrism from our culture. This does not mean taking whites out of South African history; nor does it mean projecting white people only as villains. It does mean conducting further research into the phenomenon of eurocentrism. Here the postmodernist enterprise of decoding historical representations will continue to be important - showing how, for instance, literary, historical and other texts have been riddled with crude eurocentric assumptions - an enterprise that will require closer collaboration between historians and literary theorists. The assault on eurocentrism will also require historians to sustain the growing tradition of people's history. That is, writing about people whose history has been suppressed or ignored; and writing history for people whose access to their past has been limited.

One feature of historical writing worldwide in recent years has been the enormous broadening in the scope of the discipline. Social history has superseded political history, so much

so that virtually all areas of human activity fall under the historian's microscope. Recently I have seen a reference, for instance, in a book about body language in the medieval era, another to a book about stuttering in Victorian England.

There is enormous scope for imaginative historical research in South Africa. There is so much that we know very little about. Among the themes that need to be examined historically one could include: the family, and children; gender relations, masculinity, sexuality; health, food, and consumption patterns; violence, crime and criminality; we need critical social histories of the military and the police. The list of themes could go on and on. At the same time historians must persist in addressing themes which have been better worked but which are still not properly understood. Much work has been done on the history of racism in South Africa, but it needs to be carried further. Ethnicity is one of the bugbears of our society, but it remains an elusive theme for scholars. Patriarchy and women's oppression require further research.

So there are great opportunities to pursue historical research. And such research is important. At a time when efforts are being made to steer students away from subjects like history we need to remind ourselves that history is society's collective memory, and just as an individual cannot function without memory nor can society. Take any of the main problems facing South African society today - violence, racism, ethnicity, poverty, economic decline. A proper understanding of these problems demands that they be placed in an historical context.

Like W M Macmillan, I believe that historians need to keep their eyes on the present as well as the past, constantly remaining aware of the interplay between the past and the present. Christopher Hill, the famous British historian, once said "all knowledge of the past should help to humanise us". In a similar vein, another hero of the profession, E P Thompson, wrote "Historical consciousness ought to assist one to understand the possibilities of transformation and the possibilities within people". These are pithy, powerful messages. I find the idea that historical writing ought to humanise us particularly appealing. How can historians do this? By continuing, for instance, to dissect critically and expose vigorously the destructive nature of those forces that have done so much to devastate and dehumanise society through the ages: forces such as racism, nationalism, imperialism, militarism, totalitarianism, chauvinism, sexism, among others. Forces which have invariably been accompanied by violence, oppression and exploitation, bringing misery to their victims, but also dehumanising their perpetrators.

Also attractive is the idea of historians trying to understand the possibilities within people. A progressive society is one whose structures and conditions empower people to maximise their creative potential. It is thus necessary to explore historically those structures and conditions that impede potential and those that empower, and also to develop a fuller understanding of that human potential itself. To do this the historian has to draw upon that empathy which enables her

to comprehend the culture and behaviour of people living in different ages or places from her own. And she has to give special attention to those people whose history has been denied or neglected.

Equally important is Thompson's idea of historical consciousness helping us to understand the possibilities of transformation - a particularly appropriate message at this time as South Africa stumbles clumsily and violently through its own transformation process. If historical writing can become a humanising force, as opposed to the dehumanising indoctrination that so many South African schoolchildren have been exposed to for so long, then historians will indeed be making a creative, constructive contribution to this tortuous transformation process.