

# The case of the volkscustodian and the professor: heritage versus history

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*Rational discourse does not gain from remythologizing the Afrikaner viewpoint as especially atavistic, arcane or lurid.*

~ Bill Freund

## Introduction

The climacteric political revolution of the past three decades in South African history has obscured or dwarfed many deeply significant and symbolic incidents that took place during this time. One of these is the story of how Prof. F.A. van Jaarsveld was tarred and feathered by right wing activists while delivering a paper at an academic conference. The general public has forgotten the incident. Even academics have largely forgotten or trivialised the event. This should never have been allowed to happen.

In fact, the incident constitutes a highly significant and symbolic layered historical narrative. At the most literal level, it constitutes a graphic warning of the consequences of allowing academic practice to be subordinated to ideology. Historically, it constitutes an icon that encapsulates the self-contradictory spirit of Afrikaans intellectual and ideological history during the 1970's. Theoretically, the story gives us the opportunity to investigate

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the nature and social power of historical consciousness in action. The aim of this study is to rescue the story from the level of mere anecdote and use it to cast light on what historical consciousness is and the relationship between Academic History and Historical Heritage. In the process, it will, hopefully, contribute to a greater understanding of Afrikanerdom and its contrasting mindsets during the 1970's.

In this article, I shall be claiming that historical consciousness is a continuous discourse or unfolding narrative rather than a fixed attitude or mindset. It follows from this that historical consciousness cannot be understood by freezing an instant in time for close analysis. Instead, the broader narrative needs to be considered. For this reason the article begins by outlining the fortunes of the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative during the 1970's as well as the historical consciousness that spawned it. This provides the temporal perspective necessary to impute meaning to the event of the evening of 28 March 1979. Once the event has been given significance, a historicised analysis to investigate historical consciousness can be undertaken. Finally, this analysis can provide insights into the relationship between academic history and historical heritage.

In the article, two terms are used to refer to white Afrikaans-speakers and their mindsets: *Afrikaner* and *Afrikaans*. The reason for this is that the terms denote different identities. "*Afrikaner*" tends to indicate identification with the ideal of an *Afrikanervolk* and its religio-nationalistic identity discourse and metanarrative in some or other form. Some Afrikaans-speakers explicitly reject both the discourse and its ideology. Contrary to the stereotype, one does not have to be an *Afrikaner* (in this sense) to be *Afrikaans*. Where groups and individuals have laid claim to *Afrikanerskap*, either directly or indirectly, their claim has been respected. In all other cases, the term "*Afrikaans*" has been used.

This article consciously attempts to avoid giving unnecessary grounds for offence. If it has, the author apologises unreservedly. Although some actions cry out to be condemned by any rational person, it is not part of this project to sit in judgement on the actions or thoughts of individuals.

## **Prologue**

Although to an outsider it didn't really feel like it at the time, by the late 1970's, white Afrikaans South Africa was in turmoil.

In the early and mid-1960's, the mood of Afrikaner Nationalism had soared from triumph to euphoria. The Sharpeville crisis and ensuing international storm had been weathered and republican status outside the Commonwealth had been easily achieved. Thanks to gold, the economy was booming and, after Rivonia, African nationalist opposition had been thrown into disarray.

The present was proceeding exactly as it had been emplotted and the future seemed golden. The celebration of 5 years of Republican status on 31 May 1966 took the form of a victory parade that began in Voortrekkerhoogte and marched through the shadow of the commanding Voortrekker Monument - a kind of symbolic genuflection – to the Afrikaner nationalist metanarrative symbolised by the monument. The overt symbolism of the event and its location reflected both the nature of and the role played by the Afrikaner nationalist metanarrative in legitimating the present and securing the future for those who appropriated it as their own.

This metanarrative was reflected in all the most socially influential discourses of Afrikaans culture: Politics, Religion, Literature and History.

In the afternoon of 6 September 1966 the euphoria and its underlying metanarrative was threatened and the metanarrative almost crashed when the Prime Minister and darling of Afrikaner nationalism, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd was assassinated.<sup>1</sup> This was a shattering psychological, ideological and political blow to the heart of the metanarrative. Even so, it was not a deadly one, especially after the assassin was declared mentally unfit to stand trial.<sup>2</sup> Under the strict and heavy-handed leadership of the newly elected narrator-in-chief, Prime Minister B.J. Vorster, the narrative could be re-plotted, although it was never quite as strong as it had been. Lingering uncertainties led to the appearance of two opposing ideological perspectives on the best way to re-plot the narrative and re-establish the legitimacy of the present and the guaranteed future: *Verligtheid* and *Verkramptheid*. This disagreement developed into a *broedertwis* that led to the dismissal of three members of parliament from the National Party and the subsequent establishment of the Re-formed National Party (HNP) in 1969.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970 general election, the HNP failed to win a single seat.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the metanarrative was shaken but still secure as its new custodian and chief narrator, Prime Minister B.J. Vorster revised the emplotment to legitimate his new ideals for the future.

The euphoric metanarrative of progress was reflected in the received Afrikaans metanarrative of South African historiography. Two major new general histories of South Africa were emplotted, written and published in

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1. T.R.H. DAVENPORT and C. SAUNDERS, *South Africa A Modern History*, (5th ed., Macmillan, U.K. & S.A., 2000), p. 424.

2. *Ibid.*, p.424.

3. B.J. LIEBENBERG and S.B. SPIES (eds.), *South Africa in the 20th Century*, (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1993), pp.422-426.

4. *Ibid.*, p.426.

Afrikaans during the 1960's: *Vyfhonderd Jaar Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*.<sup>5</sup> and F.A. van Jaarsveld's *Van Van Riebeeck tot Verwoerd 1652 - 1966*.<sup>6</sup> The same metanarrative was repeated in English in 1969 in *The Making of a Nation a history of the Union of South Africa, 1910 - 1961*.<sup>7</sup> This book is a remarkable publication. Although it is written in English, the author, D.W. Krüger, was Director of the Institute of Historical Research in the Human Sciences Research Council, and a former professor of History at Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. The HSRC was established and funded by the government and Potchefstroom University was traditionally a bastion of Afrikaner Nationalist Academe.

*The Making of a Nation*, which was typical of Afrikaner historiography at the time, identifies the South African Nation with republicanist Afrikanerdom. Written from the euphoric perspective of the late 1960's, it inevitably legitimated the (then) present and expressed high optimism for a golden future guaranteed by the victorious process of the past. It closed with the following words:

... the republic which came into being on that day [31 May 1961], exactly 51 years after 1910, was the visible expression of the nationhood which South Africa had achieved at the end of half a century of close association between the component parts of the Union. *It expressed the deeply-rooted feeling of oneness, the sense of belonging together. White South Africa had at last achieved a national solidarity which was based not so much on a common heritage as on the expectation of a common future*, cemented by a common loyalty and patriotism as well as mutual respect.<sup>8</sup> [my emphasis]

In this metanarrative, the white South African future is subsumed under the white Afrikaans future and so it is guaranteed through its present link to a successful past progress to a favourable present. (Black South Africa is implicitly denied a future of any description.) In fact, the metanarrative functioned exactly as Rüsen has claimed that the traditional and the exemplary forms of historical narration function in society<sup>9</sup>. The narrative

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5. C.F.J. MULLER (ed.), (Academica, Pretoria & Cape Town, 1968). The following year an English translation appeared under the title *500 Years a History of South Africa*.
  6. F.A. VAN JAARSVELD, *Van Van Riebeeck tot Verwoerd 1652 - 1966 'n Inleiding tot die Geskiedenis van die Republiek van Suid-Afrika*. (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1969).
  7. D.W. KRÜGER, *The Making of a Nation*. Macmillan, (Johannesburg & London, 1969).
  8. *Ibid.*, p.334.
  9. See J. RÜSEN, *Studies in Metahistory*, (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1993), pp.5-8, 71-73, 81

offered a sense of personal and social continuity and stable identity by legitimating the present and guaranteeing the future on the grounds of the past. For the legitimacy and the implicit guarantee to remain valid, it was obviously imperative that the metanarrative of progress remain credible.

### **The growth of uncertainty**

During the 1970's, the muted doubts of the 1960's swelled to great and the security of the metanarrative began buckling under pressure from all sides. Increasingly, doubts were raised about the metanarrative and its emplotment. Demands for a radical re-emplotment were expressed in all the major spheres of culture, notably in politics, religion and literature.

The late 1960's saw the gradual resurgence of internal African Nationalism under new leadership and with more strident demands. The South African Students' Organisation was formed in 1969 with Steve Biko as its first president. Until he was banned in March 1973, Biko devoted himself to promoting his philosophy of Black Consciousness. This entailed scathing criticism of the received historical metanarrative.<sup>10</sup> His views came to the attention of white South Africa largely as a result of his death after police torture in September 1977. In white politics, Dr. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert was elected to parliament as a Progressive Federal Party member and became PFP leader and leader of the parliamentary opposition in 1979, all without denying or attempting to conceal his Afrikaans background.<sup>11</sup>

In 1963, Dr. Beyers Naude, Acting Moderator of the Transvaal Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) and a member of the *Broederbond* had clashed with his denomination on *Apartheid* issues including the prohibition of racially mixed marriages and ecclesiastical segregation. He founded a theologically liberal organisation called the Christian Institute in 1963 and was consequently ejected from office. Although the Christian Institute made little impact during the 1960's, it did establish Bible study groups throughout the country and produced study guides for them. This alternative voice provided a gradually growing challenge to the received theological discourse. During the 1970's, the Christian Institute began to speak out in favour of Black Consciousness and Black Theology (as opposed to Afrikaner Nationalist Theology). and was consequently banned in 1977.<sup>12</sup>

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10. S BIKO, *I Write What I Like*, (Heinemann, Oxford, 1987), pp.1-2, 28-32, 70-71.
  11. F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT, *Afrikaner Afrikaan Anekdoten en Analise*, (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1999), pp.18, 21-22.
  12. J.W. DE GRUCHY, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, (2nd ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids & David Philip, Cape Town, 1986), pp.103-115; R. ELPHICK and T.R.H. DAVENPORT (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa a Political, Social*

A more indirect, but probably more influential challenge to the received theological discourse and the security it provided was contained in the work of a growing number of young Afrikaans theologians, some of whom wrote specifically for a lay readership rather than for their academic colleagues. One of the most prominent of these was Prof. Ferdinand Deist. Another, Prof. Adrio König argued for substituting the traditional conception of a national God with that of a personal God. He urged abandoning the received traditional aim of returning to and maintaining the original (static) order of creation in favour of a dynamic and future-orientated theology.<sup>13</sup> König was in great demand as a guest preacher and author of a number of popular theological works. Through these activities, König (and several others) sparked off lively and often heated debates within the established Afrikaans churches.<sup>14</sup>

König tried to duplicate this role in his academic capacity as chairperson of the Department of Systematic Theology at UNISA. Pursuing this aim, he organised an interdisciplinary and multiracial congress on the theme: “The Meaning of History. Problems in the Interpretation of History with Possible Reference to Examples from South African History such as the Battle of Blood River”. The list of speakers invited makes it very clear that König hoped to provoke discussion on the question of “the hand of God in history”. One of the speakers he invited was the celebrated historian, Prof. F.A. van Jaarsveld.<sup>15</sup>

In literary circles, criticism of the metanarrative was clearly reflected in the work of the *sestigers*. By 1974 their threat to narrative security was too loud to be ignored. For the first time, an Afrikaans novel directly accused the metanarrative of hypocrisy by challenging the moral and racial values embedded in it. The threat could not be ignored and Andre P. Brink’s *Kennis van die Aand*<sup>16</sup> was officially branded as “destructive” and banned.<sup>17</sup> Etienne

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*and Cultural History*, (James Currey, Oxford & David Philip, Cape Town, 1997), pp.148, 162-163, 387.

13. *Ibid.*, p.375.

14. I am indebted to Prof. J.A. Du Rand (Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, RAU) for some of the information in and insights underlying this paragraph.

15. National Archives Depository (NAD), F.A. van Jaarsveld Papers (VJP), A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Letter from Prof. Adrio König to Prof. F.A. van Jaarsveld, 07-06-1978 and attached draft conference programme.

16. Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1973.

17. T.R.H. DAVENPORT and C. SAUNDERS, *South Africa A Modern History*, p.445

Leroux's *Magersfontein O Magersfontein*<sup>18</sup>, a devastating attack on the received tradition of a heroic past, soon joined it. Significantly, *Magersfontein o Magersfontein* was originally approved by the Publications Control Board and subsequently banned after the intervention of Dr. Connie Mulder, a *verkrampste* stalwart and Minister of Internal Affairs at that time.<sup>19</sup>

At about the same time a number of young Afrikaans academics in various fields began to offer more or less divergent views, both in their academic publications and in the press. One of these was a historian turned political scientist named Hermann Giliomee.<sup>20</sup> In 1979, Albert Grundlingh published his M.A. thesis on dissident Boers during the Anglo-Boer War under the title *Die "Hensoppers" en "Joiners"*.<sup>21</sup> In some circles this work was interpreted as an attack on Afrikaner solidarity and the heroic past.

The increasing attacks on the metanarrative were accompanied by a variety of significant events that contributed to the growing concern and critical attitude towards the metanarrative and its validity as legitimator of the (then) present and guarantee of the future. This heightened white Afrikaans South Africa's growing sense of uncertainty. These included the decolonisation of Angola and Mozambique in 1975, South Africa's unsuccessful military adventure in Angola and the beginning of the government's attempts to withdraw from Namibia without losing face.<sup>22</sup>

Internally, militant Black action began escalating again, beginning with a series of strikes in Durban during February 1973. This escalation continued through to the outbreak of the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976. The Soweto uprising spread quickly through most of the country and continued sporadically until 1980.<sup>23</sup> Due largely to a massive security clamp down but

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18. Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1976.

19. *Magersfontein Die Dokumente*, (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town & Johannesburg, 1990), pp.7,9.

20. Giliomee's most significant publications during the 1970's were published in English. Two influential and notably divergent publications were R. ELPHICK and H. GILIOME (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society*, (Longman, Cape Town, 1979) and H. GILIOME and H. ADAM, *The rise and crisis of Afrikaner Power*, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1979). It was published in Afrikaans as *Afrikanermag: Opkoms en Toekoms* in 1981.

21. A.M. GRUNDLINGH, *Die "Hensoppers" en "Joiners" die rasionaal en verskynsel van verraad*, Haum, (Pretoria & Cape Town, 1979).

22. See T.R.H. DAVENPORT and C. SAUNDERS, *South Africa A Modern History*, pp.527-528.

23. B.J. LIEBENBERG and S.B. SPIES (eds.), *South Africa in the 20th Century*, pp.460-464.

also to the strength of the legitimating metanarrative, the Soweto uprising failed to make the impact on white South Africa that it should have done. However the level of outrage and anger expressed by the uprisings deeply shocked many white South Africans. “The ‘rules of the game’ in race relations were permanently changed.”<sup>24</sup> Some white Afrikaans-speakers found it particularly traumatic that the uprising was triggered by the compulsory use of Afrikaans in the Bantu Education system.

With hindsight, it is clear that after Soweto, the legitimating and guaranteeing power of the received metanarrative could never recover. Even at the time, it was obvious that something had to be done to restore its credibility. The period 1976 - 1982 “... witnessed the rather abrupt collapse of the widely based belief among whites that the Verwoerdian idea of apartheid would bring security to them ...”.<sup>25</sup> For some Afrikaners, the uprising constituted a brutally shattering awakening that forced them to question and ultimately to reject the metanarrative. The Pretoria historian, Prof. F.A. van Jaarsveld was one of these. In the face of the NP government’s continuing attempts to contain the groundswell of black nationalist aspirations Van Jaarsveld was becoming increasingly sceptical of the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative. The Soweto uprising jolted him into modifying his view of the South African past and, increasingly, to reject the received metanarrative.<sup>26</sup>

For other Afrikaners, the shock was just as great, perhaps even greater, but they reacted differently. For them, the psychological bereavement this entailed was unbearable and they set about trying to reinstate the metanarrative instead of reassessing it. This helps to explain the establishment or rise to prominence of a variety of predominantly Afrikaans white right wing groups, including the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) under the leadership of Eugene Terre’Blanche. In March 1982 the Conservative Party was established under the leadership of Dr. Andries Treurnicht.<sup>27</sup>

On 7 July 1973 a group of seven men met in a garage in Heidelberg to establish the AWB.<sup>28</sup> Although this was three years after the HNP’s abysmal

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24. H. GILIOME, *The Parting of the Ways South African Politics 1976-82*, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1982), p.x1.

25. H. GILIOME, *The Parting of the Ways South African Politics 1976-82*, p.x.

26. I am indebted to Prof. Johann Tempelhoff (PU for CHE) for this insight.

27. T.R.H. DAVENPORT and C. SAUNDERS, *South Africa A Modern History*, pp.474-476.

28. P.J. KOTZÉ and C.P. BEYERS, *Die opmars van die AWB*, (Oranjewerkers Promosies, Morgenson (SA) 1988), p.25.



failure in the 1970 general election, the establishment of the AWB was a direct reaction to the failure of the parliamentary extreme right wing and the feelings of persecution that right wingers experienced.<sup>29</sup> Since becoming Prime Minister, B.J. Voster had adopted an outgoing foreign policy of “dialogue and *detente*”. In practice this meant that he was actually willing to talk to Black African governments and Heads of State, provided the dialogue took place on his terms. Coming, as it did, at the end of a decade of decolonisation and accompanied by the birth of *verligtheid*, this development seriously disturbed the far right wing which became increasingly anxious about the future of the Afrikaner *Volk*. Writing at the time, one (*verligte*) political observer characterised their kind of thinking as “the politics of anxiety and suspicion”.<sup>30</sup>

This characterisation seems to be confirmed by the AWB’s stated primary aim: to ensure the continued exclusive existence of the “*Boerevolk*” as a “nation” and not merely a “population group” by establishing an independent *Boerestaat* to be administered and governed exclusively by members of the “*Boerevolk*”.<sup>31</sup> This creation of a “*Boerevolk*” would, of course, reinstate the metanarrative as a credible legitimator of the present and guarantee of the *volk*’s future, irrespective of what was happening to the rest of South Africa. If the AWB had not perceived a real threat to the Afrikaner metanarrative at this time, the organisation would not have felt it necessary to identify a separate *Boerevolk* or to adopt the creation of a *Boerestaat* as its main aim. After six years of growth and consolidation, the AWB leapt into the public eye.

As indicated earlier, Prof Adrio König organised a congress to be held at UNISA on 28 - 30 March 1979. The theme chosen for the congress reflected König’s interest in the issue of a personal versus a national deity. As mentioned before, the congress theme was: *The Meaning of History. Problems in the Interpretation of History with Possible Reference to Examples from South African History such as the Battle of Blood River*. The aim of the congress was even more significant. It was stated to be

“... to address the topic of the interpretation of history from the perspective of different academic disciplines. Historiography in South Africa is, like in other countries, undergoing major reformulations. *Certain pre-scientific historians may have felt an*

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29. *Ibid.*, pp.25-26.

30. *Die Burger*, 8 July 1967, quoted in B.J. LIEBENBERG and S.B. SPIES (eds.), *South Africa in the 20th Century*, p.423.

31. P.J. KOTZÉ and C.P. BEYERS, *Die opmars van die AWB*, p.27.

*obligation to 'create' a history of their people* - today the emphasis is on an objective recording of events. Yet the perspective from which events are observed cannot be avoided and some would conclude there are no facts, only the interpretation of facts!"<sup>32</sup> (my emphasis.)

This theme attracted considerable interest, which is, in itself, a sign of the uncertainties of the time. The title and theme of the conference made a discussion of the metanarrative's religious dimension inevitable. The conference venue seated 250 and by early February, the congress was fully booked.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously, the congress was intended to provoke debate and even to initiate radical reflection on the Afrikaner metanarrative and the ideology it sustained. This is emphasised by the provisional list of speakers and respondents, which included both English and Afrikaans speakers, members of different racial groups, a variety of ideological persuasions and representing various disciplines. History was to be represented by Prof. T.R.H. Davenport (Rhodes), Prof J. Benyon (Natal), Prof. B.J. Liebenberg (Unisa) and Prof. F.A. van Jaarsveld (UP).<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, Prof. Van Jaarsveld was requested to deliver the opening paper at the first session on the evening of 28 March. The paper (which was translated and read in English for the benefit of the cosmopolitan audience) was entitled: "*Historiese Spieël van Bloedrivier*" (*Historical Mirror of Blood River*).<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, this congress exceeded its aims. It provoked a violent attempt to humiliate and muzzle Afrikaans critics of the metanarrative.

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32. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Congress Programme, p.2.

33. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, p.42.

34. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Congress Programme, p.3.

35. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the Pretoria Magistrate's court, pp.178-179, 180; *Die Transvaler*, 29-03-1979, p.1.

## **Metanarratives in conflict**

The announcement of this paper created considerable interest, especially as, over more than two decades of prolific publication<sup>36</sup>, the author's name had become synonymous with the history of the Afrikaans past from an Afrikaner perspective.<sup>37</sup> F.A. van Jaarsveld's early career was steeped in Voortrekker history. His M.A. dealt with the early history of the South African Republic. In 1950 he completed a doctorate at Groningen on relations between the South African Republic and the Orange Free State.<sup>38</sup> During the 1950's and early 1960's he continued to pursue his interest in the Great Trek and, especially, the Boer Republics and published prolifically on these topics<sup>39</sup>.

The material he made available on these topics had direct bearing on the Afrikaner metanarrative and helped to build and confirm it. Writing in 1958, Van Jaarsveld declared that "History is the arsenal to use and the fortress to shelter in."<sup>40</sup> This tendency was underlined by his 1974 vituperative criticism of the *Oxford History of South Africa* as being "politically, rather than academically correct", written from an "African" and "Black" perspective with a "strong anti Afrikaner bias" [my translations]. He characterised the book as "ideological and militant historiography".<sup>41</sup>

During the 1960's and 1970's, his extensive series of school text books made him undoubtedly the most widely studied and influential Afrikaans historian of the time.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the firm nationalistic and republican approach of

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36. During his lifetime, Van Jaarsveld published more than 50 major works, more than 150 academic articles and numerous more popular pieces (J.S. BERGH, "F.A. van Jaarsveld: Merkwaardige Historikus" in *Historia*, 40(1) May 1995, p.2.
  37. J. DU BRUYN, "F A van Jaarsveld: Afrikanerhistorikus en Vernuer" in *Historia*, 27(1), May 1982, p.55.
  38. Anon., "Lewensloop en Akademiese Loopbaan van F A van Jaarsveld" in *Historia*, 27(1), May 1982, p.4.
  39. *Ibid.*, pp.6-13.
  40. Quoted in P.H. KAPP, "F A van Jaarsveld as Vertolker van sy Tyd" in *Historia*, vol.27(1), May 1982, p.80 (my translation).
  41. F.A VAN JAARSVELD, "Geskonde Oue of Vertekende Nuwe?". In F.A. VAN JAARSVELD, *Geskiedkundige Verkenninge*, (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1974), (Reprinted from *Standpunte*, Aug. 1969), p.171 etc. See also D.J. VAN ZYL, "Prof F A van Jaarsveld se Benadering tot die Algemene Geskiedenis van Suid Afrika" in *Historia*, 27(1), May 1982, p.50.
  42. *Ibid.*, p.80. Van Jaarsveld had published at least 15 school text books by 1984.

his work helped to entrench and legitimate the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative, making him one of its most prominent proponents. During the 1960's and early 1970's Van Jaarsveld became increasingly involved with "Afrikanerdom" to the extent that he was recognised as "the Afrikaners' historian"<sup>43</sup>. One of his avid readers was Eugene Ney Terre'Blanche.<sup>44</sup>

Eugene Terre'Blanche was the son of a farmer and a farmer in his own right in the Ventersdorp district, where his family had farmed and taken a prominent part in Afrikaner society and *volkskultuur* for several generations. His background was a conservative one, and as a child he figured prominently in the local Day of the Vow commemorations. On his own admission, he was brought up as a fervent believer in the metanarrative of the *Afrikanervolk*. The influence of his family's beliefs was strengthened at school through the influence of Van Jaarsveld's history text books.<sup>45</sup>

Terre'Blanche matriculated in 1963 and joined the South African Police where he served in South West Africa ( now Namibia) and later as a member of the Special Guard Unit, which was responsible for the safety of the Prime Minister and State President. He left the force seven years later with the rank of warrant officer and embraced a political career.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, Terre'Blanche's lack of a tertiary education did not mean he had no interest in higher learning or culture. In fact, he was an extensive, although selective, reader. During his service in the police he established the SAP theatrical group and was given the job of writing sketches and plays that would improve the SAP's public image. In 1969, he received awards for the best original work and best producer at the ATKV's national theatrical competition. Significantly, the play in question was a historical drama. He was also an avid consumer of South African history, which fed the essential existential role the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative and its concrete expression in the form of tradition and historical heritage played in his

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43. J. DU BRUYN, "F A van Jaarsveld: Afrikanerhistorikus en Vernuwer" in *Historia*, 27(1), May 1982, p.59.

44. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.5,10,13.

45. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.3-4.

46. P.J. KOTZÉ and C.P. BEYERS, *Die opmars van die AWB*, pp.34, 35, 37; NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.3-5,28.

identity and worldview.<sup>47</sup> The work that he claimed made the deepest impression on him was Van Jaarsveld's *Afrikaner Quo Vadis?*<sup>48</sup>

Terre'Blanche was also deeply interested in conservative politics. After leaving the police, he stood as a candidate for the Re-formed National Party (HNP) in the Heidelberg constituency in the 1970 general election. This election was a disaster for the HNP. After the election, Terre'Blanche "realised the inadequacy of party politics" and resigned from the HNP.<sup>49</sup> Three years later he became one of the founders of the AWB and devoted a great deal of his time to building up the organisation and recruiting support for it.

Prof. Van Jaarsveld shared Terre'Blanche's enthusiasm for politics and history, although in a different form. During his studies at Pretoria University and Groningen Van Jaarsveld had been thoroughly schooled in the principles and practice of the Neo-Rankean (empirical) historical method. Prof. I.D. Bosman, a noted archival researcher himself, supervised Van Jaarsveld's M.A. thesis. His supervisor at Groningen was Prof. P.J. van Winter, who was noted for his use of the seminar method to school his students in the application of research methodology.<sup>50</sup> There can be no doubt that Van Jaarsveld was thoroughly trained in the traditions of the Neo-Rankean historical method, or that he was a thoroughly competent professional researcher. Although he seems to have preferred researching secondary sources, some of his finest work was based on archival research and the interpretation of primary material. Van Jaarsveld's work is open to criticism on various counts. In fact, many Afrikaans historians did criticise his preoccupation with writing text books and works on historical theory instead of continuing his earlier primary research. However, he certainly had his supporters within the profession, and to many laypeople who had used his school text books, he exemplified the historical profession as a whole and his interpretations constituted an immutable historical orthodoxy.

As much as he was a member of the community of academic historians, Van Jaarsveld was also a political animal and a firm believer in practising socially "relevant" history. While living in Amsterdam he exulted in the

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47. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.4-5.

48. Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, 1971.

49. P.J. KOTZÉ and C.P. BEYERS, *Die opmars van die AWB*, p.35.

50. J.W.N. TEMPELHOFF, "Idee, Narratief en Diskoers: Die Vroeë Intellektuele Vorming van F.A. van Jaarsveld, 1922-1950" in *Historia*, 40(1), May 1995, pp.39-40, 43.

National Party's 1948 election victory, in spite of Dutch hostility towards the NP and *Apartheid*.<sup>51</sup> On returning to South Africa, Van Jaarsveld became increasingly involved in public life. In 1966 he took part in the Republic Festival and wrote two essays about Afrikanerdom's republican ideals and struggle.

These essays were undoubtedly written for pragmatic reasons: they were intended to highlight the origins and background of the Afrikaner republican ideal. ... Van Jaarsveld's nationalistic emotions reached their height in a series of radio talks during 1971 [published as *Afrikaner Quo Vadis, Voortrekkerpers*, Johannesburg] which bordered on chauvinism.<sup>52</sup>

After this, he began to reflect increasingly critically on the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative and did not hesitate to express his conclusions in print.

After 1976 Van Jaarsveld became increasingly incredulous of the future predicted by the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative, even in its *verligte* form. As we noted earlier, this can be attributed partly to the Soweto uprising, but also partly to his European contacts which exposed him to alternative points of view and offered a broader perspective. At the time he wrote a weekly column for *Hoofstad*, a Pretoria newspaper under the title "Soeklig op die Afrikaner". He used his column to undertake a critical analysis of the state of *Afrikanerdom* and its metanarrative.<sup>53</sup> The same train of thought was reflected in his academic work at the time. In January 1977 he delivered a paper at the University of Cape Town Summer School titled: "The Afrikaner: a Historical Analysis". This paper explores the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative and reaches the conclusion that the metanarrative and its practical consequences have become obsolete and a major reappraisal is necessary:

*It seems that the policy that the Afrikaner has followed since 1948 has reached the end of the road. Perhaps he will have to abandon the history he has cherished until now and deliberately forsake the heritage of the past for the sake of progress.*<sup>54</sup>

In 1978 van Jaarsveld also accepted an invitation to address the Lynwood branch of the *Rapportryers* on 2 October 1978 about the Day of the Vow and

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51. *Ibid.*, p.50.

52. J. DU BRUYN, "F A van Jaarsveld: Afrikanerhistorikus en Vernuwer" in *Historia*, 27(1), May 1982, p.59 (my translation).

53. P.H. KAPP, "F A van Jaarsveld as Vertolker van sy Tyd" in *Historia*, vol.27(1), May 1982, p.82.

54. *Ibid.*, p.82 (my translation).

how it ought to be commemorated.<sup>55</sup> His address was later published as an article in the *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*.<sup>56</sup> In the article, Van Jaarsveld investigated the authenticity and extent of the “covenant”, the changing ways of commemorating it and suggested that it ought not to be imposed on the entire South African population. These developments in Van Jaarsveld’s thinking made him Adrio König’s obvious choice as a historian to speak at his congress.

In the meanwhile, Van Jaarsveld’s now controversial views had begun attracting public interest. Eugene Terre’Blanche, for one, had noted Van Jaarsveld’s paper at the UCT Summer School and had been angered and confused by the views he expressed in that paper and elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> In this, Terre’Blanche was certainly not alone. As a result, the weekend before it was to be delivered, the Afrikaans Sunday Newspaper, *Rapport* published a report on the paper that Van Jaarsveld was due to read at König’s congress under the provocative headline: “*Heilige Beeste Word Gegaffel*” (“Holy Cows get Gored”).<sup>58</sup> According to the report, Van Jaarsveld claimed that the Day of the Vow was a “kind of artificial extra Sunday”, that the “covenant” most widely used and known by Afrikaans people was actually an unreliable 20<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction and that the “covenant” had been commemorated in different ways over the years, reflecting changes in the Afrikaner *volksgeist*. Significantly, the article concluded with the following quote from Van Jaarsveld’s paper.

Today, it is possible that the Afrikaner’s history could become a threat, yes a danger to the future, especially if it crystallises into a petrified image.

Instead of offering shelter against the onslaughts of the future and inspiration for present action, it can become the “disclosure” of a series of “mistakes” which will lead to self-accusation and condemnation.

When judging the past, it must be borne in mind that a nation preserves its structure, cohesiveness and identity in terms of the image which is projected of its past. If the image is intentionally blotted, it may damage the nation’s

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55. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, “Verdere Verklaring” deur F.A. van Jaarsveld, 31 March 1979.

56. F.A. VAN JAARSVELD, “Geloftedag in die Ban van die Tyd” in *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 18(3 & 4), September and December 1978, pp.222-242.

57. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate’s court for the district of Pretoria, pp.32-33.

58. *Rapport*, 25/03/1979, p.10.

sense of identity, which is the first step towards social disintegration and consequently the nation's destruction.<sup>59</sup>

In fact, the report was not an accurate reflection of the paper, which is hardly surprising - as Van Jaarsveld himself pointed out, one cannot expect to summarise a 55 page manuscript in a quarter page report. On the other hand, Van Jaarsveld freely admitted to holding the views imputed to him.<sup>60</sup> What had actually happened was that the reporter had extracted a number of topical contentious statements, which did actually represent views Van Jaarsveld held on the Day of the Vow and the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative (see quote above) but did not reflect the content of the paper itself. The result of this exercise was a startling and iconoclastic piece of journalism. In contrast, the paper itself was a scholarly theoretical reflection on how perspectives on the past shift with the passage of time and a detailed analysis of the origin of the Day of the Vow commemoration. It was later submitted to two colleagues, Prof. John Benyon (Head of the Department of Historical and Political Studies, University of Natal) and Prof. D.J. van Zyl (Chairman of the Department of History, Stellenbosch) for professional comment and evaluation. Both reacted favourably to the paper and pronounced it to be in accordance with recognised academic principles and practice.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, except as a demonstration of Van Jaarsveld's academic status, none of this really matters as Eugene Terre'Blanche did not see the paper itself until after the event. Issues of accuracy and academic accountability are not really relevant. What is important is that Terre'Blanche read the newspaper report on 25 March and reacted violently. In his view, this constituted a further assault on the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative, values and historical heritage. Convinced that matters had gone too far, he decided that action must be taken to prevent further destruction of Afrikaner heritage and called a meeting of the Supreme Council of the AWB for the next day.<sup>62</sup>

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59. *Rapport*, 25/03/1979, p.10 (my translation).

60. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.181-196.

61. See NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Letter: Prof. D.J. van Zyl to F.A. van Jaarsveld, 23/05/1979 and "An Analysis of the Paper by Professor F.A. van Jaarsveld Originally Prepared for the Conference on the Meaning of History at Unisa, 28 March 1979, and entitled 'An Historical Mirror of Blood River'" by Prof. J.A. Benyon, 17/04/1979.

62. See NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.17-19, 20-22.



This vehement reaction needs to be understood in its context. We have seen that Terre'Blanche's upbringing was steeped in the traditions of the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative. As a policeman in South West Africa and as a member of the Special Guard Unit, he would have been further exposed to the same milieu. In this environment, the metanarrative was a way of life and a worldview – in fact the only way of making sense of the experience of life. Like many others, Terre'Blanche must have become increasingly uneasy about the political changes he experienced and the increasingly outspoken criticism of the metanarrative by a variety of academics. Without condoning Terre'Blanche's reaction in any way, it is understandable that he experienced an existential crisis when he realised that the author of *Afrikaner Quo Vadis?* had joined the sceptics' ranks and begun increasingly to question the foundations on which the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative rested.

It had been reported that the congress was fully booked and Terre'Blanche was unable to reserve a seat for himself. However he was determined that a serious right wing protest should be made to prevent further pillaging of the metanarrative. Terre'Blanche knew that in 1932, four students had tarred and feathered Prof. H.P. Lamont in Church Square for insulting the Voortrekkers (and so threatening the Afrikaner nationalist metanarrative). The reason for their assault was the publication of Lamont's (fictional) novel, *War, Wine and Women*. In the novel, one of Lamont's characters claims that the Voortrekker men's chief recreation had been procreation with black women and that the *predikante* held South Africa in a grasp of iron.<sup>63</sup> Terre'Blanche decided accordingly that imitation would be appropriately symbolic,

... as a gesture of protest, of absolute disapproval and in accordance with the dictates of our consciences and entire upbringing ... that we should tar and feather the person being used to denigrate the day [of the Vow].<sup>64</sup>

On the Wednesday evening when Van Jaarsveld was due to read his paper, a group of AWB members met at the Voortrekker Monument, where Terre'Blanche addressed them, explaining what he wanted done and why. He asked them to join him in his protest "to the glory of God and the day".<sup>65</sup>

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63. See *Beeld*, 30 March 1979.

64. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, p.22 (my translation).

65. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, p.22 (my translation).

The group then proceeded to Unisa, burst into the Senate Chamber where Van Jaarsveld was reading his paper, seized him and poured a can of tar and a bag of feathers over him.<sup>66</sup> Terre'Blanche used the occasion to address the audience, apologising for the inconvenience and explaining that it was a deed of protest against the "desecration and degradation of everything holy to Afrikaners".<sup>67</sup> Afterwards, the party returned to the Voortrekker Monument to sing a hymn and offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the privilege of taking part in the outrage.<sup>68</sup>

This apparently extraordinary admixture of politics, history and religion is the key to understanding the event.

### **"The Volkscustodian and the Professor" or "The antiquarian and the critic"?:**

The run-up to the 1970 elections had demonstrated once again that Afrikaner Nationalist politics was prone to rowdy disruptions. However, there are several puzzling aspects to our particular case. Firstly, the disruption involved went far beyond the rowdiness of other occasions. Secondly, the disrupted meeting was academic, not political and the victim was an academic historian, not a politician. Why?

The easy way out would be to point to Van Jaarsveld's involvement in the public sphere and his frequent political and quasi-political pronouncements, suggesting that this is simply a case of politics being practised in the academic domain. However, this fails to explain a fundamental difference between the Van Jaarsveld incident and other instances of Afrikaner Nationalist political violence since World War 2. All the other incidents occurred at the level of party politics and they were usually concerned with winning votes or preventing others from doing so. In most cases, members of one party would set out to disrupt their opponent's election meetings or retaliate after their own meetings had been disrupted. In the Van Jaarsveld incident, party politics was not an issue and there were no votes to be won or lost. In any case, the purely political explanation fails to address the teeming

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66. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.24-27, 168-174.

67. *Beeld*, 30/03/1979, p.3.

68. NAD, VJP, A2055, vol.72, Teer-en-Veer Hofsaak 1979, Trial transcript of case no. 18/21/79 in the magistrate's court for the district of Pretoria, pp.27-28.

symbolism of the incident. Nor does it adequately explain the historical and religious dimensions we have identified.

The solution is, in fact, obvious: we are dealing with a conflict of historical consciousnesses and metanarratives - not primarily a political one. The victim of the incident was a professional historian and the issues in dispute were fundamentally historical ones. By the late 1970's, Van Jaarsveld was indisputably the best known Afrikaans historian in the profession. There are several reasons for this. The most obvious are: his prolific output, the ubiquity of his school text books, his participation in civil society, his willingness to communicate through popular media (notably radio and the press) and his conviction that historians should address socially relevant historical issues. Indeed, it is precisely this conviction that led to his victimisation. As we have noted, rightly or wrongly, Terre'Blanche was under the impression that Van Jaarsveld's paper constituted an attack on what he perceived to be the history of the Day of the Vow, the piety of the Voortrekkers and, ultimately, God's direct intervention in history on the side of the Afrikaners. The easiest way to conceptualise this conflict is to view it as a clash of historical consciousnesses.

In *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Nietzsche identified three modes of historical consciousness: the monumental, the traditional and the critical.<sup>69</sup> Although there have been several other (strikingly similar) attempts to categorise historical consciousness, Nietzsche's elementary subdivisions are entirely adequate for our purposes. Each category of historical consciousness has the potential to make either a positive or a negative contribution to social life in the present.

In the monumental mode, the past becomes a source of inspiration for the present through the realisation that greatness existed in the past and, by implication, can be brought about again. The past becomes a resource, providing role models, teachers, heroes, achievements and so on to encourage one to aspire to greatness in the present.<sup>70</sup> However, as Nietzsche himself points out, an attempt to find role models or even encouragement in the past can easily degenerate into petrification that ignores contexts, causes and changes over time in order to present a collection of examples. This

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69. F. NIETZSCHE, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, (Translated by Peter Preuss, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis & Cambridge, 1980), p.14.

70. S. BANN, "The Splitting of Historical Consciousness" in S. KEMAL, IVAN GASKELL & DANIEL W. CONWAY (eds.), *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*, (Cambridge University Press, UK, USA & Australia, 1998), p.149.

inevitably results in a representation of the past that is closer to myth than to history,<sup>71</sup> with all the practical dangers this implies.

In the antiquarian mode the past becomes a source of security and even identity through the literal or figurative collection of events, actions and artefacts which are then appropriated as being specifically one's "own". This mode of consciousness can be both harmless and beneficial, but it does tend to result in an egocentric approach to life and a denial of the reality of change. "Antiquarian history itself degenerates the moment that the fresh life of the present no longer inspires it."<sup>72</sup> In sharp contrast, the critical mode is primarily presentist. It is the consciousness of somebody who feels the need to get rid of baggage from the past in order to make a fresh start -

... to have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: he achieves this by dragging it to the bar of judgement, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it ...<sup>73</sup>

If we consider Van Jaarsveld's career, it seems clear that during the early 1970's his historical consciousness began to shift from a monumental and antiquarian mode to a critical one. Du Bruyn<sup>74</sup> has shown convincingly that during the early part of his career he was content with the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative but that by the late 1970's he had become one of its critics almost to the point of demythologising aspects of Afrikaner history and excising parts of the metanarrative. (He specifically targeted the notion that God was on the Afrikaners' side which legitimated the present order and guaranteed the future.) This is born out by the discussions of Van Jaarsveld's work on the Day of the Vow earlier in this paper.

In stark contrast to the later Van Jaarsveld, Terre'Blanche's historical consciousness hovers between the monumental and the antiquarian. Clearly, he could not consider giving up his historical treasures in the face of new challenges from the present. This becomes abundantly clear when one considers the nature of his objections to Van Jaarsveld's work and especially the statement he made while Van Jaarsveld was being tarred and feathered.

All this is very interesting, but it still does not satisfactorily explain why Terre'Blanche went to such outrageous lengths to silence Van Jaarsveld. The answer to that question lies in the existential status of the Afrikaner

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71. F. NIETZSCHE, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, pp.14-18.

72. *Ibid.*, p.21.

73. *Ibid.*, p.21.

74. J. DU BRUYN, "F A van Jaarsveld: Afrikanerhistorikus en Vernuwer" in *Historia*, 27(1), May 1982, pp.55-64, especially pp.55,59.

Nationalist metanarrative within Terre'Blanche's historical consciousness and ultimately his worldview. From his own testimony, Terre'Blanche's historical consciousness was fundamentally monumentalist. The metanarrative and, to an even greater extent, the rites and traditions associated with it fulfilled a unifying role in his consciousness, combining his political consciousness with his religious consciousness and interacting with both to create an integrated and functional consciousness.

According to Freud, consciousness is neither continuous nor comprehensive. *Indeed, it is possible that we expend a great deal of mental energy in excluding undesired elements from our consciousness.*<sup>75</sup> Van Jaarsveld's later views, and particularly his metamorphosis into a critic of the Afrikaner Nationalist metanarrative undoubtedly posed a serious and unwelcome intervention in the integration of the historical, political and religious dimensions of Terre'Blanche's consciousness. Perhaps Freud's suggestion that, on occasion, we go to the utmost lengths to blot out unwelcome intrusions into our consciousness helps us to understand why Terre'Blanche took such drastic action to silence Van Jaarsveld's disruptive voice.

### **Conclusion - Historical consciousness and heritage:**

Lowenthal expresses a somewhat jaundiced view of Heritage in his work, suggesting that its status as an appropriated past representation makes it necessarily a partisan fabrication.<sup>76</sup> While this may often be the case, it does not seem an essential attribute for a heritage narrative. What actually is essential is that the narrative must find acceptance with those who are expected to appropriate it. If Nietzsche is correct, heritage is a form of the antiquarian mode of historical consciousness (and is therefore more closely connected to history than Lowenthal is prepared to admit) without being subsumed under it. Our exploration of clashing historical consciousnesses certainly suggests a far closer relationship than many historians might care for and demonstrably deserves further consideration.

Finally, we have noted that each mode of historical consciousness contains its own negative potential. This was certainly true of the narrative of the Volkscustodian and the Professor. Heritage practitioners and historians need to keep this constantly in mind when practising their crafts.

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75. See H.D. KELLNER, "Time Out: The Discontinuity of Historical Consciousness" in *History and Theory*, vol.14, 1975, pp.282-284.

76. D. LOWENTHAL, "Fabricating Heritage". Electronic copy from *History & Memory*, 10(1), Spring 1998, found at <http://iupjournals.org/history/ham10-1.html>.

## **Opsomming**

### **Die geval van die volksbewaarder en die professor : erfenis versus geskiedenis**

Op 28 Maart 1979 is prof. Jaarsveld verhinder om 'n referaat by 'n akademiese kongres te lewer deur 'n groep regse aktiwiste. Hulle het hom in die rede geval en voor die gehoor letterlik geteer-en-veer. Hierdie studie is 'n poging om die voorval te verklaar deur dit binne die historiese konteks van die 1960's en 1970's te plaas en die historiese bewussyns van die betrokke partye te analiseer in terme van Nietzsche se drie kategorieë: Antikwarianisme, Monumentalisme en Kritiek.