

Three who led me to history

*Randolph Vigne*²

History was poorly taught at my schools, as in most others in South Africa in the 1930s and '40s. In my Sixth Form year when I read for the University of South Africa's then History I, studying H.A.L. Fisher's *History of Europe* and little else. My headmaster at St Andrew's College, Grahamstown, Ronald Currey, opened my eyes to Roman history in that last year, but this did not compensate for Thatcher and Schwil on European, and Fowler and Smit on South African history. This was an uninspiring diet for such a good school.

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At Oxford I read English language and literature (with Currey's disapproval – "books about books"), having won at school the Coupland Prize (donated by the historian) for English literature, with essays on the history-based *Cymbeline*, *Barnaby Rudge* and Browning's "Epistle to Karshish".

As English editor at Maskew Miller's in 1950, responsible for their mainly educational list, I was first led into the study of history, which has been a major interest, almost a reason for living, through the six decades that have followed.

Old Thomas Maskew Miller was one of those Victorian commercial titans who built up a dominating bookselling and publishing concern, having started as a counter hand at Darter's, and he soon eclipsed it. He was a bibliophile too and his collection of rare South African books and pamphlets became, after his death, the "Africana Room". Here I would spend tea breaks, lunch hours and perhaps too much of the "company's time" picking my way through the splendid collection. Having read so little history, how did I know what to read? My mentor was a short, rotund lady with pebble glasses and a grey bun, the manager of the Africana Room, Miss M.K. Jeffreys, and she was the first and perhaps the most influential of the people who have demarcated the area of my studies and taught me how to cultivate it.

Open almost any issue of the *Archives Year Books of South African History* until the 1940s, and many early Van Riebeeck Society volumes, and you will find acknowledgments to "Miss M.K. Jeffreys, M.A. of the Archives Dept., Cape Town". The incomplete volume VI of Cory's *Rise of South Africa*, published in the series in 1940, acknowledged her having prepared "the synopsis of each chapter and the detailed index to the volume" (Longman's indexes to volumes I-V were very sketchy). She was a tremendous help to her senior (male) colleagues at the Cape Archives, notably Colin Graham Botha and Victor de Kock, particularly with her detailed knowledge of the early years of the Cape under the Dutch.

Kathleen Jeffreys had been a mature student from a poor background at Rhodes University College in the 1920s, but would have learned no history from Cory, who was professor of chemistry until freed by government subsidy in 1925 to do his historical research in Cape Town, where she would have known him in her Archives years. Professor W.M. Macmillan was before her time at Rhodes but his influence seems to have remained (Professor I.D. McCrone, in the 1930s,

found English-speaking girls at Rhodes one of the most liberal groups in the country in relation to race.) Macmillan blazed a trail in South African history studies which as been followed by many enlightened historians to this day. He was followed at Rhodes by Margaret Hodgson (later Ballinger), who may have overlapped with M.K.J., as readers of her book, picture and antique sales notes in the *Cape Times* knew her, was staunchly liberal in her political views, yet always a seeker after truth. She taught me, above all, the primacy of archival sources, the ultimate authority of the records, and the duty to follow them scrupulously.

She also encouraged me to see history as a whole, not a succession of periods and happenings in unconnected regions. She could summarise Cory's eastern Cape history in the 1850s and 1860s as authoritatively as she could scrutinise affairs in *Het Vlek* in the Van der Stels' day.

Sadly, she failed to publish and her vast knowledge of the seventeenth-century Cape went to the grave with her.

The need to put pen to paper and publish was imparted to me by my second major influence. He was Major Charles Ralph Boxer, a regular soldier who had never been to a university and had no degree but was Camões Professor of Portuguese Imperial History at King's College, London University, and author, by the time of his death aged 96 in 2000, of some 450 books, articles and reviews, chiefly on Portuguese and Dutch history.

We met first in England in 1956, sharing an interest in the China coast painter, George Chinnery, who had lived in Macau from 1825 to 1852. Boxer visited us in Cape Town in 1960 and after lecturing at Wits, invited by Professor J.S. Marais, whom he greatly respected, set off for eastern Pondoland by train and coach to visit the sites of shipwrecks whose stories he had translated from the original sixteenth and seventeenth century Portuguese narrative (collected in 1733 as the classic *História Trágico-Marítima*). Pondoland was in the throes of a peasant revolt against Verwoerd's "Bantu Authorities", but Boxer bought his coach ticket undaunted, saying to us: "If you see a headline 'Professor incinerated in bus', it'll be me." He lived Tawney's dictum about a historian needing a pair of stout boots. I learned that from Boxer, as I did his commitment to a moral basis for his reconstruction of the past. Though honoured and bemedalled in Portugal, Brazil and the Netherlands for his magisterial studies of their imperial ages, he did not hesitate to write what they did not want to read, as in his Wits lectures. Published as

Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire (1964), they gave the lie to Portuguese claims to social (and sexual) non-racialism.

As J.S. Marais, in *Maynier and the First Boer Republic* had castigated Theal, so did Boxer utterly discredit S.R. Welch. I have tried to follow that lead towards historians, sometimes my betters, who need to be held to account. It is also a duty to withhold praise where it is not due, but this comes from the Reverend Sydney Smith in an earlier age.

Charles Boxer, whom I once recruited to lecture on the celebrated Huguenot traveller Tavernier, was not an outstanding speaker. He read the lecture and, when finished, handed in a perfect text ready for publication.

A third, much lesser influence, was a brilliant speaker, who held an audience for an hour, without a note. The last lecture I commissioned from him – his last too? – was delivered when he was nearly blind, and was as commanding as ever. He created endless difficulties over publication, however, once flatly denying to my predecessor that he had ever agreed to it. Another time, at a conference, he was seen to be scribbling away at the back of the hall until he was called to the podium. Both lectures were spoken perfectly. He was Hugh Trevor-Roper, sometime Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. Later Lord Dacre of Glanton, his *hubris*, the cause of his disgrace over the authentication of the concocted “Hitler Diaries”, was tempered by a willingness to speak to very minor audiences, such as the Huguenot Society on the above occasions. He must have taken much trouble to speak for an hour *ex tempore* and was “affable and condescending”, as the old phrase goes, to those he dealt with. His much-evidenced unpleasantrness to others of higher academic status was outside my own experience of him. To me he was a model, as speaker and prose stylist in his writings.

Of the trio who inspired me – M.K. Jeffreys, Boxer and Trevor-Roper – to Boxer I owe a particular debt. When one met him, he would, almost invariably, pluck a card or note from a pocket with the name and telephone number of a historian, researcher, or student (usually of Portuguese) in need of a leg-up. He provided the leg-up I myself needed by commanding my humble efforts to Professor Charles Wilson, professor of Netherlands history at Cambridge, as a speaker at a major conference, with subsequent publication and a measure of recognition. It was a good start. Thank you, Charles.