

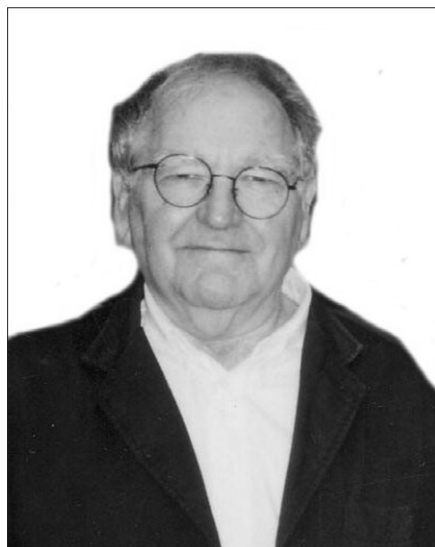
Stanley Trapido, Historian of South Africa, 1933–2008

Stanley Trapido, one of South Africa's foremost historians, died at the age of 74 in January 2008. He had for many years been attached to Queen Elizabeth House at the University of Oxford and was Lecturer in the Government of New States and a Fellow of Lincoln College. Based in Oxford Commonwealth studies, he was an influential figure within the beavering circle of left-wing scholars who forged materialist academic history writing on South Africa through the 1970s and 1980s, in which vibrant social history and class analysis stretched the minds of scores of probing postgraduate students and appreciative academic colleagues. Although Stanley Trapido was in the thick of this mainly seminar atmosphere in London and Oxford, he never cultivated a school of personal protégés. His was not that sort of fancy reputation.

Born in 1933, Stan Trapido grew up and was schooled in the gruff Transvaal mining town of Krugersdorp, an appropriately geological spot from which to embark on his planned science studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. But finding common cause with a radical fringe of students associated with the Congress of Democrats in the 1950s tugged him towards political history, and he ended up completing a master's dissertation on the ANC.

After a junior lecturing stint at the University of Cape Town, he moved to the University of Natal. In Durban, Stan met and married the woman who would be his devoted companion to the end of his life, the noted novelist, Barbara Trapido. In December 2007 she wrote gently and wryly in *The Guardian* about working in an attic stuffed with 'biographies of dead imperialists', and which had once been decorated with pictures of colonial buffalo hunts and mission churches. It had been occupied previously by her husband, 'Stanley, a historian', for whom she had by then become a 'carer', in the coy custodial language of modern British welfare service.

Over four decades earlier, Stan Trapido had left a repressive apartheid South Africa and had gone into self-imposed exile in Britain where he taught for several years at the University of Durham, much favoured by silver-spoon undergraduates who got the benefit of his unblinking, measured tutorial deliberation and characteristic low chuckle. His next step in teaching was at a university to which



Durham played a classic second fiddle. Having completed a University of London Ph.D. on Cape liberalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Stan took up a post in Oxford where he worked until his retirement in 2001 and continued to live until his death.

Stanley Trapido was a truly uncommon scholar. His no-nonsense upbringing included immersion in athletics and boxing, and early childhood passion for cricket and rugby never waned, with the state of play at Lords or at Cape Town's Newlands cricket or rugby grounds always getting him into a quizzical state of mild animation. Never intellectually stuffy, his readiness to provide pensive comment or terse judgement could extend as much to South African cricketers and rugby players like Clive van Ryneveld and Okey Geffin as to this country's historians such as P.J. van der Merwe and Leonard Thompson.

His sceptical temperament and self-effacing sensibility made him healthily critical or quietly dismissive not only of ruling establishments and their institutions, but also of academic grandeur. After a seminar during a summertime Oxford visit in the 1990s, I was treated to dinner in Lincoln College. Stanley Trapido was presiding. It is a pity that so few were present. After fumbling about unsuccessfully for a Latin grace which Barbara had jotted down on a scrap of paper, he shrugged it off and announced, simply, "oh, what the hell, let's eat". That was accompanied, aptly, by Mulderbosch Chardonnay instead of some Bourgogne Grand Cru. He embodied then, as ever, the most gentle and beguiling contrariness imaginable.

An exceptional researcher who embraced time-consuming archival labour with relish, it is quite remarkable that Stan

Trapido rose to become so eminent an historian without ever producing a book of his own. Perhaps there was something in his natural reticence and low-key manner of never really wanting to have his cake and eat it. Instead, his inquisitiveness and subtle observation in re-interpreting major aspects of South African history was doled out in virtuoso slices. These were always meaty. Whether written individually or in co-authorship with others, notably Shula Marks, the offerings on Stanley Trapido's plate would have kept even *Oliver Twist* quiet. The range encompassed Dutch conquest and early Afrikaner nationalism, Cape colonial liberalism and the African peasantry, South African industrialisation in comparative perspective, British imperialism and the origins of the 1899–1902 South African War, Boer trekker and Afrikaner societies of the 19th-century agrarian Highveld, and the nature of early 20th-century South Africa during and after post-1902 reconstruction.

Whether in the form of journal articles or essays, book chapters, biographical sketches or in co-editorship of pioneering collections on 19th- and 20th-century South Africa, Stan left an enduring imprint on interpretation of his country's past. His facility of acute understanding and pithy expression was conveyed in conceptually powerful observation, as in his depiction of baronial capitalism in early 20th-century South Africa as the alliance of gold and maize.

Stan sustained an abiding interest in such things as liberalism and paternalism, Afrikaner nationalism, and mining capitalists and the 1899–1902 War throughout his scholarly life, often re-evaluating their significance in pretty unlikely places, such as Muizenberg beach. Fusing a large generalising capacity with an eye for suggestive detail, his scholarship throughout was marked by an alertness to the structures of power in society, to ideas and the forms they took, and by a keen attention to individuals and social classes and how they were embodied and deeply connected to one another. His research students, many of whom now occupy prominent university positions in South Africa, Britain, Australia and America, knew the supervision challenges that were coming, even before their supervisor opened his mouth.

Like other South African historical revisionists of his generation, Stanley Trapido's writings owed a general intellectual debt to Marx. But his distrust of more arcane theory and leaden explanatory models made him a lucid and pene-

trating historian within the Marxist tradition, rather than a Marxist of the hydraulic variety.

Anyone lucky enough to have known Stan personally in recent decades would have known a warm, deliciously impenetrable and slightly mischievous man, pottering about the welcoming Trapido lair, or wandering across an Oxford meadow with Polly and Moley, his

beloved lurcher dogs. His rich companionship could also be felt in the Cape that he loved so much and its special spots that mattered to him up to the last years of his life, like the Olympia Café and Quagga Bookshop in Kalk Bay. He was truly an exceptional man of letters, by turns witty and stubborn, benign and exacting. He will be remembered for that as much as for his Eastern Cape expertise on

Sir Andries Stockenstrom, Lieutenant-Governor of British Kaffraria in the 1830s. In referring to him, invariably, as Stockies, Stan reminded one of why history is worthwhile.

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