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Francis Wilson (1939–2022): Economist and mentor

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Francis Aylmer Hunter Wilson (1939–2022) was an economist whose work contributed significantly towards our understanding of the social impact of the migrant labour system in southern Africa. Perhaps even more important was the role he played in mentoring progressive research in the social sciences during his long tenure in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Economics Department between 1967 and 2004, and in particular by creating the South African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) in 1975.

Francis, the elder son of the anthropologists Monica and Godfrey Wilson, was born in 1939 in Zambia, where his father was Director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. Two years later the family returned to South Africa, where they settled at Monica's family home Hunterstoun, at Hogsback in the Eastern Cape. Godfrey, a pacifist, enlisted in the South African Army, first in the Medical Corps and subsequently in the Education Service, but died just before Francis's fifth birthday. Monica took up a post at Fort Hare and was subsequently appointed Professor of Social Anthropology at, respectively, Rhodes in 1947, and then UCT in 1952, where she remained for the rest of her working life. In each case she was the first female full professor to be appointed at the institution.

Monica's appointment proved to be a wise one for UCT as she emerged as the country's leading social scientist of her generation, and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980. She shared this honour with Francis' paternal grandfather, the Shakespearean scholar John Dover Wilson, Regius Professor of English at Edinburgh, and a Companion of Honour to boot. For Francis, an academic career was not an easy act to follow.

Francis was at school at St Andrew's in Grahamstown, remaining there as a boarder at the college once his mother had moved to Cape Town. In 1957 he enrolled at UCT, where he obtained a BSc in physics, and met his future wife Lindy Serrurier, whom he married in 1964. Influenced by having grown up in Hogsback, he decided that he would like to work in a field with more potential direct impact on South African society, so decided to switch to economics when, in 1960, he went up to his grandfather's old college, Gonville and Caius, at Cambridge. He read for the Economics Tripos and subsequently completed a PhD in 1967, returning to UCT to a lectureship in economics in the same year.

His major work of scholarship, the book *Labour in the South African Gold Mines 1911–1969*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 1972, and was based on his doctoral thesis. It revealed that black miners' wages had actually declined in real terms during this period, despite the rise of white worker's wages and increased prosperity in the industry. When Francis discovered this, four years earlier, he wrote a popular article about it in the *Financial Mail*, expecting a strong counter-argument in response from the Chamber of Mines.

But even the antediluvian Chamber found this embarrassing, said nothing to refute it, and black miners' wages began to increase during the 1970s. At the same time, increasing numbers of South Africans were employed on the mines. Before 1973, approximately three quarters of black workers came from the neighbouring states of Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia. Today miners no longer count among the lowest paid members of the workforce, but this sadly remains the fate of workers from neighbouring states.

Two other important works of personal scholarship were a report to the SA Council of Churches on migrant labour in the same year; and a chapter on farm labour in the *Oxford History of South Africa* in 1971.

Not satisfied with academic labours alone, Francis and Reverend David Russell got together a small, ecumenical group of men to walk from Grahamstown to Cape Town over Christmas 1972 to highlight the migrant labour system which forced the break-up of black families by law. His brother Tim was also part of the group.

An early proponent of what is now called experiential learning, Francis believed that in order to write authentically about labour he needed to experience what it was like to be a labourer. Realising the impracticalities of attempting this in South Africa, he spent part of a sabbatical assembling lorries and fire engines for the Berliet factory in Lyon, France, among the North African migrants.

In 1975 he founded and became Director of SALDRU; he was appointed professor of economics in 1979. SALDRU became his most important academic project, in which his personal strengths came to the fore. A marvellous networker, he was remarkably effective in raising research funds, and no less so in ensuring that they were well spent. Francis appeared to extract work from his graduate students by a combination of enthusiasm and charm alone, in contrast to the often tortuous processes resorted to by the rest of us.

Despite heading a large group, Francis took very little credit for the research of which he was the ultimate progenitor. Most of his students published on their own, or at least without him as a co-author.

Among his many protégés at SALDRU included the distinguished academic economists Murray Leibrandt (his successor as director there) and Stephen Devereux (now at the Institute for Social Development at the University of the Western Cape); as well as the current Minister of Trade, Industry, and Competition, Ebrahim Patel.

In 1982 Francis was appointed to direct the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in South Africa, which was to become the focus of his work during the 1980s. To this project he recruited Mamphele Ramphele, and they subsequently co-edited the book *Uprooting Poverty – The South African Challenge*. Ramphele went on to become Vice-Chancellor at UCT before serving as a managing director of the World Bank.

In 1995, he was amongst the 106 Founder Members of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), which was launched in 1996 with then-President Nelson Mandela as patron.

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On relinquishing the directorship of SALDRU in 2001, Francis founded the Data First Resource Unit, an information and training programme dedicated to providing open access to data from South Africa and other African countries, as well as developing skills among prospective users.

Francis remained deeply passionate about that most maddening but alluring of provinces, the Eastern Cape, for the course of his life. As had his mother, he returned often to Hogsback outside of the university term to write, and it was here that he was most relaxed and happy. During the critical and often turbulent years from 1990 to 1999, Francis was Chairperson of the Council at the University of Fort Hare in Alice, during which time Sibisiso Bengu was recruited as rector from 1991 to 1994. Bengu went on to become Minister of Education in the Mandela government.

Francis's Eastern Cape background was critical to a formative aspect of his persona which had profound effects on his career. Colonialism, followed by apartheid, largely succeeded in setting different races in South Africa apart from each other. This hardly applied in the case of Monica Wilson, whose parents were Scottish missionaries and who spent her primary school years at Lovedale Girls' School, where white children comprised a small minority. In Francis' generation, learning isiXhosa, together with his family's close association with the Bokwe, Mathews and Mali families, meant that he did not see himself as apart from people or different.

Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, in his homily at Francis's funeral in St Georges' Cathedral on 2 May 2022, mentioned Francis' own invocation of the words of the theologian Paul Tillich, who describes love as 'the drive towards the unity of the separated'. This proved to be a central tenet both in Francis' personal life and in his work, and resulted in his enjoying credibility from a wide range of quarters.

Francis met Mpumlwana, Steve Biko, Mamphela Ramphele and other members of the Black Consciousness Movement through his friend David Russell, who was a parish priest in King William's Town, when Biko was banned to his mother's home in its Ginsburg township in 1973. Black consciousness resonated with both he and Lindy, and they became regular visitors to the office in Leopold Street, King Williamstown, from which the Black Community Programmes operated, as well as the Zanempilo Clinic nearby before Biko was arrested and killed – and most of his associates banned – in 1977.

Perhaps more than anything else, it is Francis' inimitable optimism which will be missed, both within and beyond the academy. His son-in-law, the late Stephen Watson, alluded to this once when he said that if Francis was missing outside at night he could visibly be found 'glowing in the dark'; an anecdote Francis's daughter Tanya related at his funeral. Francis's enthusiasm appeared to have no bounds, and served as an inspiration to all whom he encountered.

Francis is survived by Lindy, his children David, Jessica and Tanya, grandchildren Hannah and Julian, and his brother Tim.



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Reference

1. Wilson F, Perrot D, editors. Outlook on a century: South Africa 1870–1970. Lovedale: Lovedale Press; 1973. p.1.