

*John Lambert – University of South Africa*

I am fortunate to have been influenced by three historians, John Agar-Hamilton, Maurice Geen and Colin Webb, each at a crucial stage in my development. I come from a family in which religion and singing were important parts of family life and it was taken for granted that as a young boy I would follow in the footsteps of uncles, brother and sister, and sing in the choir of St Alban's Cathedral in Pretoria. My parents also encouraged me to read widely, but it was during evensong on Sunday evenings that a love of history was instilled in me by John Agar-Hamilton, at that time editor-in-chief of the Union War History and a sub-deacon in the Cathedral. He frequently preached at evensong. There was a strong Christian message in his sermons, but it was the history in them that captivated me. Whereas it was only too easy for a young boy to fall asleep while other preachers droned on, I would sit enthralled listening to Agar-Hamilton expounding on Europe's Christian and missionary history. I was so impressed by a sermon on Roman roads that to this day, over 50 years later, I seek them out every time I am in England.

Thanks to Agar-Hamilton's influence, I became an avid reader of classical and British history and many Saturdays were spent searching out books in the State and Berea Park Libraries in Pretoria. By the time he moved to Grahamstown in 1958, I was a pupil at Clapham High School where in 1957 the headmaster, the redoubtable Maurice Geen, taught history to the second form. Whereas Agar-Hamilton had instilled in me a love of history, Geen shaped my understanding of what history means and guided my reading. He was a most perceptive teacher and soon realised that the not particularly promising pupil in his class could, with a little effort, become a budding historian. A firm believer in the importance of the individual in shaping history, he encouraged me to read biographies and would spend time discussing them with me. Although 1957 was my only contact with Geen as a history teacher, in my senior years at Clapham I would regularly receive a summons to his office where he would hand me one of his books and ask me to let him know what I thought of it. Geen was a passionate believer in British values and institutions and the books he gave me tended to be on British history, however he skilfully weaned me from an early love of the works of "patriotic" historians such as Arthur Bryant and Winston Churchill by exposing me particularly to those of C.V. Wedgwood, for whom he had a great admiration.

Geen, like Agar-Hamilton, was a staunch Anglican and on retiring at the end of 1961, he was ordained and became a self-supporting priest on Tristan da Cunha before finally retiring to England. Although I was to see him only once after he retired, I retain a strong sense of gratitude to a man who was prepared to take so much trouble over developing in me a love for and understanding of the past.

In the 1960s I read History at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg where, like so many undergraduates of that time, I fell under the spell of Colin Webb's lectures. Although I was only to discover this later, Webb had, together with Burrige Spies, later my colleague at Unisa, been a pupil at Pretoria Boys' High School in the 1940s when Geen had taught history at the school. As I was to learn, both historians looked to Geen as an early inspiration for their love and understanding of the past.

There are few scholars in the field of Natal and Zulu studies who do not acknowledge their debt to Colin Webb. I owe so much to his inspiration and encouragement that it is difficult to do justice to him in a few words. Physically, intellectually and as a man of principle, he was larger than life; an inspiring lecturer who widened my studies to embrace

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a love of South African, and particularly Natal history. Colin however was far more than an outstanding lecturer. He was a man of deep convictions who instilled in me both a liberal consciousness and the belief that history was something to be passionate about; that although the historian had always to see both sides of an argument, he should, indeed must, be prepared to hold strong convictions about what had happened in the past.

Colin did not tolerate half measures and possibly the greatest thing he taught me was that if I wanted to become a historian, only the best was good enough, both as a lecturer and a researcher. This was particularly important when I wrote my master's dissertation under his supervision. I am forever indebted to the care and thoroughness with which he guided me; not only did he teach me how to become a researcher and how to improve my literary skills, he also established the benchmark against which I have always judged myself as a lecturer and a supervisor.

Of the three historians who played a role in my development as a historian, Colin Webb's influence was undoubtedly the most important. In addition to being a teacher and a mentor he was also responsible for my becoming a lecturer at Unisa when, at the request of the then head of the History Department, Christoph Muller, he recommended me for a contract post. But John Agar-Hamilton and Maurice Geen, by establishing in me a love of history, laid the groundwork for my development as a historian.