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Forty years of historical research in South Africa: some general trends and personal recollections

Paul Maylam

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Students like to begin their history essays by quoting an historian. As an historian I would like to begin this talk by quoting a student. As you know, at the end of a course lecturers hand out questionnaires so that students can give their assessment of the lecturer and the course. So this is what a student once wrote in a questionnaire about me: “You need to drink some Red Bull”. This is clearly why tonight’s lecture is not by the recipient of the distinguished teaching award. This comment did come some years ago – so maybe I’ve improved a bit since then. But I’ve remembered it, and it hurt. One is supposed to pay careful heed to students’ comments in these questionnaires, but this is one piece of advice I have not taken – wisely, I think. Not a drop have I drunk in my whole life. Red Bull may “give you wings”, but research suggests it can also cause heart damage – and the drink is banned in Norway and Denmark.

I have been asked to say something tonight about my research interests and experience, and to pass on some advice to young researchers. These interests have been quite varied – so in talking about them I won’t be able to offer a coherent presentation centred on a single theme. I will also try to say something about broad trends in South African historical writing.

I began my research career about forty years ago at a time when historical writing about South Africa was beginning to move along exciting fresh paths. New work in the political economy tradition was transforming the way in which South Africa’s past – and present – were being interpreted. To put it simply, it was an approach that viewed segregation and apartheid, as they evolved in the twentieth century, less as systems of racial separation and more as modes of class exploitation. Central to this analysis was the mining revolution of the late nineteenth century (what might in the future come to be called the first mining revolution should Julius Malema’s

proposed new mining revolution, whatever that is, ever materialise). The gold-mining industry, in order to be profitable in the early decades of its existence, required large supplies of cheap, tightly controlled, unskilled labour. The cheapest form of labour was migrant labour – and so developed a system that enabled the industry to become highly profitable, but also brought in its wake far-reaching consequences – a pattern of white racial domination that made possible the ultra-exploitation of labour, together with a widespread social breakdown in town and countryside, largely precipitated by the migrant labour system.

This was the basic starting-point of the new approach. How did it influence my early research? Well, hardly at all. In my own formative student years – the time when one can experience an exciting, personal intellectual transformation as one takes in new ideas – in those years I gained no exposure to this approach – not as an undergraduate student here at Rhodes in the late 1960s when the new radical literature had not yet appeared, nor as a postgraduate student at Queen's University in Canada. There my supervisor, Arthur Keppel-Jones, a South African who had left the country in the late 1950s, was still working in an older liberal tradition – a tradition that came to be heavily criticised by the new generation of radical scholars, sometimes too harshly.

So my research began forty years ago in this liberal tradition, without any real awareness on my part of the developing political economy approach. My first project – a masters mini-thesis – was a study of a late nineteenth-century strip of disputed territory on the border between present-day Botswana and Zimbabwe. No big deal – the only point worth mentioning about this is that three central figures involved in the story were adventurers, mineral prospectors from Grahamstown – Joseph Wood, William Francis and Edward Chapman. So my first venture into the history of Grahamstown took place in Canada.

At the time I was not clear in myself as to what my particular historical interests were – there is a lesson here for a young researcher, and I will come back to this later. So the topic for my PhD thesis was essentially chosen for me by my supervisor – the operations of the British South Africa Company in what was the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) in the 1880s and 1890s. A central player in this story would be one Cecil Rhodes, a figure who would now for the first time become a major focus of my research. The more I delved into his own private papers, the more I discovered about his dealings, the less I liked him. But somehow he managed to find his way into the titles of two of my books, and I have spent twenty-five years of my life studying and working at an institution named after him – happily I may add.

While there was a significant change of direction – a paradigm shift – in South African historiography from the 1970s, there was at the same time a massive expansion in historical writing about the country. Fresh themes came to be addressed and new sub-branches of history opened up: labour history, women's history, urban history, the history of popular culture (sport, music, for instance) and popular struggles; and significant work was done to develop the African history of the country. This has meant a huge growth in published books and articles on South African history in these forty years. I recently gave my second-year students a select bibliography covering just the past 130 years of South African history. It contained over 650 items, and it could have been three times as long had it been more comprehensive. Hardly any items on this list – perhaps four or five – had been available to me when I was a student. Such has been the expansion in the scope of the discipline that one can now ask students to write essays on a range of exciting topics – topics for which there would have been hardly any literature forty years ago. At the same time, though, the amount of historical literature available to students today must seem utterly daunting.

Furthermore the quantity of historical literature is growing at a time when the culture of reading is in decline, giving rise to a disjuncture between supply and demand. This might be seen as the academic equivalent of supply-side economics with its primary emphasis on the production and supply of goods and a secondary concern for demand. Indeed, I believe that there is a crisis of research overproduction and underconsumption – not what the DVC for research wants to hear. There are too many journal articles being published that hardly anybody is reading – a consequence of the 'publish or perish' syndrome. As academics spend more and more time producing research outputs, as they are pressured to do, so they have less time to consume – to read this growing body of literature – here I'm speaking for myself. I think one has to ask, who is making the greater contribution to society? The academic who produces five articles a year that hardly anybody reads? Or the scholar who reads a hundred books a year and passes on that fresh knowledge and thinking to students, who in turn take it out into the world?

In the 1980s the sub-branch of history that I moved into was urban history, developing a particular focus on Durban where I was living at the time. There was a growing number of scholars working on the history of Johannesburg and Cape Town in particular, and so it was important that Durban not be left behind.

In the early twentieth century Durban developed a system for controlling its African population – known as the 'Durban system'. It comprised a local state apparatus of what was called at the time 'native administration'. This was largely funded, not by white ratepayers, but by the profits from municipal beer-halls which supplied sorghum beer to the local African population. Durban's policy was to try to limit the African presence in the city according to labour needs. Hence African residents were generally denied freehold tenure in the city's townships – an indication that their presence in Durban was not deemed to be

permanent. The point to stress here is that Durban, a city in which local government was in the hands of white English-speakers, served as a model for the later development of urban apartheid. Delegations from other municipalities came to Durban in the 1920s to learn about this system.

I will make two general points here. First, this system, and its later development as urban apartheid, represented one of the ugliest underlying principles of the apartheid order – namely, that Africans in urban areas were viewed only as units of labour and not as human beings. This was stated quite explicitly, and brazenly, by a government minister in 1965 when he said that Africans could only be in white areas to supply labour: “it is labour that we are importing”, he said, “and not labourers as individuals”. This was the gross dehumanisation that came with apartheid. The goal was to maximise the exploitation of cheap labour while at the same time minimising the African presence in white areas. Apart from being inhuman this goal was, of course, fundamentally contradictory and impossible to achieve. Influx control and the pass laws were the mechanisms of enforcement – but they were constantly defied, so that there would be millions of arrests under the pass laws and millions more evading arrest. Apartheid policy-makers constantly grappled with this contradiction and failed to resolve it because it was simply not resolvable.

My second general point is to counter the assumption that the main culpability for apartheid rests on the shoulders of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party. The foundations of apartheid were firmly laid before 1948; and it was cities like Durban that pioneered the development of urban apartheid. There is a tendency on the part of English-speakers to deny responsibility for past and present wrongs – what I call ‘the clean hands syndrome’ – ‘we were not responsible for apartheid, nor were we tainted by the violence that ravaged the country during the liberation struggle’. There is complicity in the past and this needs to be acknowledged.

This denial of responsibility on the part of English-speakers may arise out of their relative political powerlessness over the past 100 years. White English-speakers have for the most part enjoyed cultural and economic security, even dominance, but not significant political influence. Since 1910 every prime minister or president has been Afrikaner or African, and since 1948 there have been only a few white English-speaking cabinet ministers. One of the last significant English-speaking political leaders to enjoy power was Cecil Rhodes, 120 years ago, as prime minister of the Cape.

So we are back with him, as it was Rhodes who I returned to as a research subject in 2000, twenty-five years after I had abandoned him, intending never to write about him again. Why, then, the revived interest? In 2000 there were three Rhodes centenaries looming – the centenary of his death in 2002, the centenary of the Rhodes Scholarships in 2003, and of this university in 2004. So I decided to explore how and why it was that his name had lived on during the century after his death – in other words, to examine not his life, but his after-life. This was a venture into the growing field of historical memory. Intending just to write an article, I found more and more material to work with and analyse – over thirty biographies, seven novels in which Rhodes featured, plays, a movie, a TV series, and all the monuments, statues and memorials – the Rhodes Memorial In Cape Town, Rhodes House in Oxford and so much more.

Rhodes was in his lifetime obsessed about his own immortality and the perpetuation of his name. So he would have been happy for the most part with this excessive memorialisation – although not so happy with some of the later critical biographies, nor with the near-total obliteration of his memory in independent Zimbabwe. Only his grave survives in the Matopos – and there have been threats to blow this up, or to disinter his remains and send them back to England.

The main reason for this immortality has been Rhodes' money – a legacy of about 5 million pounds – not a vast amount in terms of today's trusts and foundations – but enough to fund well over 6000 Rhodes Scholars to study at Oxford, as well as contributing to the more recent Mandela-Rhodes scholarships – and providing about 50 000 pounds for the establishment of the first four chairs at this university in 1904. Whatever one may think of Rhodes his money has been put to good use.

Having spent some time working on Cecil Rhodes I decided a few years ago that I wanted to write about likable people. My most recent project arose out of a question that I used to ask friends and colleagues – can you name any twentieth-century head of government anywhere in the world whom you really admire? People struggled to come up with anybody. This got me thinking and reading. The twentieth century has been called 'the age of catastrophe' by the late Eric Hobsbawm, the brilliant British historian who died two weeks ago – perhaps 190 million people killed in wars in the century, most of which were wholly unnecessary and easily avoided had the key decision-makers been endowed with greater wisdom and humanity.

So I tried to identify some exceptions to this dismal norm, and selected six twentieth-century heads of government – presidents or prime ministers – who displayed certain desirable qualities in the way in which they governed, and I wrote 15 000-word biographical essays on each of them. Of the six, three were little-known Latin American presidents from the first half of the century, and three better-known figures from the second half – Nehru of India, Olof Palme of Sweden, and Mandela. I do not present these figures as heroes or great leaders, but as heads of government who are worthy of admiration and emulation. They all had shortcomings and have been subjected to critique – Nehru and Mandela in particular.

What were my criteria for selection? Each possessed a basic humanity, a deep sense of compassion, a commitment to international peace, a proper respect for democratic principles and human rights, a genuine concern to promote social and economic justice, and moral authority – meaning no ostentation, no conspicuous consumption, no grandiosity or pomposity. In reality five of the six – Palme excepted – found it very difficult to fully realise these values and concerns, given the conditions that existed in their countries.

My choice of these six was, of course, highly subjective, and it has been criticised. I would like to believe that the work gets more scholars and others thinking and writing about government leadership in the modern world, and to bring the field of leadership studies more into the terrain of social science, thereby reducing the business sector's current domination of the field. After all, when it comes to leadership in government, the twenty-first century is so far looking no better than the twentieth, with twelve years of war and civil war already behind us, involving massive human slaughter, social dislocation and physical destruction.

I said earlier that I thought the 1970s and 1980s had represented an exciting phase in the development of South African historical writing. I feel unable to say the same about the past twenty years – but maybe I am stuck in an older mind-set. History was a politically important subject during the apartheid era, for both sides in the conflict. The defenders of apartheid needed eurocentric versions of South African history – versions that stressed white superiority and black inferiority – in order to try to justify apartheid. Opponents of apartheid drew upon history to provide some hope for the future – either by pointing to the contradictions and flaws in the apartheid system that could bring about its collapse, or by highlighting the struggles of the oppressed and showing the revolutionary potential of such struggles.

When apartheid came to an end history thus lost much of its political significance – the system that history had been used to defend or attack no longer existed, although its legacy is still very much with us. At the same time some of the more established approaches to history – whether it be the standard orthodox approach that tried to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible, or the Marxist political economy approach – these came under attack from the postmodern critique that denied the possibility of any accurate reconstruction of the past, and dismissed the Marxist approach as nothing more than a grand theory, a metanarrative that gave a false coherence to what has been a thoroughly complex, chaotic past.

So what was to be the role of the historian in the post-apartheid era? Some have found a place in the heritage sector – assisting in the development of heritage sites, training heritage workers, revamping museum displays, and so on. This has been worthwhile, but by its very nature it is very difficult for the heritage sector to capture the complexity and contestation that are part of history, tending as it does to present rather fixed views of the past. But it is clearly important as it reaches a far wider public than does academic history.

History and memory has been another developing field – how the past is remembered and represented in different ways – so the focus is more on the process of how history is transmitted to us, rather than on the actual past itself – the kind of work I did on Rhodes, and a particular research interest of my colleague, Gary Baines.

What I bemoan is the sidelining of the political economy approach. I find this regrettable at a time when the power of corporations is greater than it has ever been in the history of the world – when ownership of the mainstream media, for instance, enables corporations increasingly to control the various messages that are sent out – think Rupert Murdoch.

In South African historiography there was once a central focus on the mining industry – a theme barely considered by historians these days – it is old-hat. Yes, mining has long since ceased to hold its once-dominant position in the South African economy, but the events of recent weeks tell us that the industry is still at the centre of class struggles that continue to rage in the country that is the most unequal in the world.

A few final points. My brief is also to pass on advice to young researchers. First, try to discover as soon as possible the research area that really interests and excites you – in other words, don't follow my example as I took some time to discover my real interests. Second, don't just follow the money – don't just engage in research because there is funding for it, especially if the field does not particularly interest you. Third, don't just engage in research work for the sake of it – simply to increase your outputs, improve your cv, and gain recognition. There needs to be a higher purpose – a desire to make some kind of contribution to society, perhaps an emancipatory one.

Lastly, try not to become demoralised or dispirited. The pressures and demands on young academics today are far, far greater than they were when I started lecturing 38 years ago. The pressure to be a productive researcher – to obtain a PhD and publish – is very much more intense than it was. Your teaching is ever more closely monitored. There is a call for community engagement activity. Such are the pressures I sometimes wonder whether universities will still be able to attract the best young minds into the academic profession. My message is – try not to be overwhelmed by these demands. It is impossible to be performing optimally in all these different areas. Think positively about what you are achieving – not negatively about those areas in which you feel you are not meeting the demands. And in spite of all these pressures an academic career is still richly rewarding – I have certainly found it to be so.

My final word of advice – don’t think that you will be a better teacher or researcher if you drink Red Bull.