

Pioneering regional history studies in South Africa: Reflections within the former Section for Regional History at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

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Introduction

Although this paper aims towards reflecting the establishment and contribution of a formalised division for doing research in regional history in South Africa after 1975, the reality that published contributions in regional and local studies existed before and after this year are not ignored or downplayed.¹ After all, most histories on countries and their regions are conducted within frameworks of a space, accentuating a certain timeframe and covering a particular theme or phenomenon.² South Africa's present-day nine provinces, of which the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State and Gauteng probably host the richest contributions in print, all have a proud heritage. However, it's not a "complete" researched legacy and has not been done within a healthy organised regional history studies tradition.³

The HSRC's regional history studies section was founded within the Institute for Historical Research (IHR) on 1 April 1975,⁴ which happened to be a time at which several historical paradigms and/or ideologies continued to divide and label South African historians.⁵ If they were not practitioners with an Afrikaner nationalist agenda, they were tagged as, or were self-declared supporters of, a liberal, radical, Marxist or revisionist stream of thought.⁶ To what degree the

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1. See the discussion in E.S. van Eeden, "Regional, Local, Urban and Rural History as nearby Spaces and Places: Historiographical and Methodological Reflections towards Modern-day Practice", Special Edition, *New Contree*, 63, 2012, pp 1–34.
2. E.S. van Eeden, "Debating Some Past and Present Research Frameworks and Methodologies in History on Places and their Peoples in South Africa", *African Historical Review*, 45, 2, 2013, pp 113–141.
3. A historiography (covering various angles of regional history studies) and perhaps a representative bibliography on the regional history contributions of each province in South Africa are still due. Some micro efforts in this suggested paradigm can be recalled such as P. Maylam and I. Edwards, *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-century Durban* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996), p 313; C. Saunders et al. (eds), *Studies in the History of Cape Town, Volume 1* (Cape Town, university of Cape Town, 1979–reprint 1984). More than seven volumes on Cape Town's history have since been published. See also P. de Klerk, "Streeksgeskiedskrywing en Koloniale Verhouding: Die Wes-Kaapse Platteland en die Karoo", *New Contree*, 58, 2009, pp 1-35.
4. Interview with A.G. Oberholster conducted by E.S. van Eeden, November 2012; C.M. Bakkes, "Editorial", *Contree*, 1, 1977, p 2.
5. Interview with A.G. Oberholster conducted by E.S. van Eeden, 5 February 2013. He did not mention such a possibility, but after being questioned about it, he acknowledged the indirect impact these streams of thought might have had on the initiative to take a different route and invest instead in research which was more comprehensive and less contentious than political history.
6. Compare the historiography at the time in K. Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988), pp 131–221; A. Grundlingh, "Sosiale Geskiedenis en die Dilemma in Afrikaergeskiedskrywing", *South*

pioneers of regional studies in South Africa were influenced by, or perhaps remained deliberately ignorant about, these different approaches in their vision and methodology has never been fully recorded. Nor has their pioneering legacy of regional studies in South Africa, which includes social history.⁷ Even in current historiographical reflections, historians tend to hark back to historical thinking of many years ago and blur their vision and insights of what happened over the past 40 years of historical thinking in South Africa – they do this to provide a more digestible understanding of the past-to-present contours of regional history publications and those on social history.⁸

Previous predictions concerning social history will prevail, even if the emphasis on political history should return after its temporary “exile” in historiography.⁹ The impression was that Afrikaans-speaking historians for many years operated outside the broader contentious debates of social history as perceived internationally, especially in Britain, although a South African variant of social history during the 1980s to the 1990s was noticeable.¹⁰ This “variant” was traceable in the pioneering work of the IHR’s urban and regional history section of the HSRC; it could also be detected in the politically inspired, urban-focused research by the University of the Witwatersrand’s History Workshop;¹¹ and in some regional history projects conducted by history departments of universities countrywide.¹²

African Historical Journal, 19, 1, 1987, pp 31–49; J. de Villiers, “Geskiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika: Moet die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis Herskryf Word?/The Discipline of History and the New South Africa: Should South African History be Re-written?”, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 52, 2, June 2012.

7. Albert Grundlingh has made some effort, but a comprehensive historiography on this wide-ranging field is still to be written. See A.M. Grundlingh, “Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential”, at sas-space.sas.ac.uk/./Albert_Grundlingh_-_Social_history_and_Afri..., 1993, pp 1–10; and Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), “Sosiale Navorsing in Suid-Afrika” [196-?] (HSRC Library, 300. 72068, ca 1988), pp 1–11.
8. De Villiers, “Geskiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika: Moet die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis Herskryf word?/The Discipline of History and the New South Africa: Should South African History be Re-written?”.
9. This impression was formulated by Grundlingh from the thinking of a regional historian, C. Eloff, “History from Below...”, Paper presented at the 13th South African Historical Society (SAHS) Conference, Unisa, 22 to 25 January 1991, p 12; and by a supporter of urban social history, F.A. van Jaarsveld, “Politieke Geskiedenis uit Ballingskap Herroep”, Paper presented at the 13th SAHS Conference, Unisa, 22 to 25 January 1991, pp 10–11. See also Grundlingh, “Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential”, p 1.
10. Grundlingh, “Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential”, p 1.
11. See P. Bonner, “Keynote Address to the ‘Life after Thirty’ Colloquium”, *African Studies*, 9, 1, 2010, pp 14–15.
12. For example, T. Strauss and C. Saunders, *Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula post-1806: A Working Bibliography* (Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1989), p 141; J.J. Fourie and E.L.P. Stals, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, Deel 1: 1886–1924* (Hollandsch Afrikaansche Uitgevers Maatschappij, Pretoria, 1978), pp 1–178; E.S. van Eeden, *Carletonville. Van Pionierstreek tot Goudspens* (Carletonville Town Council, Carletonville, 1995), pp 1–329; A. Duminy and B. Guest, *Natal and Zululand from the Earliest Times to 1910: A New History* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1989), pp 1–489; B. Carton, *The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa* (Virginia University Press, Virginia, 2000).

A lack of clarity or consensus on research methodology and an epistemological point of departure within academia contributed to the grey areas, and as a consequence there was a lack of understanding of and progress in this field. Perhaps historians in some fields of regional history in South Africa, who were too quick and without a solid foundation, sought to claim that they were doing social history or urban history, but more often than not they either basically lacked the fundamental research to enable complex engaged interpretations, or simply satisfied themselves with interesting trivia. Perhaps the criticisms made against those engaging in this kind of regional history were, for the time, premature and insensitive when one considers that formal regional and social research began to flourish when approached methodologically and constructively. The international experience of Dr A.G. Oberholster on the status of regional studies during the mid-1970s serves as an example of how institutions in various countries were still struggling, despite innovative thinking, to develop manageable ways or the ultimate way of thinking about research in this field after decades of exposure to several schools of thought.¹³ This not unexpected observation is a focus for some time in the future,¹⁴ as are my suggestions for considering research phases in regional history as part of a possible methodology towards newly approached regional histories.

In debates on regional studies which are on the map in some way¹⁵ – whether in a narrow, phenomenological or a broader comparative context – there is merit in recalling and debating the formal roots of regional history studies in South Africa. In many ways the firm academic point of departure of the pioneers serves as a cornerstone for the mature development of regional history studies.

The following sections cover some features of the exploratory phase after the IHR, under the authority of Dr Cas Bakkes, commissioned the young Arie Oberholster to travel overseas for three months. A few key themes have been identified which interested Oberholster abroad, or which he learnt from then, and which became cornerstones of how to think about regional history studies that are not dominated by a politicised approach. These themes are still valid as a learning curve for twenty-first-century regional history studies in South Africa.

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13. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, pp 54–57.
 14. See the author's approved article in process of being formatted for publishing in a 2014 issue of the *International Journal of Local and Regional History*, entitled "Challenging Traditional Ways of Thinking and Doing Local/Regional History Research in South Africa: Some Global Learning and Sharing". See also Van Eeden, "Regional, Local, Urban and Rural History", pp 1–33; and E.S. van Eeden, "Considering Environmental History within the Transdisciplinary Methodology as Research Focus for Today and Tomorrow", *Interdisciplinary Science Review*, 36, 4, December 2011, pp 314–329.
 15. A conference on regional history was hosted by the Southern African Historical Society in Botswana, Garborone, from 27 to 29 June 2013, on "All for One, One for All: Leveraging National Interests with Regional Visions in South Africa".

The HSRC: Pioneering urban and regional history studies

Support for more emphasis on research in the humanities¹⁶ in the higher ranks of the HSRC¹⁷ eventually brought about changes in the newly formed Council's focus from 1 April 1969.¹⁸ For History educators¹⁹ on all educational levels, and historians in the tertiary educational sector, these initiatives must have been perceived as an exciting time for practising a career, yet the HSRC initiative gradually became surrounded by a dark cloud of criticism,²⁰ which may serve as a discussion from another point of entree in future.

The Institute for Historical Research (IHR),²¹ also founded in 1969 under the authority of the HSRC, took some steps to identify their preferred fields of research, of which regional history was a possibility.²² At this stage the writing of social history was blossoming within the broader structured environs of regional history, including developments such as "history from below" and the "Alltagsgeschichte".²³

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16. As recently as 2012 a similar plea was made. See V. Reddy, "Restoring the Humanities", *HSRC Review*, 10, 4, November 2012, pp 16–17.
 17. The HSRC's early history started in 1916 with the Union government stimulating its national educational and research priorities. After a temporary closure from 1939 to 1945, it re-opened as the National Council for Social Research (NCSR) in 1946. From April 1960 the Bureau for Educational and Social Research (BESR) was replaced by the National Party's Ministry of Education (with no linkage to any other government department) to become the HSRC of today. In the process, the HSRC was reformed just before and after 1990. Amongst others the transformation was directed towards social research that practically adhere more to present day needs such as addressing violence. See L. Chisholm and S. Morrow, "Government, Universities and the HSRC: A Perspective on the Past and Present", *Transformation*, 63, 2007, pp 2–7.
 18. For a critical review on the history of the HSRC, see Chisholm and Morrow, "Government, Universities and the HSRC", pp 45–67; and C. White, "Can the HSRC Join in the Future?", *Transformation*, 18, pp 22–34.
 19. See as an example, Human Sciences Research Council, "Die Onderrig van Geskiedenis aan Suid-Afrikaanse Sekondêre Skole: 'n Verkorte Weergawe van 'n Opname in die Jaar 1966", Compiled by C.R. Liebenberg, Report 0-11 (HSRC, Pretoria, 1971), pp 1–36.
 20. It is recorded that hidden, politically inspired agendas impacted on the HSRC initiatives at the time. However, for practitioners of History as a discipline, new revival initiatives are always welcome. See Chisholm and Morrow, "Government, Universities and the HSRC", pp 45–67; and White, "Can the HSRC Join in the Future?", pp 22, 28. White and Afrikaans-speaking dominance in the HSRC, among other aspects of the institution, is criticised, yet the demographic reality of white-trained experts in, for example, history, compared to people of colour, was certainly an accountability that stretched wider than the group of researchers who happened to have been recruited to do research at the HSRC. In current circumstances (2014) many black, coloured and Indian historians are employed in tertiary education. What a tragedy if in years to come there were fingers pointing back to trained expertise whose knowledge contribution was reviewed mainly from a statistical perspective of colour, gender and ideology.
 21. The IHR formed part of 10 institutes within the HSRC at the time. See Chisholm and Morrow, "Government, Universities and the HSRC", p 8.
 22. Interviews with A.G. Oberholster, November 2012 and 5 February 2013.
 23. Grundlingh, "Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential", pp 1–10. C.C. Eloff, "History from Below: 'n Oorsig", *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal*, 25, 1, 1991, p 40; C. Saunders, "What of Regional History? Towards a History of the Western Cape", *South African Historical Journal*, 22, 1, 1990, pp 131–140. Saunders refers to the USA, Australia, Canada, France and Britain. See also A. Lütke, "Alltagsgeschichte: Ein Bericht von Unterwegs", *Historische Anthropologie*, 11, 2003, pp 278–295.

Dr Casper (Cas) M. Bakkes, a military historian with a passion for cultural history, was appointed director of the IHR and tasked with employing staff who could engage with research in history.²⁴ Along the way a few research sections of the IHR, as fields to explore and connect with, were identified, namely:²⁵

- Section for Conflict Studies
- Biographical Dictionary Section
- Section for the Publishing of War Diaries
- Applied Research Section
- Genealogy Section
- Regional History Section (from 1975).

A year before the Section for Regional History was established, a local and overseas investigation was conducted in 1974 to learn more about the organisation and method of regional historical research. From March to June of that year, Mr (later Dr) Arie Oberholster was tasked with exploring these goals in several countries in Europe and in the USA.²⁶ His itinerary took him to Italy, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands and England as well as the USA, where he visited, among others, the states of Texas, Utah, Tennessee and Washington.²⁷

Opportunities arose for Oberholster, as a pioneering leader within the IHR,²⁸ to explore the history of the micro-environment with the intention of finding its broader value. His observations, impressions and thoughts in countries far from home, and his learning experiences and ideas also inevitably made him a “product of his time”. As almost no one can escape this reality, it is therefore equally imperative to review the intentions and actual contributions of a person's field of expertise before unequivocally shelving their outcomes and labelling them, for example, as apartheid ideology, or as being related to past government principles, etc.²⁹ The well known sports analogy of “playing the ball and not the man” should

24. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013. Memories exchanged via e-mail: A. de V. Minnaar/E.S. van Eeden, 5 April 2013; and C.C. Eloff/E.S. van Eeden, 9 April 2013. See also Van Eeden, “Regional, Local, Urban and Rural History”, pp 1–34.

25. Memories exchanged via e-mail: M. Wentzel/E.S. van Eeden, 11 April 2013. See also A.G. Oberholster, “Verslag in Verband met die Oprigting van 'n Afdeling Streekgeskiedenis in die Instituut vir Geskiedenisnavorsing van die Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing (RGN, Pretoria, 1975), pp 1–40.

26. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, pp 54–57.

27. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974.

28. Interviews conducted by E.S. van Eeden with: C.C. Eloff, on 9 April 2013; with M. Wentzel, on 11 April 2013; and with A. de V Minnaar, on 5 April 2013.

29. A tendency among critics (including academia) in the past to “play the man” (for example against the IHR in the HSRC) with labels of being white; by being focused exclusively on research done by whites; being dominated by white males, etc., instead of/including also reviewing “the ball” (for example representative of the knowledge repertoire and contributions to a discipline such as History). For a discussion on the first part of this statement see White, “Can the HSRC Join in the Future?”, pp 22–34.

apply when assessing past contributions of knowledge by individuals and divisions of History studies such as the HSRC's.³⁰

To be a (passionate) “product” of one’s time

Initiatives for exploring the possibilities of a section for regional history that gradually developed in the boardrooms of the HSRC were aimed at ordinary people as products of their time.³¹ People trained to engage with research of a particular field of history. Meeting new pioneering challenges, such as establishing something exciting, new and not well developed in South Africa like regional history, became something to aspire to. This happened outside the contentious boundaries of rivalry in political historiography,³² which appears to have been welcomed by IHR researchers.³³ Oberholster, as an upcoming researcher, remembers the stressful and frustrating challenges of political discord and agendas. Most of the other academic recruits, as Oberholster puts it, “simply wanted to engage passionately in historical research, despite their limitations and despite being an inevitable product of the time”, who happened to be in a certain place at the time.³⁴ All this happened within the reality that the individuals involved could not be anything but “products of their time”,³⁵ but should also have aspired to efficient research.

As part of the white Afrikaans-speaking community at the time and an educator for six years in Bloemfontein, Oberholster recalls that in early 1971 he was approached by Dr Bakkes³⁶ to assist as an IHR researcher in the Section for Source Publications. Oberholster then went on an overseas study trip in 1974 to explore the status of regional history abroad. Consequently his transfer followed in 1975 to head the newly-formed Regional History Section. At this stage Oberholster³⁷ was still doing a PhD under Prof. APJ (Arrie) van Rensburg of the

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30. In another article by the author (in progress) this principle is followed by applying a principle of reflective reasoning to determine the value and limitations of the HSRC's knowledge production within the regional history section.
 31. Consider the idea of “people as products of their time” with the thoughts expressed by F.A. van Jaarsveld, in his “Die Historikus in die Samelewing”, *South African Historical Journal*, 3, 1, 1971, p 3; and E.L.P. Stals, *Môrewind oor die Karasberge: 'n Kultuurhistoriese Verkenning van die Karasreek in die Laat Negentiende Eeu* (Protea Boekhuis, Pretoria, 2009), p 437.
 32. Van Jaarsveld, “Die Historikus in die Samelewing”, pp 3–29; F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Moderne Geskiedskrywing: Opstelle oor 'n Nuwe Benadering tot Geskiedenis* (Butterworth, Durban, 1982), pp 1–176; Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013.
 33. Compare also memories exchanged via e-mail: A. de V. Minnaar/E.S. van Eeden, 5 April 2013; and C.C. Eloff/E.S. van Eeden, 9 April 2013.
 34. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013.
 35. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013. By this, Oberholster suggested that as a person in a particular timeframe, one is more often than not in agreement with the ideas and values of that particular period and the social environment. This did not, however, bar one from having an enquiring mind and being critical. See Anon., “Produk van sy Tyd”, *Beeld*, 14 August 2009, p 18, in which Dr Willem de Klerk is discussed.
 36. Impressions expressed by Oberholster in an interview with the author, 5 February 2013.
 37. Oberholster sees himself as a liberal historian. According to him, his controversial views in his PhD thesis (UP, 1979) serve as example. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013. See also A.G. Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking, 1922* (RGN, Pretoria, 1982), p 223.

University of Pretoria on the Rand Revolt of 1922, which he completed in 1979.³⁸ In his Master's dissertation³⁹ (which he was awarded in 1970 before his appointment to the IHR in 1971) he was guided and influenced by Prof. D.C. Uys of the University of the Orange Free State (now Free State University). Oberholster perceived Uys as having a cynical and meticulously detailed outlook of history.⁴⁰

Oberholster recalls that in the early 1970s the pioneering of regional history-related activities in the IHR developed spontaneously. The history departments of the universities were apparently experiencing difficulties at the time in coping with the pressing need of towns and particular institutions in towns for their distinct history. It was a period in which political history, embedded within several ideologies, was a dominant practice in research by historians in South Africa.⁴¹ Social, urban and agrarian as well as rural history within the broader scope of regional history studies gradually became seen and heard.⁴² Ways of defining, practising and categorising this field of history vary,⁴³ and so it was in the case of the understanding by the developing IHR team in regional history studies of what regional and urban history studies could and should be. Perhaps they passionately wanted to depart from the still grey area of comprehensive research.⁴⁴

To embark on the field of regional history studies, it was felt within the IHR that exploring and learning from other international institutions and initiatives would provide the institute with a firm foundational base. So Oberholster was tasked with doing so. Preparations followed for reading, exploring and connecting with several institutions in Europe and the USA (in those days via the postal services), with the intention of visiting all of them, and thereby discovering ways of conducting research on regional history in South Africa.⁴⁵

38. Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking*, pp 1–223.

39. His MA dissertation (UOVS, 1970) was entitled "Die Sendingaktiwiteite van die Ned. Geref. Kerk in die Oranje Vrystaat tot 1910".

40. Uys was perceived by Oberholster as a cynical historian, apparently very much concerned with historical detail. See author's interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013; and memories exchanged via e-mail between Prof. O.J.O. Ferreira/E.S. van Eeden, 31 March 2013.

41. Smith, *The Changing Past*; J. Carruthers, "The Changing Shape and Scope of Southern African Historical Studies", *South African Historical Journal*, 62, 2, 2010, pp 384–393; C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past: Major Historians on Race and Class* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988), pp 1–240.

42. Van Jaarsveld, "Die Historikus in die Samelewing", pp 3–29. Compare Grundlingh, "Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential"; Van Jaarsveld, *Moderne Geskiedskrywing*, pp 1–176; B. Freund, "Urban History in South Africa", *South African Historical Journal*, 52, 1, 2005, pp 22–24, 26; B. Freund, "Rural Struggles and Transformations", *South African Historical Journal*, 19, 1, 1987, p 170; W. Beinart and C. Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape, 1890–1930* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987), pp 326.

43. The variety of methodological paradigms in the histories of regions has yet to be researched.

44. See "Editorial", *Contree*, 21, January 1987, p1.

45. Interviews with A.G. Oberholster, November 2012 and 5 February 2013.

Exploring regional history internationally to develop a firm foundation and vision in South Africa

Lasting impressions of out-of-country regional research

Nearly 40 years ago in March 1974, the newly established IHR of the HSRC commissioned A.G. Oberholster to undertake a three-month journey to many parts of the world to explore the urban and regional history activities of institutes, societies, museums, etc. first hand. The aim was to gather ideas for a point of departure for the HSRC to progress with regional history studies in South Africa.⁴⁶ The lack of studies in this field was also pointed out by some academics.⁴⁷ Preparedness to explore the world of history (with the intention to be more than just politically oriented) created a platform for exciting exploration of new pathways in doing history.⁴⁸

Logistics

The three-month visit (without the modern luxuries of internet research, cellphones and laptops) must have been challenging and time consuming when it came to establishing contacts, recording observations, preserving data and maintaining contact with the sponsors of the visit.⁴⁹ The standard letter to communicate intent and establish contact was phrased along the lines of:

Dear ..., I am a research official of the HSRC, Private Bag X41, Pretoria, South Africa. As the Council's Institute for Historical Research plans to start a Section for Regional History, it has sent me on a visit to England, Europe and the USA, with a view to obtaining first-hand information about the organisation and methods of institutions in this field...⁵⁰

Between hopping from one place to another, the typical modes of writing and travelling are captured in Oberholster's formal letters (not unusual for the time), such as the following example:

Dear Dr Bakkes,

At the moment I'm sitting in Brighton station writing while I wait for the train to depart for London. I had a very pleasant visit with Prof. Asa Briggs, and will try to report briefly on it...⁵¹

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46. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013.
 47. Compare Grundlingh, "Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential", p 4; and Grundlingh, "Sosiale Geskiedenis en die Dilemma in Afrikanergeskiedskrywing", p 32. See also Van Jaarsveld, "Die Historikus in die Samelewing", pp 3–29.
 48. The author's impressions in a nutshell, based on an interview with Oberholster on 5 February 2013.
 49. The author's observations having studied the 95 pages of correspondence between Dr A.G. Oberholster and Dr C.M. Bakkes while Oberholster was on a three-month research visit in 1974.
 50. See for example Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes on the International Visit to Explore the Status of Regional History Abroad", London, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, Letter dated 24 April 1974, p 43.
 51. See as an example Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, Letter dated 29 April 1974, p 50.

Most other reports which were in the form of letters he wrote on carbon paper and they were then sent via the postal services to Dr Bakkes. They were usually written in the evenings after a day's exposure to research, researchers and administrators.

Efficient communication

Communication difficulties with interviewees in Europe (especially in Germany and Austria, who mainly preferred to converse in German) are recalled by Oberholster as exhausting and frustrating.⁵² As an Afrikaans-speaking historian, Oberholster never complained of having to communicate in English, because it was "natural" and "expected" to be able to do so when travelling abroad.⁵³

Observations of ways of archiving regional history

In most places Oberholster visited, he found that all the regional archives explicitly acted as storehouses for the regions' history, and also that most regions hosted a regional historical society which were assisted in some way by local universities.⁵⁴ He also noticed that yearbooks and some journals for particular regions covered a multitude of different disciplines that dealt with the legacy of the regions.⁵⁵ At some stage – later in Oberholster's visit – he also recorded of the Wiltshire-Victoria County History (VCH) that they:

... also enjoy the cooperation of a local historical society, and involve women's clubs in the research, which make scrapbooks of various local events, and school children. However, the editors reserve the right to adapt all the details as they see fit...⁵⁶

Oberholster was impressed with the way in which some VCHs⁵⁷ operated, although he felt that their circumstances differed⁵⁸ very widely from those of South Africa.⁵⁹ From the VCHs Oberholster absorbed a tremendous amount of knowledge and structural possibilities. In his letters to Bakkes he frequently remarked that he (Oberholster) had provided him (Bakkes) "for now" with information, but that he (Oberholster) first wanted to ponder on some observations before applying them in a totally different environment such as South Africa.⁶⁰

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52. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974.
 53. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013.
 54. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Letter from Vienna, dated 18 March 1974, p 1.
 55. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr CM Bakkes", Letter from Innsbruck, dated 22 March 1974, p 10; from Munich, dated 25 March 1974 and 2 April 1974, p 22; from London, dated 24 April 1974, p 42; from Norwich Station, England, dated 2 May 1974, p 58; and from Bruges, Belgium, dated 8 May 1974, pp 63–64.
 56. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Letter dated 25 April 1974, p 45.
 57. The VCH's in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire especially impressed Oberholster.
 58. The "different" circumstances Oberholster refers to is his argument that more established families were recalled in the county areas of the UK, whereas in South Africa communities of his time were perceived to be more "nomadic" in nature.
 59. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Letter dated 25 April 1974, p 46.
 60. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Letter dated 30 April 1974, p 52. The University of Leicester's Local History team also published an Urban History Yearbook from 1974 onwards.

Awareness of international schools of thought

Before going abroad, Oberholster must at least have been familiar with the fact that some South African historians were guided and influenced in their research by schools of thought such as the French *Annale*'s socio-economic thinking; the British "History Workshop Model" which concentrates on the lives of ordinary people; the American "New Left" group; and the German "Alltagsgeschichte" (everyday history according to the Marxist school of "history from below").⁶¹ Undoubtedly, research in some areas or localities was done for its heritage value or particular legacies,⁶² while others were explored for their social history.⁶³

Oberholster was especially impressed by the methodology and ideas of the French *Annale* School of historical research. Of its interdisciplinary nature he observed that supporters of this school integrated more into their research methodology than some other practitioners of regional history, and that they avoided a lock-up approach in socio-economic and agrarian themes, which were supposed to have commonalities⁶⁴ that should be explored together.⁶⁵

When he was abroad, Oberholster also learnt that the researchers at, for example, the Bokrijk open-air museum in Belgium (Vlaaminge)⁶⁶ and the agricultural school at Wageningen⁶⁷ followed the work of the French peasantry-focused historian E. le Roy Ladurie.⁶⁸

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61. Also compare Grundlingh's particular references to British historians such as E.P. Thompson, E.J. Hobsbawm, Gareth Stedman Jones and Raphael Samuel, in Grundlingh, "Sosiale Geskiedenis en die Dilemma in Afrikanergeskiedskrywing", p 32.
 62. E.S. van Eeden, Exploring Local Histories in the Use and Appreciation of Heritage and History in History Curricula", *Yesterday & Today*, 5, October 2010, pp 23–50; J Carruthers, Africa Forum on "Heritage and History", available at H-Africa: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-africa&month=9810&week=c&msg=sv82DZpkATFzGc7zqbKfKA&user=&pw=>, 20 October 1998, accessed January 2011. See also Van Jaarsveld, "Die Historikus in die Samelewing", pp 3–29.
 63. Grundlingh, "Sosiale Geskiedenis en die Dilemma in Afrikanergeskiedskrywing", pp 31–49.
 64. Compare the well-explained comment by Grundlingh on what modern social history should entail, although his critique on Afrikaner historiography in social studies is unacceptable. Grundlingh ignores the complexity of research methodologies on regions and the reality that South African historians were still newcomers to social history in the 1970s, and had to depart from a parochial angle. See Grundlingh, "Social History and Afrikaner Historiography in a Changing South Africa: Problems and Potential", p 1.
 65. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, p 50.
 66. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, pp 72–73.
 67. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, p 76.
 68. Ladurie had Fernand Braudel of the French *Annales* School as his mentor. Ladurie serves micro history well in his New History approach from the 1970s. He makes a study of events, locality, family or life to reveal the structures which underlie life in the particular period under study. French regions, and pioneering thoughts on environmental history in regions, also receive his attention. See E. le Roy Ladurie, translated by J. Day, *The Peasants of Languedoc* (Illinois Press, Champaign, 1976), pp 1–370; and E le Roy Ladurie, *The French Peasantry, 1450–1660* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987), pp 1–447.

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During his visits to the Agricultural College in Wageningen (the Netherlands), Oberholster was exposed to some French *Annale* supporters who impressed him:

Today I have an appointment to see Dr A.M. van der Wonde of the Agricultural High School, who is in this specialised university's Department of Agrarian History. He, like Dr Wrigley at Cambridge, is representative of a new breed of historians who obtain interesting results using a so-called quantitative method. Briefly, what this means is that a great deal of demographic data, which includes literacy, prolificacy, occupation, etc., are statistically organised and interpreted with the aid of a computer, which tries to find answers to questions or problems concerning various cultural manifestations. Dr van der Wonde remains, however, basically a historian with a very balanced approach. Like Wrigley, he ascribes his method to the influence of French historians, whose work he takes as an example and adapts to his own circumstances.⁶⁹

From Wageningen and then Groningen, Oberholster departed for a visit to some of the states in the USA. After an introduction to the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)⁷⁰ in Nashville, Tennessee, in late May 1974, he was informed of the several regional history societies and their activities. This led him to comment as follows, while thinking of South Africa:

...Without wishing to be idealistic, I would nevertheless like to believe that we will be able to do something about the interest in the history of the region by the people in the region, and perhaps be able to develop the function to assist with the organisation of regional historical societies.⁷¹

The regional historical activities of the Texas State Historical Association (TSHH) probably further motivated Oberholster to engage not only academia in South Africa in doing regional history research:

Apart from an interesting and informal newsletter, the TSHH publishes a quarterly of the highest quality: *The Southwestern Historical Journal*; [as well as] a historical journal which publishes the contributions of art high school students, the *Junior Historian*; and thirdly, a publication of regional historical significance, which has a great resemblance to our SABW [South African Biographical Dictionary], but also includes articles on places and events ... The *Handbook of Texas* originally appeared in two parts (A–K, L–Z) and Mr Branda is currently working on a third supplementary part. It appears that this is a possible alternative method of doing regional history. Dr Ragsdale, who is responsible for the publication of *Junior Historian*,⁷² is doing a great deal to encourage high school students' interest in history.⁷³

69. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Wageningen, Netherlands, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, Letter dated 20 May 1974, p 76.

70. The AASLH was founded in 1904 and currently its vision is to provide leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful to all Americans. See AASLH in <http://www.aaslh.org/>, accessed on 2 April 2013.

71. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Nashville, USA, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, Letter dated 29 May 1974, pp 80–81.

72. South Africa's, journal for high school learners, known as *Historia Junior*, established in the late 1950s, was probably an initiative copied from similar activities in the USA. Other than in Texas, whose junior historian activities still appear to be widely supported (see <http://www.tshaonline.org/education/jh/index.html>), a lack of funding and initiative in the early 1980s led to the demise of the *Historia Junior*. See J.S. Bergh, "Historiese

Sitting at the feet of masters: The “how to’s” of recording and writing regional studies

Content possibilities and structuring

The regional history focus in the countries that Dr Oberholster visited occasionally appeared to him vague to very geographically specific, and sometimes it had a precise local community content.⁷⁴ Understandably this was an open agenda survey at the time which did not become particularly less blurred with regard to the understanding of regional history after his lengthy research visit – this was a visit which involved interviews, reading and obtaining scientific and popular articles on regional thinking and activities, and exploring at first hand how regional and local history was done and managed. Regional history activities that impressed him were being carried out at places like Leicester,⁷⁵ Norwich University,⁷⁶ Limburg,⁷⁷ Utah and Memphis.⁷⁸

Early stops during his research visit, for example at Vienna and Munich, also caused Oberholster to make some observations on regional history practices which he perceived as constraints if applied in the South African environment. For example, on the Vienna visit, he wrote:

...As far as content is concerned, the work was done somewhat haphazardly. All the articles appear to be relevant but they do not accumulate to form a logical structure. With regard to content, the research set covers a wide field but apparently no-one drew up a preconceived plan about how interdisciplinary the undertaking should be or was intended to be.⁷⁹

In the same way he also pointed out some informative features which he observed about regional history activities in Munich:

It has become increasingly clear from the various interviews that in South Africa we are dealing with a very different situation and that by taking note of this we will also be in the position to develop other methods of handling regional history. Things that are self-evident in Europe (such as families that identify themselves 100% with a particular area and are also constitutionally bound to such an area) virtually do not exist in South Africa because our population moves around too much, and in the case of those who do have such a status, this is often because of their interest in

Verenigings en Tydskrifte in Suid-Afrika: Verlede, Hede en Toekoms”, *Historia*, 38, 2, November 1993, p 38.

73. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Letters to Dr CM Bakkes”, Austin, Texas, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, Letter dated 31 May 1974, p 84.
74. Interview with A.G. Oberholster, 5 February 2013; Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974.
75. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, p 52. Several sources and contributions are mentioned, such as that of V.H.R. Skipp, who was not available for an interview at the time of Dr Oberholster’s visit.
76. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, p 58–59.
77. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, p 69.
78. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, pp 91–93.
79. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Research Visit Memoirs”, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974; Letter dated 18 March 1974, pp 9–10.

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their own environment. I am still amazed at how disorganised our study of regional history is here.⁸⁰

Despite some disorganised regional study practices which he observed, he encountered other perceived positive aspects, such as the research practices in place name studies (toponymy)⁸¹ and the content focus of the *Historischer Atlas von Baden-Württemberg*. This contribution, as a reflection of several themes in local/regional studies, made him realise that the IHR's regional section-to-be should perhaps manage the histories of regions together up to a point with regard to their historical and wider contexts, after which the focus should be narrowed down to the region itself. Some of the themes in the *Historischer Atlas von Baden-Württemberg* were published separately, but held the promise of eventually being combined into one understanding of this region's development. Oberholster observed the following themes,⁸² which he in many ways must also have picked up in the regional history research methodologies of Leicester⁸³ and in the Netherlands:⁸⁴

- Historical maps of a region
- Topographical and geographical maps of a region
- Pre-history and early history
- Development of the cultural landscape
- Political history (general/contextual)
- Church history
- Law and cultural history
- History of roads
- Economic history
- Population/demographic history
- Social history

In the roll-out of regional history study themes, the historians in Leicester and the Netherlands also considered archaeology; local government history; health and social welfare service history; educational development; law and order and military history.⁸⁵ The comprehensiveness of the approach led Oberholster to observe that:

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80. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974; Letter dated 25 March 1974, p 10.
 81. See Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr CM Bakkes", Zürich, 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974; Letter dated 1 April 1974, p 25; A.G. Oberholster, "Raakpunte tussen die Streekgeskiedenis en Pleknaamkunde", *Contree*, 12, 8, 1982, pp 23–25.
 82. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974; Letter dated 2 April 1974.
 83. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Research Visit Memoirs", 18 March 1974 to 14 June 1974, p 52; G. Sheeran and Y. Sheeran, "Discourses in Local History", *Rethinking History*, 2, 1, 1998, p 67; V.H.T. Skipp, "Local History: A New Definition and its Implications", *Local Historian*, 14, 1981, p 328.
 84. See as an example, W. Jappe Alberts and A.G. van der Steur, *Handleiding voor de Beoefening van Locale en Regionale Geschiedenis* (Fibula-Van Dishoeck, Bussum, 1968), see content pages.
 85. C. Kammen, *Local History* (Alta Mira Press, Walnut Creek, 2003), Introduction and pp 1–40, especially pp 32–33; H.P.R. Finberg and V.H.T. Skipp, *Local History: Objective and Pursuit* (David & Charles Publishers, Newton Abbot, 1973), pp. 132; Jappe Alberts and

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... The impression I get is that in Germany such a great deal is being done that no regional historian, no matter how hardworking he or she may be, has any hope of keeping up to date with what is being done in terms of research in the country ... By way of illustration, Carl Haase attempted to assess the problem regarding quantity and concluded that a researcher who simply wanted to stay abreast of new publications on Lower Saxony alone would have to read 12 000 to 15 000 pages annually. For the whole of Germany it would work out to about 400 pages per day...⁸⁶

Constraints in establishing regional history studies research regions

Apart from learning about the impracticality of mastering history-related research activities in all regions in a national history, Oberholster also discovered from the experienced Prof. Ralph Pugh in London, an expert on English county history (Victorian County History – VCH), that dividing a country's history into manageable regions is not an easy task:

...we [will] have to make a very careful choice of "region". We must start big enough, although we will be free to subdivide later. Furthermore, in their most recent publications they leave out natural history because he [Prof. Pugh] feels that this is an area that is too foreign to them to handle easily. However, I have some reservations about the wisdom of his decision ... the English historical framework around counties and parishes [differs] so much from our own ... that we cannot use their system as a direct example.⁸⁷

The VCH, which coordinated the history activities/research of all the counties in England by the 1970s, applied the following research methodology:

They deal in their General Volumes with, e.g., prehistory, geography and administrative institutions within earldoms, and then go on in their Topographical Volumes to deal with various smaller subjects within parish boundaries.⁸⁸

Data gathering and local community support

Oberholster showed a keen interest in the way the VCH recorded and managed their documentary data. He was less impressed with the disciplinary narrowness in appointing staff. His remarks on the Wiltshire VCH county structure provide some understanding of the way the Regional Division of the IHR in the HSRC later functioned:

The fact that there were separate personnel for each earldom leads to the problem, in my opinion, that they did not have a completely balanced complement of personnel since they were all historians. If everything were to be housed at a single site, it would be possible to appoint a larger variety of researchers who could serve more than one region.⁸⁹

Van der Steur, *Handleiding Voor de Beoefening van Locale en Regionale Geschiedenis*, content outline and pp 124–133.

86. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Zürich, Letters dated 1 April 1974; and 28 March 1974, pp 15–16; and 23.
87. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 17 April 1974, p 28; Letter dated 18 April 1974, p 31.
88. See Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr CM Bakkes", London, Letter dated 18 April 1974, pp 31, 35.
89. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 25 April 1974, p 45.

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In the same frame of mind, Oberholster also later remarked:

However, I want to state here that I noticed certain inadequacies in the VCH organisation ... which we might be able to avoid. In this regard I believe that the fact that South Africa has a lower density of people, buildings, etc. will allow (or even oblige) us to work with larger units than the English. Concerning content, we will be able to adopt their form to some extent, but we will also have to think of new aspects ... I sat and tried to think about what these additional aspects should be:

- The establishment of a local, regional historical museum.
- Youth programmes that would involve learners and teachers in regional history; a museum could play a useful role here
- Recorded programmes which could include, among others: (a) tapes of memories concerning the old people of the region; (b) a systematic recording plan – descriptions of old buildings; (c) films and video recordings of important events.
- Historically oriented excursions with a specific theme, e.g. battlefields (or a battlefield), diggings, industry, etc. – with a bit of effort one could add to this.

...I am increasingly coming to believe that, apart from doing basic research into regional history, our job will also be to encourage interest over a wide field and to support it financially and morally. But anyway, these are just thoughts on the matter and although some of these may come to nothing, time will tell.⁹⁰

And time eventually did show that what should and could be does not necessarily happen in a fortnight.

From-bottom-up research

From-bottom-up research in social history, or “Alltagsgeschichte”, about the daily lives and activities of people in towns and rural and urban areas,⁹¹ is an integral part of the contexts Oberholster was exposed to during his visit to Europe. He also endorsed this approach because he felt that the social history of regions had been neglected for years in favour of political history in South Africa.

Well known local/regional history studies centres that Oberholster visited for their inclusion of a from-bottom-up approach were the universities of Leicester and Birmingham. The regional research methodology of historians of local history, such as Professors W.G. Hoskins, H.P.R. Finberg and V.H.T. Skipp⁹² was later taken under consideration to be followed in some way in the South African context.⁹³ The knowledge that Oberholster gained during his trip to Leicester concerned a more inclusive type of history covering the ordinary man in a from-bottom-up/below approach, which should be more prominent in the research on the history of nearby spaces and places. At Leicester, a career in local history was an important focus of the Department of Local History, and student entry could be

90. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Letters to Dr CM Bakkes” London, Letter dated 26 April 1974, p 49.

91. See the quote on Lütke in G. Eley, “Labour, History and Social History, Alltagsgeschichte ...” *Journal of Modern History*, 61, 2, 1989, p 322; and in Eloff, “History from Below: ‘n Oorsig”, p 40.

92. See Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, “Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes”, London, Letter dated 22 April 1974, p 39; Letter dated 29 April 1974, p 50.

93. Van Eeden, “Debating Some Past and Present Research Frameworks”, pp 113–141.

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from any field, although history appeared to take the lead.⁹⁴ Prof. Everitt informed Oberholster that environmental history was not fit for practising in local history if it was presented in an encyclopaedic, isolated way. Oberholster recalled from a conversation with Everitt:

It [environmental history] may have a place as a branch of the agrarian or economic history of a region.⁹⁵

Regional history research in a multidisciplinary way

Apart from his constructive discussions with Everitt, Oberholster found his visit to Prof. Harold J Dyos of Leicester complementary, especially with regard to the value of multidisciplinary regional history studies:

His [Dyos's] interest is in urban history and our discussion about regional history was seen from that point of view. Nevertheless, it was very fruitful. In dividing up the regions, we must take the sphere of influence of cities and towns into account. There is a strong tendency to give a lot of weight to the centres to which people migrate to determine what it is that starts the process and maintains it. Coming from an economics historian, this may sound like an economic approach, but I am convinced that the assistance of sociologists, geographers and scientists from various appropriate fields should be involved on condition that the historian maintains the central position and that we should guard against taking cross-sections through history, which is what sociologists and political scientists are inclined to do.⁹⁶

As to the question of which research methodology may be the most feasible for regional studies, Dr Hassell Smith of the Centre for East Anglian Studies in the city of Norwich, England,⁹⁷ also expressed an opinion that impressed Oberholster as a possibility to be considered in South Africa:

...a region should not be studied in isolation, but in its interaction with its surrounding areas, particularly the interaction between the region and the central authorities. Questions relating to this that need to be answered are: How did the broad policy of the central government affect the region? And what influence did the region have on the central authorities? This seems to me to be a viable approach since it counteracts the danger of encyclopaedic fragmentation. Secondly, while the study of a region is being undertaken, a serious attempt must be made to reconstruct the community structures and their evolution. A thorough study and description of buildings and other manmade structures is essential, and to do this the assistance of archaeologists and architectural historians will be needed. The buildings should not be described simply as items of interest from the historical past, but should serve as a means of reconstructing the historical community and its functioning. This means that the ordinary man, the labourer and the small farmer should also be taken into consideration.⁹⁸

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94. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 1 May 1974, pp 53–54.
 95. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 1 May 1974, pp 54–56.
 96. Compare H.J. Dyos, *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban Uistory*, edited by D. Cannadine and D. Rheeder (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982). This yearbook later became known as *Urban History*. See <http://www2.le.ac.uk/library/find/subjects/history/urban>.
 97. Compare C. Rawcliffe, R. Virgoe, R. Wilson and H. Smith, *Counties and Communities: Essays on East Anglian History: Presented to Hassell Smith* (University of East Anglia, Centre of East Anglian Studies, Norwich, 1996), pp 345.
 98. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Norwich, Letter dated 2 May 1974, p 59.

Oberholster immediately acknowledged that he realised that this was easier said than done, and that source availability usually dominated the final word and outcome.⁹⁹

It serves of value to note that apart from source availability, there is reason to argue that advanced forms of research analysis of regional developments, trends and phenomena only become possible after several micro contributions, or sometimes contributions perceived as parochial (which can stretch over many years). These valuable parochial contributions form part of a baseline, and/or a higher level of specialised research that can vary from theme research to the study of several related phenomena or the comparison of regions. Advanced forms then include all related historiography, within and outside the boundaries of the subject matter, such as multidisciplinary or modernised social history research questions. I am convinced that the latter form of research advancement in regional history studies, traces of which Oberholster picked up abroad in the mid-1970s, can seldom be efficiently applied at Master's or doctoral level. More often than not it takes years of research experience, observation and professional maturity to be able to ask the questions skillfully and to follow the kind of research methodology that leads to meaningful macro contributions in regional history studies.¹⁰⁰

While still in England, Oberholster was informed that the VCH had staffed a multidisciplinary team of architects who covered the history of buildings.¹⁰¹ Furthermore they occasionally worked with archaeologists.¹⁰² The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHM) recruited a multidisciplinary group of experts to do research. Among others, historians, geographers, architects and archaeologists were appointed.¹⁰³ Oberholster also visited genealogy divisions to get some idea of what they were doing and how their activities related to regional history studies.¹⁰⁴

Oberholster's discussions with Prof. (Baron) Asa Briggs¹⁰⁵ on regional history in France are typical examples of talks on integrative multidisciplinary methodologies at the time:

I had a very pleasant visit with Prof. Asa Briggs ... Concerning regional history, he is of the opinion that the French are doing interesting work because they integrate regional history more than the VCH does, for example. What he means by this is that the French approach regional history in a more interdisciplinary way and are less

99. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Cambridge, Letter dated 2 May 1974, p 59.

100. The author's opinion, discussed within the suggested framework in Van Eeden, "Debating Some Past and Present Research Frameworks", pp 113–141.

101. See Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 18 April 1974, p 30.

102. See Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 18 April 1974, p 42.

103. See Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 22 April 1974, p 38.

104. Compare Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 22 April 1974, p 40; 26 April 1974, p 47.

105. In 1976, Prof. Asa Briggs was created a life peer as Baron Briggs of Lewes County in East Sussex.

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inclined to place it in closed compartments. This is especially true of the general volumes in which social, economic, agrarian, etc. histories are seen more in context in relation to each other but within a particular region.¹⁰⁶

The multidisciplinary approach of the Cambridge group in England, with Dr Tony Wrigley as spokesperson of the Group on History of Population and Social Structure (founded in 1964),¹⁰⁷ was perceived by Oberholster as original, modern and meaningful for developing a similar way of doing research in South Africa. After his discussions with Dr Wrigley Oberholster reports that:

The group consists, among others, of geographers and historians who aim to undertake a historical reconstruction of population growth and its influence on population shifts, population groupings, etc. The basic material that they work with is very genealogical, but they require more information than the genealogist usually requires about a family or an individual. This information is fed into a computer which indexes it and then processes and generates it according to the immediate requirements. I think that this is the point at which the natural sciences method and the human sciences method converge and complement each other.¹⁰⁸

After leaving England, Oberholster travelled to Bruges in Belgium. During his tight itinerary covering the areas of Herentals and Turnhout, he learnt that the Provincial Service for Culture Department (Provinciale Dienste voor Cultuur – PDC) dealt with regional historical studies. Although the PDC stressed the value of multidisciplinary and multi-skilled requirements in regional history studies, Oberholster regarded their publications as more encyclopaedic than regional narrations.¹⁰⁹

On his next stop in Limburg (Netherlands) he visited the Social Historical Centre (Sociaal-Historisch Centrum). Here he met a Dr J.C.C.M. Jansen whose vision was to develop a history of the Limburg region that would be more than just politically and geo-regionally oriented. To ensure that historical gaps in Limburg's comprehensive history were minimised, an archive was set up to collect a variety of regional material, such as the documents of businesses, hospitals and mines, as well as a collection of pamphlets, books, brochures, etc. Some of the information collected at the time was disseminated in an annual yearbook of the region. To enable it to operate efficiently, 50 percent of its operating costs were funded by the province, and the rest came from friends who were members of the centre in the Limburg community.¹¹⁰ Oberholster's visit to the Centre for Social-Scientific Documents (Sociaal-Wetenschappelijke Documentatie) at the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie voor Wetenschappen in Keizersgracht, revealed yet again the multidisciplinary nature of regional history studies that relate to settlement

106. See, as an example, Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 29 April 1974, p 50.

107. University of Cambridge, the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (Historical and Cultural Geography Research Cluster), available online at <http://www.hpss.geog.cam.ac.uk/>, accessed on 2 April 2013.

108. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Cambridge, Letter dated 3 May 1974, p 60.

109. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Brugge, Letter dated 7 May 1974, pp 61–62.

110. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Limburg, Letter dated 12 May 1974, p 69.

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research, dialect studies, onomastic studies and genealogy.¹¹¹ Academia in Groningen shared the vision of other colleagues that broader regional historical insights add value to the contributions of regions.¹¹²

From our discussions the thought emerged that regional history did not have to be a closed or isolated history, but should lead back into the region and its particular place in the greater whole.¹¹³

Similar studies of regions were recorded at the University of Utah (Salt Lake City) in the USA, which was involved in American Western Studies; the Redd Centre for Western Studies; the Church History of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS); and the Utah State Historical Society.¹¹⁴

Oberholster's multidisciplinary observations eventually found their way into the thinking of the IHR as far as teamwork among a variety of disciplines was concerned.¹¹⁵ However, the possibilities of a framework for integrative multidisciplinary regional history study were unfortunately never fully exploited by the IHR until its closure in the early 1990s.¹¹⁶ It is only recently that this prospect has been remodelled so that it can be applied in studies related to regional history.¹¹⁷

Regional history societies and academia

The existence of regional history societies doing research in uncoordinated ways was also recorded. Oberholster then listed a few things that made sense to him in the process of progressing towards establishing a regional history section at the IHR (HSRC) in South Africa:

- A regional history journal is important to maintain interest in the regions, but the smaller the region, the easier it will be to continue with it. The Turnhout library's collection is evidence of the many regional historical journals that have already had to be discontinued. I think that we will have to work with a journal such as *Historia* for the more academic publications and with local newspapers for more popular topics (e.g. a weekly feature on the region).
- Liaison with the municipalities will be necessary to find out to what extent their records are accessible to researchers, and to encourage them to

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111. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Amsterdam, Netherlands, Letter dated 16 May 1974, p 73; and 18 May 1974, p 74.
 112. See Oberholster's meeting with Professor P.J. van Winter who wrote several publications on Groningen and tutored South Africa's Floors van Jaarsveld at PhD level. See also Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Amsterdam, Netherlands, Letter dated 25 May 1974, pp 78–79.
 113. Equally, compare with G.H. Pirie, "Urban, Regional and National History", *Contree*, 3, January 1978, p 28.
 114. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Salt Lake City, Utah University, Letter dated 11 June 1974, pp 89–91.
 115. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", London, Letter dated 1 May 1974, pp 54–55.
 116. The demise of the IHR, after almost 22 years of functioning, brought all historical research initiatives, including the regional history section, to a standstill. In essence this unfortunate event also contributed to the lack of progress South African historians have made in recording and developing regional history study methodologies and initiatives.
 117. See Van Eeden, "Considering Environmental History", pp 314–329; and Van Eeden, "Regional, Local, Urban and Rural History".

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consolidate, apart from their official documents, documents of a general nature such as their magazines or newsletters, and private documents relating to the town. In addition, the municipality must be involved in any attempt to promote regional history locally.

- Central research personnel are preferable to local enthusiasts if one wishes to establish anything constructive. The local enthusiasts are a necessary link, but they must not become so important that their erratic interest could affect the research programme.¹¹⁸

The importance of financial support and the encouragement of regional history conservation through the involvement of private businesses (and their appreciation of its value) were accentuated during Oberholster's visit to the Gemeentekrediet (Community Credit) in Brussels, whose *Pro Civitate* apparently delivered outstanding service to regional history studies.¹¹⁹

In Haarlem, Netherlands, Oberholster learned that the Society of Haarlem, which had 1 200 members, was occupied with regional history via the publication of an annual yearbook. Highly qualified academics lent their support. The Society also took care of historical buildings in their region. Regular excursions were made and lectures given. With some of the funding they received from the provincial authority they also assisted people to preserve their property if it was regarded as of historical value.¹²⁰

Conclusion

This discussion is mainly about the pioneering work of the former Institute for Historical Research at the HSRC in formally establishing a regional history section. An international survey and recorded "metadata" impressions on the "how to" and practices of regional history studies by the main investigator, Dr Arie G. Oberholster, opened up thinking of the time on regional history studies that was enlightening, modern and progressive. This thinking had not previously been expressed in South Africa, and may have contradicted the perceptions and criticisms of the motives for establishing various history research sections in the IHR (in particular the regional history section) that perhaps still pervade some mindsets.

In the discussion the formal roots of regional history studies in South Africa are recalled and debated under a few main topics that interested Oberholster during his international research visit. A striking aspect of these topics is that the major emphasis was on how to structure regional history; which disciplines could constitute the multidisciplinary team; regional studies, including the oral history approach; and an acceptable way of considering a history-from-below methodology. Indeed, race as a topic never featured in Oberholster's research findings abroad – nor was it necessary, because it had always been envisaged that the Regional History Section of the IHR would expand and progress in such a

118. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Bruge, Letter dated 8 May 1974, pp 63–64.

119. Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Brussels, Letter dated 8 May 1974, p 65.

120. Compare Personal Archive, A.G. Oberholster, "Letters to Dr C.M. Bakkes", Salt Lake City, Utah University, Letter dated 14 June 1974, pp 93–94.

way that it would become a paragon of inclusivity of the peoples of all the regions of South Africa.¹²¹

The firm academic point of departure in this survey, before the establishment of a section for regional history studies at the IHS of the HSRC (the first of its kind in South Africa), is commendable. Its pioneering leaders provided a cornerstone as a point of departure to develop studies of regional history in a balanced and mature way. These developments were not recognised at the time of the closure of the IHR in the early 1990s. Close to forty years since the establishment of the Section for Regional History it is timely, or perhaps overdue, to dust off this forgotten milestone in the historiography of South Africa.¹²² Furthermore, it is suggested that the firm foundation from which regional history studies departed in the former IHR (ideas, planning, research capacity, networking, publication, education and methodology)¹²³ should be continued in a newly-created historical institute or regional studies institute with a much broader and deeper scope of doing, and making progress with, regional history studies than any kind of effort since the closure of the IHR.

Abstract

In the early 1970s, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) explored the possibility of establishing a regional history studies section within the Institute for Historical Research (IHR), which was founded in 1969. At the helm as director was a military historian, Commandant C.M. Bakkes. After the institute had been founded, a few young upcoming historians were appointed under his leadership. One of the early appointments was Mr (later Dr) Arie Oberholster. He was expected to be the driving force behind the IHR's planned regional studies section. Because the initiative was only a proposal (although passionately driven) in a still empty vessel, the IHR tasked Oberholster to explore, observe and learn from the international community in Europe and the USA. He did so for three months in 1974. Oberholster's insights, and the efforts of his counterpart Dr C.C. (Callie) Eloff, formed the cornerstone upon which the IHR's Section for Urban and Regional History was based shortly after July 1974. This discussion is in essence a recapitulation of this first formal initiative in South Africa to pioneer research in the field of regional history studies. It reveals how international thinking and doing helped to shape the early leadership's thinking about research in this comprehensive and challenging but exciting field of regional history. It is unfortunate that the IHR and all its activities were closed down in the early 1990s. This action brought constructive regional history studies to a standstill, and ended an initiative which could have flourished in the modern social history of South Africa. It has been suggested that the firm foundation from which regional history studies departed in the former IHR of the HSRC (ideas, planning, research capacity, networking, publication, education and methodology) should be re-

121. Compare interviews, with A.G. Oberholster conducted by author, November 2012; and 5 February 2013.

122. See some effort to recall the historiography of regional history in South Africa in which the IHR's regional history section is extensively acknowledged, in C.P. Jooste, "Machodorp tot en met Dorpstigting in 1904", MA dissertation, UP, 2008, pp 1–42. No critical stand is offered. Neither can this historiography be valued as an inclusive reflection of regional studies in all parts of South Africa.

123. See *New Contree*, Special issue, 67, December 2013, still to be published.

instated and continued in a newly created historical institute or regional institute with a much broader and deeper scope of regional history studies than any effort that has been made since the IHR was closed. If this is not done, South Africa will continue to lose valuable historical memory daily among black, white, coloured, Indian and other communities in all the provincial regions of the country.¹²⁴

Keywords: Regional history studies; local history; social history; Human Sciences Research Council; A.M. Oberholster; C.M. Bakkes; Institute for Historical Research; history from below; oral history; multidisciplinary research.

Opsomming

Pionierswerk in streeksgeskiedenis studies in Suid-Afrika: Refleksies in die voormalige Afdeling vir Streeksgeskiedenis by die Raad vir Geesteswetenskappe (RGN)

In die vroeg sewentigerjare het die Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing (RGN) ondersoek ingestel na die moontlikheid van die vestiging van 'n afdeling streeksgeskiedenis aan die Instituut vir Historiese Navorsing (IHN). Laasgenoemde is reeds in 1969 gestig. As direkteur is aangestel 'n militêre historikus, kommandant C.M. Bakkes. Onder sy leiding is 'n paar jong opkomende navorsers in Geskiedenis in diens geneem. Een van die eerste benoemings was mnr (later doktor) Arie Oberholster. Met verloop van tyd was Oberholster die dryfkrag agter die IHR se streeksgeskiedenis inisiatief. Omdat die moontlikheid vir 'n streeksgeskiedenis afdeling nog net 'n voorstel was, het die IHR vir Oberholster getaak om wyd te verken, waar te neem en te leer van die internasionale gemeenskap in Europa en die VSA. Dié opdrag het hy vir drie maande in 1974 uitgevoer. Oberholster se insigte voortvloeiend hieruit, en die pogings van sy eweknie dr C.C. (Callie) Eloff, sou die hoekstene vorm waarop die IHR se Afdeling Stads- en Streeksgeskiedenis kort na Julie 1974, tot stand gekom het. Hierdie bespreking is in wese 'n kritiese en analitiese samevatting van die eerste formele inisiatief in Suid-Afrika om streeksgeskiedenisnavorsing te vestig. In die gesprek word uitgewys hoe eertydse internasionale denke en aktiwiteite in die praktyk daartoe bygedra het om die vroeë leierskap in die Afdeling Stads- en Streeksgeskiedenis se denke te help vorm oor navorsing in hierdie omvattende en uitdagende maar opwindende terrein. Dit is jammer dat die IHR en al sy aktiwiteite in die vroeë 1990's beëindig is. Hierdie aksie het konstruktiewe en kontinue navorsing in streeksgeskiedenis navorsing 'n besliste knou gegee. Dit in 'n tydperk waarin moderne sosiale geskiedenis in Suid-Afrika ook binne hierdie subveld van geskiedenis kon floreer het. In die bespreking is voorgestel dat die stewige fondament waarop die Afdeling Stads- en Streeksgeskiedenisstudies eertyds funksioneer het voor hulle sluiting (idees, beplanning, navorsingskapasiteit, netwerke, publikasie, onderrig en metodiek) eerder herstel behoort te word, en voortgesit behoort te word in 'n nuutgeskepte historiese instituut van 'n aard. As voorbeeld hiervan dalk die gedagte van 'n streeksgeskiedenisinstituut met as fokus 'n baie breër en dieper omvang van streekhistoriese studies as enige poging tevore wat gemaak is in Suid-Afrika sedert die IHR is gesluit het. As dit nie gedoen word nie, sal die land steeds waardevolle historiese geheue onder swart, wit,

124. This discussion should also be read with the contribution by Van Eeden, "Regional, Local, Urban and Rural History", pp 1–34.

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bruin, Indiër en ander gemeenskappe in al die provinsiale streke van die land op 'n daaglikse tempo verloor.

Sleutelwoorde: Plaaslike geskiedenis studies; plaaslike geskiedenis; sosiale geskiedenis; Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing; A.M. Oberholster; C.M. Bakkes; Instituut vir Historiese Navorsing; geskiedenis van onder; mondelinge geskiedenis; multidissiplinêre navorsing.