

## Reminiscences - Herinneringe

### A hundred years of History at Rhodes University: some reflections on the department's centenary colloquium, September 2011

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In 1911, W.M. Macmillan, who would become the most distinguished South Africanist historian of his generation, was appointed as the first lecturer in History (and Economics) at what was then Rhodes University College. To mark the centenary of its founding the Rhodes History Department held a two-day colloquium on 16–17 September 2011. The event brought together almost 50 current and former staff and students. Some delivered papers reflecting on the history of the department; others spoke about their present research interests. Among the participants there was a representative from every decade since the 1940s – Rodney Davenport having been a student in the department from 1943.

Providing the link back to the founding of the department was W.M. Macmillan's son, Hugh, who came out from Oxford to talk about his father's days in the Eastern Cape. Macmillan was a remarkable figure. During his years at Wits in the 1920s he would write important books – *Bantu, Boer and Briton* (1929) among the most important – providing a revisionist interpretation of South African history. He also carried out an extraordinary amount of fieldwork, pursuing his deep interest in contemporary socio-economic issues such as poverty, landlessness and conditions of rural and urban life. He travelled the length and breadth of South Africa, by cart, rail, road or sea, interviewing local people, in particular farmers. He conducted research into white poverty in Grahamstown, and produced a pamphlet calling for sanitary reform in the town (something required today in some areas where the bucket system still operates).

Macmillan was, too, a public intellectual who spoke out on political issues – a tendency that brought him into conflict with the Wits authorities. And he was an inspiring teacher. Among his students at Rhodes were Margaret Hodgson (later Ballinger) and A.L. Geyer. At Wits, two of his students, C.W. de Kiewiet and Lucy Sutherland, would go on to become outstanding historians.<sup>1</sup> During the six years Macmillan spent at Rhodes, from 1911 to 1917, he was severely constrained in what he could teach, given the kind of secondary sources available. He was acutely aware of the dire limitations of the literature on South Africa:

What passed for South African history when I started my teaching career was the tale of the conquest of a new country by lonely and scattered white men, with no regard whatever for the interests or the fate of ... [indigenous people]. History was the triumph of white power in crushing all these peoples.<sup>2</sup>

This wariness was well justified. Among the prescribed history texts at Rhodes in 1911 were C.P. Lucas' *Historical Geography of the British Colonies*, and J.R. Seeley's *Expansion of*

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1. See the two colloquium papers on Macmillan: H. Macmillan, "The Travels and Researches of W.M. Macmillan in Southern Africa, 1915–32"; and B. Murray, "W.M. Macmillan and the Making of History at Wits, 1917–1933".
2. W.M. Macmillan, *My South African Years* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1975), p 162.

*England*. Lucas had a thoroughly simplistic view of the country's past: "South African history", he wrote, "consists largely of wars and treaties with Boers and natives."<sup>3</sup> Lucas' work was full of the old Eurocentric stereotypes: indigenous people readily described as "savages"; Shaka deemed responsible for "wholesale extermination".<sup>4</sup>

Seeley's approach was informed by his own firm sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority, and by an unabashed Whig view of history. Students would have read that "slowly but surely England has grown greater and greater".<sup>5</sup> All this was very much in keeping with the founding ethos of Rhodes University College, established in 1904 with the clear purpose of extending and strengthening the imperial idea in South Africa and, as John Darwin has put it, making Rhodes "the engine room of English cultural ascendancy in South Africa".<sup>6</sup>

Macmillan thus preferred to teach European and British history. But he was far from being Eurocentric. In the context of South Africa during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, he was a radical thinker. He opposed the segregationist thought and practice which was dominant among both liberal and conservative whites, preferring to espouse the idea of South Africa as a single society. Moreover, his combined interest in history and contemporary issues, as well as his pursuit of research in both, set him apart from other academics of his era. W.M. Macmillan gave the Rhodes History Department a good start.

Rodney Davenport provided another link back to the early history of the department as he reflected upon his days at Rhodes. He had met W.M. Macmillan and studied under and/or worked alongside some subsequent heads of department, before himself taking up the position in 1975. Michael Roberts held the chair of History from 1935 till 1953, but was out of the country between 1943 and 1945, performing war service as an information officer and then joining the British Council in Sweden. Rodney Davenport took courses in History under Winifred Maxwell in 1943 and 1944, before himself entering war service in Italy just before the end of the conflict. In 1943 and 1944 the History Department was very much a "one-woman show", as Winifred Maxwell did most of the teaching. Like Macmillan before her, she also displayed an astute understanding of contemporary issues, giving a public lecture series on world affairs, during which she predicted with great foresight the future rise of Asian states.<sup>7</sup>

Rodney Davenport's return to the department in 1946 to take History honours, coincided with the return of Michael Roberts. Davenport remembers Roberts' "homely honours tuts ... He would rise from his piano stool ... then set us in easy chairs in his lounge to get us talking about our essays for the honours course in seventeenth and eighteenth-century European history".<sup>8</sup>

Michael Roberts must surely have been one of the most formidable scholars ever to have taught at Rhodes University. Possessed of a remarkable mind, he knew long passages of Dickens by heart and could quote extensively from Jane Austen, Trollope and various poets.

3. C.P. Lucas, *Historical Geography of the British Colonies, Volume 4* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1900), p 225.
4. Lucas, *Historical Geography*, pp 15, 136, 191, 271.
5. J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (Macmillan, London, 1911), p 162.
6. J. Darwin, "The Rhodes Trust in the Age of Empire", in A. Kenny (ed), *The History of the Rhodes Trust* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), p 496.
7. See the paper delivered by Rodney Davenport at the colloquium, T.R.H. Davenport, "Oxford at Rhodes? Its Middle Age, 1943–1990".
8. Davenport, "Oxford at Rhodes?"

He was also a gifted musician. When I interviewed him a few weeks before his death late in 1996 he told me that he had stopped listening to the Thursday night concerts on the radio because he could play the music better in his mind.

It was as an historian that Roberts established an outstanding international reputation. He was appointed to the chair at Rhodes in 1935 at the age of 27, having obtained a brilliant first at Oxford. During his sixteen years at Rhodes he became renowned for his fine teaching. A student taking Roberts' first-year history course in 1939 later recalled how he "at the very first lecture was struck, not to say dazzled, by the effortless articulateness and the urbane, ironic style of the lecturer".<sup>9</sup> Six of his Rhodes students would later move into chairs of history: Leonard Thompson, Rodney Davenport, John Omer-Cooper, Jeffrey Horton, Andrew Duminy and Basil le Cordeur.

In 1954 Roberts left Rhodes to take up the chair of History at Queen's University, Belfast. By that time he was establishing himself in the field of Swedish history. He would eventually publish several books in this field and, in the view of one renowned Swedish historian, would achieve "single-handedly more than all other historians together" in "making Swedish history known in the Anglo-Saxon world".<sup>10</sup> Roberts was remembered by colleagues for the "remarkable (at times almost terrifying) versatility of mind and range of knowledge" that he displayed in research seminars.<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Parker has described him as "one of the most erudite, prolific, and influential British historians of the twentieth century".<sup>12</sup>

The two decades from 1954 to 1974 might well be described as the age of Winifred Maxwell, who occupied the chair during those years. While she had been a one-woman show during Rodney Davenport's first two years as a student, this appears to have still been very much the case in the early 1960s. When Peter Kallaway and Eddie Webster took History honours at Rhodes in 1964, all four courses were taught by Maxwell.

She maintained something of an Oxford tradition at Rhodes, following in the footsteps of previous Oxford graduates, Macmillan and Roberts. She had obtained a first-class honours in modern History at Oxford. As the editors of her *festskrift* would write soon after her retirement, "An Oxford emphasis on logic and accuracy, as much as Italianate inspiration, has accompanied Winifred Maxwell to the academic (and other) frontiers she has fought upon".<sup>13</sup>

During her 21 years in the chair, student numbers in the department increased from 75 to over 200. Among her students from the late 1950s and early 1960s was a particularly able group who went on to distinguish themselves in further study at Oxbridge – among them Vic Gatrell, Geoff Ellis, Deryck Schreuder and John Benyon. There was later a time in the 1980s when the chairs of History at the University of Cape Town, Wits, the Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses of the University of Natal, and Rhodes, were all held by Maxwell's former students (respectively, Basil le Cordeur, Bruce Murray, Andrew Duminy,

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9. G. Parker, "Michael Roberts 1908–1996", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 115, 2002, p. 337.

10. Parker, "Michael Roberts", p. 343.

11. Parker, "Michael Roberts", p. 340.

12. Parker, "Michael Roberts", p. 352.

13. J.A. Benyon, C.W. Cook, T.R.H. Davenport, K.S. Hunt, "Winifred Maxwell, Historian", in J.A. Benyon, C.W. Cook, T.R.H. Davenport and K.S. Hunt (eds), *Studies in Local History: Essays in Honour of Professor Winifred Maxwell* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1976), p. 7.

John Benyon and Rodney Davenport). No wonder that the president of the South African Historical Society, Professor Noel Garson, at the society's fourth biennial conference would describe her as the "doyen of modern South African historians" in recognition of her contribution to historical scholarship in the country.<sup>14</sup>

One particular honours course introduced by Maxwell came to be much talked about at the centenary colloquium. This was the "Age of Anne". Why, people have often wondered, should a university in the Eastern Cape have developed a special honours course on the twelve-year reign of an English queen at the beginning of the eighteenth century? The explanation to emerge at the colloquium was that Maxwell had acquired a sizeable body of primary sources for the period and saw the course as providing valuable training in historical research. Former students who took the course (myself among them) could not remember too much of its content, but did value the experience of working extensively with primary material (the department still holds the collection of sources, long after the demise of the course).

So for years training in primary research at Rhodes was conducted in the field of British rather than South African history. After Rodney Davenport returned to the department in 1965 he shared with Winifred Maxwell the responsibility for teaching South African history at the third-year level. He taught the post-1860 course which I took in 1969, at a time when the significant historiographical developments of later years were yet to occur. For insight into the history of African societies one was still dependent on the work of anthropologists like Monica Wilson, Isaac Schapera, Eileen Krige and Hilda Kuper. A student wanting to read about black political opposition in the twentieth century would have had to rely on Eddie Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* (1979). The Simons' *Class and Colour* only appeared in 1969, and Walshe's *Rise of African Nationalism* in 1970. Davenport could, however, lecture on episodes of twentieth-century African resistance – the Bambatha Rebellion, for instance, and the Bulhoek massacre of 1921. And he distributed to students unpublished papers by Ranger on the 1896–97 *chimurenga*. This at the time was the latest work, at the cutting edge. In the field of political economy none of the fresh revisionist work of the 1970s, by Legassick and others, was yet out. Davenport urged his students to read one pioneering article – Blainey's "Lost Causes of the Jameson Raid" – which offered some kind of materialist analysis of the raid.

All this serves to underline the (perhaps obvious) point that the teaching of history at any time is constrained by the limitations of knowledge at that particular moment. Historians of later eras might look back with some contempt at the work of earlier generations, failing to take into account the conditions of possibility for knowledge production and transmission in those earlier times.

Rodney Davenport took over the chair from Winifred Maxwell in 1975. By this time African History was becoming a rapidly growing field. As African countries had gained their independence, so had the demand grown for a history of the continent that was freed from old colonial assumptions and stereotypes. African History as a field of research and teaching grew slowly in South Africa, lagging behind some other African countries. Davenport was keen to be involved in the catch-up process, and so brought two Africanist historians, Julian Cobbing and Jeff Peires, into the department in the late 1970s. Their arrival allowed for the

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14. Benyon et al., *Studies in Local History*, p 11.

introduction of two undergraduate African courses and an African special subject as an alternative to the Age of Anne at the honours level.

In the 1960s a gendered understanding of history had not developed at Rhodes, as was the case with most history departments across the world. Two papers at the centenary colloquium dealt not so much with questions relating to history and gender, but rather with the gendered experience of students at Rhodes. Rosemary Jackson wrote of the humiliations endured by women students in the early 1960s – the awful first-year rituals, often involving the parading of young women students before the gaze of senior males; and the draconian disciplinary rules and procedures which came down particularly hard on women students deemed to have deviated from genteel feminine norms. Rosemary also remembered being refused entry into History honours by W.A. Maxwell, even though she met the entrance requirements. There was a sense that she favoured her “laddies”.<sup>15</sup>

Another gendered understanding of student life at Rhodes was offered in a paper by Robert Morrell. His perspective was that of a former male history student of the late 1970s who is now one of South Africa’s foremost scholars in the field of masculinity studies. He argued that many white middle-class male students spend time in a phase or space that is termed “guyland” – an intermediate, indeterminate period, perhaps lasting some years, between leaving school and “settling down”. It is a time when these young adult males enjoy newly acquired liberties – such as the right to vote, drink and drive a car – without being burdened by heavy responsibilities. In this space masculinity tends to gain expression in various activities – chief among them, drinking, courting, playing sport, and sometimes fighting. Those who did not conform to these behaviour patterns – perhaps those whose orientation was not heterosexual, or those engaged in left-wing politics – were often mocked by the “guyland” majority for being unmanly or unpatriotic.<sup>16</sup>

In reflecting upon the history of history at Rhodes University over a 100-year period, one is struck by both the continuities and discontinuities. Among the latter there is the obvious break with an older Eurocentric tradition. Although W.M. Macmillan was not Eurocentric, the South African texts available to his students in 1911 were crudely so. In the ensuing decades some of this crudeness would have been filtered away, but as late as the 1960s the overwhelming focus of history courses was either on Europe or on Europeans in South Africa. A major shift occurred in the 1970s with the introduction of courses in African History. The broadening of the geographical scope of the department’s courses has continued into the present, so that students now have some exposure, albeit limited, to South Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas, as well as to global perspectives.

In the field of South African History alone there has been a remarkable broadening in the range of themes that can be covered. Themes such as ethnicity and nationalism were barely on the agenda of historians and social scientists in South Africa 40 years ago. Now there is a vast literature on Zulu nationalism, Afrikaner nationalism, and coloured identity, and a growing body of work on English and Indian identities. Urban history was hardly developed at all in South Africa in the 1960s, but it has become a vast field. So it is now possible to set an essay on District Six or Sophiatown, and direct students to at least ten texts on each; or on gangs on the Rand, for which there is extensive published work. The

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15. R. Jackson, “Rosie Writes Back: A Women Student’s Experience at Rhodes University in the 1960s”, paper presented at the colloquium.

16. R. Morrell, “Pissed and Punching: Masculinity, Politics and the Extra-curriculum at Rhodes in the 1970s”, paper presented at the colloquium.

department now offers courses on gender history, environmental history, the history of health and disease, film and history, the history of popular culture. Most of these have a strong South African focus. One could run a course on the social history of South African sport. None of this would have been possible 30 or 40 years ago, such has been the burgeoning of historical literature on South Africa in recent decades.

Among the continuities in the department's history one should note the Oxford influence. This was particularly evident from 1911 to 1991, during which time the leading figures in the department – W.M. Macmillan, I.J. Rousseau, Michael Roberts, W.A. Maxwell, and Rodney Davenport – were all Oxford graduates (although Davenport's main field of study was theology at Oxford). This Oxford influence meant that the Rhodes department would consistently operate in an empirical tradition. This was a tradition which, in Davenport's words, was committed to

seeking the truth with the self-imposed impartiality of Thucydides and Ranke, and based on the evidence of documents classed as primary and secondary, and presented as a form of narrative literature with as much showmanship as was necessary to engage the mind of the reader, but not too much more.<sup>17</sup>

In his autobiography, W.M. Macmillan admitted that he never developed a capacity for abstract reasoning,<sup>18</sup> and as a sharp observer, his method was clearly more inductive than deductive. According to Geoffrey Parker, Michael Roberts “frowned upon those who devoted their energies to discussions of historical theory and method”.<sup>19</sup> And Rodney Davenport shared W.A. Maxwell's “very, very strong insistence on not reaching historical conclusions without producing the evidence”.<sup>20</sup> In the past two decades the Rankean approach to history has been subjected to sharp critique in the department's honours historiography course. So there has been a departure from a narrow empiricism, in the belief that one cannot take theory out of history. But an emphasis on empirical substantiation has remained a key element in the department's overall philosophy and teaching practice.

Another continuity has been the department's firm, ongoing commitment to undergraduate teaching. This was very much the emphasis during the Winnie Maxwell era. Most of her top students did not stay on at Rhodes for their masters or doctoral degrees, instead proceeding to universities in the United Kingdom or North America. Maxwell herself was first and foremost a teacher of undergraduates. This was her great strength and her main contribution to the discipline in South Africa. With very few publications to her name she would have struggled to build an academic reputation in the present era. Had she devoted much more time to research and publication, one wonders whether her impact would have been significant as it was.

In the past two decades the department has maintained this emphasis on undergraduate teaching. Julian Cobbing in particular has devoted much of his time and energy to first-year teaching over the past decade, developing a highly popular, successful semester course in which he both historicises and analyses what he sees as the modern world crisis. This is a course with a strong presentist dimension – in keeping with the spirit of W.M. Macmillan, who consistently maintained a strong interest in contemporary issues.

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17. Davenport, “Oxford at Rhodes?”, p 1.

18. Macmillan, *My South African Years*, p 24.

19. Parker, “Michael Roberts”, p 352.

20. N. Southey, “Interview with T.R.H. Davenport”, *South African Historical Journal*, 26, 1992, p 23.

While the department has in recent years kept up an emphasis on undergraduate teaching, it has also developed a considerable research capacity. There has been a steady output of publications, and there are currently fourteen students registered for postgraduate research degrees. Former Rhodes history graduates gave papers at the colloquium. A striking feature of some of these was both their interdisciplinary character and their focus on contemporary issues. Young historians are moving easily across disciplinary boundaries and are not feeling bound to work within an orthodox historical framework. This was evident at the colloquium, where former graduates offered a range of papers on their current research interests: Nomalanga Mkhize on Karoo farm workers; Rebecca Hodes on sexual and reproductive health in South Africa; Luvuyo Wotshela on the Eastern Cape's marginalised histories in the late apartheid era.

In her eulogy at Macmillan's funeral in 1974, Lucy Sutherland stated that Macmillan used "all his powers of historical imagination to recreate the past, relate it to the present, and apply it as a guide to the future".<sup>21</sup> This is still the approach as the department strives, through the study of History, to help students make better sense of the world we live in today, and make them better equipped to cope with what threatens to be a difficult future. We proceed on the assumption that one cannot properly understand any present-day issues without looking at them historically. It goes without saying, too, that any effective teacher of History has to encourage independent, critical thinking among students. This means that the record of the Rhodes History Department itself should be subjected to critical analysis. There were, indeed, some critical comments expressed at the colloquium. Ashley Westaway, for instance, argued that the department had paid insufficient attention to the regional history of the Eastern Cape, and had not properly grappled with issues of history and community engagement. Alan Webster asked why the department was not attracting more black students into its courses.

These are challenging matters that have been discussed extensively within the department. The limited presence of black students cannot be put down to any kind of Eurocentric orientation in our courses, most of which have had an African focus. It is more likely due to a perception that a History major does not open up clear-cut career paths. There are limits to the offerings that a small department such as ours can put forward, but it has been the case that in recent years the department's emphasis, at least at the first-year level, has veered more towards the global than the local. We recognise the gaps and the shortcomings, but like to think that over the past 100 years the department has made a valued contribution in South Africa both to teaching about the past and to historical research.

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21. Foreword to Macmillan, *My South African Years*, p vii.