

Herinneringe / Reminiscences Dabbling in History: More apprenticeship than sorcery

*Bill Nasson**

Almost two years ago, having been run to ground in the Western Cape winelands, I gave the first and last history inaugural lecture of my life.¹ A bit of this and a bit of that, I concluded with a couple of observations on the future of the past, or the historian's usual recurring headache. One was to recall some of the sentiments of an Alan Paton Award acceptance speech made by the renowned Charles van Onselen in 1997.² What were those? In a nutshell, we were reminded of the fine professional historians who tramp across this country in their shiny bibliographic boots and flowing footnotes. Yet, their talents had become devoted invariably to writing for other professional historians, an affair between smart consenting adults, with little thought given to firing the imagination of a more general reading public. Van Onselen's concern was the future of the past, arguing that for its continuing survival, scholarly South African history needed consciously to cultivate a more public audience.

Put another way, history is not something that ought ever to be done behind the same lock and key as post-post-structuralist literary criticism, or sociology with the customary grudge against intelligible language. A uniquely democratic literary craft, it is, after all, the exact opposite of fancy university disciplines which are technically complex or which rely for understanding on the bondage of some kind of Masonic grammar. As a low-level sorcerer's apprentice, I have long been attracted by the simple alchemy of trying to avoid obscurity, of always striving to write attractively and accessibly, if with the usual mixed results. It seems to me that fifteen years on, we

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1. B. Nasson, "How Abnormal is South Africa?" *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 66, 1, 2012, pp 40–50.

2. C. van Onselen, "Only Good Writing", (Johannesburg) *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1997.

could still do worse than to take account of Charles van Onselen's inclinations. Whether as postgraduate researchers your histories are the conduct of public affairs or the breathless micro-narratives of the unwritten or the subaltern, it is salutary to remember one of G.M. Young's dictums from the 1940s. According to the eminent English Victorianist, it is for the historian to write "while you hear the people talking", and to know that you have passed the test when you write "while you watch the people reading".³

In a way, there is no need to leave the telling of attractive and digestible stories of chance and change, of irony and ambiguity, of colliding interests, to the historical novel. Equally, when it comes to crafting imaginative representations of the past, there may be something to be learned from novelists who dabble in historical themes. Theirs is, of course, a genre known for making things up, or for presenting someone's fondness for the bottle as the national narrative, uncorked. Still, in considering work with an imaginative reach into African pasts, it is not all Robert Ruark's *Uhuru* (1962) or Nicholas Montsarrat's *The Tribe that Lost its Head* (1956). Many modern examples, like Christoffel Coetzee's *Op Soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (1998) and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* (1964) are assuredly worth their salt. William Boyd, an English novelist I have long admired, is good on this. Go and do your homework, he has advised historians. Assemble the most compendious documentation. Strive for authenticity. But if you are not sure whether, as "historical truth", a thing works or not, look at how such matters are being tackled through the alchemy of literary art.⁴ Historians of war have known this for a long time.

The other closing observation of a couple of years ago was more cautionary than encouraging. In selling new versions of the national story, historians would perhaps do well to beware

3. Quoted in R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* (Penguin, London, 2001), p 234.

4. W. Boyd, *Bamboo* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 2005), p 42. His classic 1982 picaresque historical novel of the First World War in East Africa, *An Ice-Cream War*, remains in print.

of getting too carried away. It is true enough that cramped, torn, disputed nations that were once thought unrealisable can be realised. Forget South Africa, try asking the Irish. It is no less the case that nations have a habit of rising and falling – try asking the Welsh, especially if your recollections are coal mining and Rugby Union. For that matter, too, historians and their brands of history – say, master-narratives – also have a tendency to rise and fall, if rather more swiftly than nations. Nowadays, apparently even comfortable master historians have to *become* their history, so that before you get to grips with David Cannadine’s view of the Edwardian English aristocracy, you learn about his Birmingham upbringing and grammar school pedigree. Or you could turn, should you so wish, to Hayden White, if you want clarity about the medium being the message, or the content being the form. If history itself should be treated historically, “there is no reason that historians should historicize absolutely everything, yet forget about themselves”.⁵

On the other hand, if you are not “a dedicated follower of fashion”, to quote the sublime 1960s pop group, *The Kinks*, you could even ask Karl Marx, who said much the same sort of thing rather earlier, and rather more plainly and tellingly. No man, he once wrote, squats outside history. That sense of scholars themselves squatting inside history, and of being influenced and formed by various kinds of historical experience, is something that I first encountered academically about 30 years ago. It was a set of essays in the form of professional life histories of major scholars who had spent most of those lives defining themselves against the conventional historiographical arena. Called *Visions of History*, and published in 1983 by the US Radical Historians Organisation, once upon a time it would have been required reading on any senior-level historiography course.⁶ Here was a fistful of historians revealing a large larger set of influences, some personal, some more public and seismic, that had helped to fashion their practice, ideologically. Those included American naval service in the Pacific War of the 1940s; the women’s

5. J. Brewer, *Sentimental Murder: Love and Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (Harper Perennial, London, 2005), pp 290–291.

6. H. Abelove (ed.), *MAHRO: Visions of History* (Pantheon, New York, 1983).

movement; the trade union movement; anti-nuclear politics; the civil rights movement; English missionary Methodism; and life at bruisingly close quarters in the Communist Party.

These supreme practitioners were, almost needless to say, the usual suspects, including E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Sheila Rowbotham in Britain, and Natalie Zemon Davis, Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman in the USA. Grand wizards and grand witches of a capacious Marxist historiography, they were the Merlins of materialism, extending it from the history of economic relations to the history of culture. It was the infectious power of their visions of the world and how it worked that enabled me, for some part of my own professional life, to survive comfortably, happily, and *fraudulently*, in a university Department of Economic History without ever having become an economic historian.

There was also something else that was explanatory about the writings of those scholars, especially Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Decades later, through them I could really understand and appreciate the meaning of one part of the world of work which I encountered, mostly uncomprehendingly, through my pre-teen and teenage years. One half of my family – the less pretentious side – lived by their hands. They included aunts, uncles, older nephews and nieces who were factory cloth cutters and seamstresses, who were typesetters in print shops, who baked wedding cakes, who were car mechanics, who knitted, sewed, crocheted, always making things.

One of the first things I learned about the Second World War, aside from Tobruk and Robey Leibbrandt, was that the domestic cake business took a dive due to the shortage of white flour. These damn couples were so picky about their precious cakes that they kept postponing weddings until the war was over. I was particularly impressed by an inky uncle who not only pumped out sports club programmes on a Gestetner hand press. He fussed over cars. The long bonnet of his black Citroen saloon was held down by brown leather straps. When they rotted after too many Cape winter monsoons, he fashioned new ones. Years later, you find yourself with

Thompson or Hobsbawm whose texts are illuminating the growth of industrialisation or the formation of labour hierarchies or craft skills, and your personal history theme-park returns.

What, then, do you come to realise? It is not so much some intellectual abstraction, of whether, given vastly different times, vastly different countries, you could apply Edward Thompson's reconstruction of Leeds handloom weavers to 1950s Cape Town. What you realise – then, and now – is what those working individuals amounted to, as an atmospheric history that once cloaked you. In a loose way, they were tied to an identifiably social historical landscape – peopled by a labour aristocracy, apprentices, artisans, craftsmen, journeymen, mechanicals, finishers and so on. And so, you, too, are reminded that just as there are many ways of skinning a cat, so there is more than one way of squatting inside history.

There is also, possibly, a sense in which that artisanal slice of my personal history has left a mark, at times feeling a bit like a hump to match that of Richard III. I have, after all, gone on record as claiming to be never more than a jobbing, journeyman kind of historical writer, content to do some of the cutting, and with no aspirations to plant a shoot. At times, it is almost impossible not to confront a deeply unsettling question. By that, I do not mean the current therapeutic catharsis of our national narrative, glory be, is it possible any longer to write the history of South Africa? No, what I have in mind is something far more mundane. The question is not just *who* is history for? It is to wonder what *you* are for?

If the answer is that you are a practising academic historian, jack of some trades, master of none, where does that leave you? Perhaps right alongside the perpetually re-born general or common reader, for whom you are frequently trying to write. In effect, it is to be a bit like a couple of stray suburban cats, prowling about, always on the sniff. Being slightly skittish, and carrying about you an air of the alley, you can reasonably expect to be the object of vague neighbourhood curiosity. With luck, there may even be some sympathetic interest. But no-one will necessarily wish to claim you.

This all leads to another consideration. As the incisive and no-nonsense Roy Foster has emphasised more than once, never mind all those balls of theoretical floss, we make credible history by *remembering* things.⁷ That is, I suppose, a better thought than relying on history to remember *us*. Foster has, undoubtedly, a forceful point, a consoling, common-sense rationalisation for getting on with history as we fret over such matters as the recycling of historical memory as heritage tourism, interrogating silences or sanitised re-remembering.

Foster's maxim is probably more than ever right when you take a wider view of the history enterprise, of who is doing it and why. Self-evidently, politicians cheerfully milk history for all that it is worth. It is such a pity. For the thing is, for most politicians, not least our own, it is best not to dabble in history. A dignified silence about the past may sometimes be the right course. Take a cue from old George Bernard Shaw, not an Irishman for nothing. Back in the 1890s, he advised his native-born politicians that they would do better to stick to the customary tricks of their trade. Conjure up the future rather than dredge up a past which has been either buffed up or soiled to suit the need of present purposes. At the same time, one could say, in equal measure, that if historians do nothing else, it is their job to remember. You can even yawn over methodologies or genres, but you have to remember, and not even but *especially* the awkward and unwelcome things that do not fit a particular favoured view.

And, predictably, once you get to a certain age, the beguiling essence of history as remembering can become positively addictive. If anything, there are occasions when you are probably better-off with the opposite of involuntary memory – voluntary amnesia. By remembering, I do not mean memory with a capital M, nor structured memory. These are, as we know, sometimes all too exhaustingly, high historiographical fashions with a historiography all of their own, conceived, as with so many dazzling fashions, in the cerebral cafes and *ateliers* of Paris. What I have in mind is something more low-level, remembering in order to relate yourself personally to history, how it crowded in to leave one stuck with doing it as a means of earning a

7. Foster, *Irish Story*, p 24.

living.

The idea of the present explaining itself through remembering and citing the past is a long and respectable intellectual tradition. Whether it is as self-validation or as shameless self-indulgence, is for others to judge, and preferably not the French. Otherwise, one would be expected to be re-appropriating discarded sites or realms so as to be cured either of perpetual cultural loneliness, or of the “methodological solipsism of the postmodern academy”.⁸ For the remainder of this talk, then, let me turn to a personal tale about history and its long, insistent resonance inside our skulls. Having reached the sixth decade of my existence, nailing down whatever is left to be done is beginning to feel increasingly like a race with the undertaker. Or, equally to the point, with the mortuary attendant. This is, after all, South Africa, colourful land of many vultures.

Ultimately, when it comes to history as confessional, we can all end up as a poor man’s David Cannadine, moving back in personal time to our own laundry-list of his deliciously edgy English things, schooling, class, accent. At some point, the irresistible urge may come to squirm back into the small hours of youthful memory. And, once there, to remember some of the collisions with history which live on in some corner of your mind because they are not only your working present, but also your working future. To dispel any rising suspicions that I am a congenital Francophobe, on this there is the view of the bourgeois-born and revolution-inclined philosopher, Georges Sorel.

If your craft is history, he once wrote towards the end of the nineteenth century, your mind and your waking hours are forfeit to two matters. One is the inescapable empiricism imprisoned in documents with which you construct elaborate, even baroque, tellings of a national history. The other is what Sorel called a *diremption*.⁹ By that, he meant a slice out of a living past reality, something at the edge of your personal plate, like a mound of burnt peas, which communicated

8. T. Judt, *The Memory Chalet* (Penguin, New York, 2010), p 172.

9. See G.A. Williams, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), p 1.

memory of a haunting kind, an evocative sense of swaying within a history in the making. It is, at the risk of now sounding a Francophile, rather like the famous bit about those biscuits being dipped in the tea in Marcel Proust's famed multi-volumed 1920s–1930s *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Here, then, is a sample taste or a Sorelian slice. Incidentally, it is a great shame that I am not in Britain this Jubilee year as they are rounding up anyone who happened to have been born in 1952 to record their experiences of the New Elizabethan Age. As another child of that year, I wonder what Ghana-born William Boyd is telling the BBC about what those colonial service Britons on the Gold Coast made of Prince Philip. My own earlier memories of a Cape Town childhood include that of my mother's showy memorabilia from the 1947 Royal Visit. Another is that of a family friend, one of those deep-pocketed fictive uncles, who had served in the Cape Corps in the Second World War. His sitting-room contained a framed picture of King George VI and another of his battalion on post-war parade in front of the City Hall. He was inordinately fond of reminding anyone who would listen that that moment on the Grand Parade had been the proudest moment of his life. Why, because of the privilege of being addressed by not one but two British field-m Marshals, Bernard Montgomery and Jan Smuts. The significance of that only dawned many years later, when you realise what it told you about the corner into which *not-so-Slim* Jannie had painted himself by the later 1940s, and partly why he was done for when it came to white electoral politics.

There was another looming figure in the late 1950s, a hangover from the Smuts *Bloedsap* South Africa, who was struggling not to be erased from its fading history. My father, who was wholly bilingual, used to give Afrikaans lessons in our dining room to a very pink round man with a round face, round glasses and unblinking green eyes. An immigrant Englishman, Mr Shaw was a Cape Town magistrate with a pressing need to learn Afrikaans. At the age of whatever it was, eight or nine, I found it all rather odd. Why was he practising Afrikaans in front of my doubtful father when he was everything that was Britain – or, back then, England as I understood it. As its generous

visiting emissary, Mr Shaw brought perks, the novels of Somerset Maugham and Evelyn Waugh for my parents, children's books for me, like Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, Richmal Crompton's *Just William* series and A.A. Milne's *The World of Christopher Robin*, and for the kitchen a tartan tablecloth that would now be considered quite hideous. Again, as with ex-Sergeant Felix Hendricks of the Cape Corps on Smuts, it was only much later that those fuzzy weekly encounters with the saintly Mr Shaw made sense as a message about historical time and place. What he was on about was having to scramble to pick up Afrikaans to ensure a continuing judicial job in the teeth of the wave of affirmative action following the National Party takeover in 1948.

Can anything be marshalled from such subjective and personal slices of historical memory? At least two things, perhaps. Firstly, for anyone like me, like you, who goes on to slump into the practice of history, they can have a lot to answer for. Perhaps, most obviously, for germinating an impulse, or early curiosity, however haphazard, but with an overriding future direction. Therefore, once you have ducked and dived through, in my case, the University of Hull undergraduate years of topics like "British Society, 1870–1950", and "The Dutch Republic, 1588–1713", and you turn to the writing of what you like to think is real history, where do you go? Again, in my own case and, I suspect, a good many of yours, you go where you are tugged by the prospect of chewing at what you've already been licked by. Inevitably, then, you yield to the allure of the South African War or Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, to the British imperial world, to the Great War and, with a kind of dread inevitability, the Second World War. A post-war decade being amused by General H.B. Klopper at Tobruk falling into the hands of the Italians, of *all* adversaries, has possibly not gone entirely to waste.

Secondly, I think, for any early encounters with history's droppings to amount to anything meaningful or distinctive, one needs to be an attentive listener and open-eyed observer. Helped – and I suggest this at the risk of psycho-babble – by being an only child, I have been listening to the experiences of older or more elderly people for

much of my life, certainly with the usual stifled yawn from the age of around ten, probably. The main problem with keeping it up was always having to keep it up, even when the record was quite clearly getting stuck, or some or other life story was stumbling into magical realism or becoming bloody nonsense. If, in later decades, in my own life, the 1980s, you flirt with the practice of oral history, the pursuit of bright-eyed politeness in an open-mouthed effort to find out more, could become an occupational risk. As always, not only were old people, that is, anyone older than yourself, constantly repeating themselves. In the life-stories you were trying to record and to document, there were gaping holes, evasions, inventions and laughably implausible incidents. This remains, obviously, an occupational hazard faced by anyone who is concerned to learn about a past, whether more recent or more remote, from a jumbled and muddled deposit of personal oral testimonies.

For me, oral history in the 1980s was also a sequel of sorts. For his entire teaching life, my father had worked at a small church primary school within spitting distance of Cape Town's District Six. One minor chord of my childhood experience was the noise of the life and urban folklore of District Six, from which the children of factory garment workers would trudge down to slurp soup from the feeding scheme run by St Mary's Primary School. So, when I tried my hand for a while as an apprentice oral historian, what I ended up doing was District Six, or offering some of its then evicted residents a patient historian's ear. There was one thing in particular which struck that ear, about the trickiness of oral history as new history. We were all for alternative histories, then well ahead of the cultural critics who would later be overtaking us in the rush to blaze new trails in alternative history.

That thing was a simple methodological curiosity, and it has stuck on like a limpet. In retrieving memories of District Six schooling, we asked a sample of life-history respondents what their childhood classroom experience had been like. The near uniform response was rosy, apples for Miss, contented rows of pupils beavering away, teachers of legendary compassion and charity. That did not quite

square with expectations, to say nothing of one's own experience of school. So, we changed the question to something more precise. Interviewees were asked what happened if someone did something wrong. Almost inevitably, it elicited another version altogether of a schoolroom childhood, casual floggings, fear of tyrannical authority, incidents of almost sadistic paedophilia.

What might one say about those stories? Perhaps, that memories of working-class schooldays as an idealised urban pastoral or as a record of rough and capricious adult authoritarianism, are merely counter-texts, each with its own authentic internal validity. Perhaps, that one of the inescapable basic elements of oral history as a genre is that, depending on how the coin is tossed, you will be able to get what it is that you think you ought to get. Or, perhaps, that the beneficial impact of the recording of mentalities, memories, voices, upon the genre of history is that it can sometimes offer a relaxing liberation from the irritation of the ascertainable fact or factual correctness.

The history of school experiences – sunlit or Dickensian – is probably as good an educational point as any upon which to round off. If I have ended up as a superannuated historical apprentice, by nature inclined to turn my hand to this or that when it comes to historical subjects, the blame lies either with my dodgy *Gemini* birth-sign, or with my high school. I was fortunate, if that is the right word, to spend five years from the mid-1960s at a school which traded on richly overlapping varieties of literature and history, incessant histories which kept you in line.¹⁰ Mercifully, these were not the sports achievement roll-call of standard institutional school histories, but those associated with the radical Western Cape political culture of which that high school was one of several Cape Town strongholds. It was just taken as read that virtually all teachers were, well, independent socialists, uncompromising advocates of non-racialism, and tribunes

10. For Livingstone High School and its political culture, see A. Wieder, *Teacher and Comrade: Richard Dudley and the Fight for Democracy in South Africa* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2008); B. Nasson, "R.O. Dudley, Teacher, Educator and Political Dissenter, 1924–2009", *South African Journal of Science*, 106, 11/12, 2010, pp 26–28.

of principled non-collaboration with what we learned to term as apartheid's *Herrenvolkism*.

Moreover, they were all afflicted by the need to go on and on about history as the best nest of critical values with which to get to grips with the dubious world that was life in South Africa. This meant that history – as allusion, as warning, as fact – was always lurking somewhere on virtually every lesson menu, whether the class was English, Afrikaans, German, Biology, Physics or Geography. It also meant that subject History in itself was taught through a sort of oppositional schizophrenia. To satisfy Caesar, we were taught to render the Nationalist textbook hogwash that was Fowler and Smit (dubbed “Fouler than Shit”) in any external examination.¹¹ Put simply, it was the necessity of parroting the required version of things such as the Great Trek. Alongside it, we were taught an alternative version of the same story, for consumption on the premises. I daresay that educationists would term it as having been a hidden curriculum or a counter-curriculum.

Best of all, though, by a long shot, was the imparting of history as an internationalist vista, as a humanist escape from choking parochialism. It was to cross borders to squat on the rim of new and ardent historical worlds, if of a particular kind. By the time you hit matriculation year, depending on the extra-mural gap, there might be introductions to Joseph Needham on Chinese science, Isaac Deutscher on the life of Leon Trotsky, E.H. Carr on the Soviet Union, C.L.R. James on Caribbean anti-colonialism and William Morris on fraternal Victorian socialism. You could skip weekly Christian school assemblies for alternate secular assemblies, joining those who were Muslim, Hindu, agnostic or atheist for Charles Darwin rather than John the Baptist. Deep down, the history that I have pursued since then has, somehow, sometimes, felt as if it has run all of that a respectable second.

11. On the indigestible content of the Fowler and Smit era, see P. de Cruz, “From Narrative to Severed Heads: The Form and Location of White Supremacist History in Textbooks of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid Eras – A Case Study”, M.Phil History Education dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2005, esp. pp 19–21.