

Book Reviews

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Academic entanglements with society

Howard Phillips, *UCT under Apartheid: Part I, From Onset to Sit-in, 1948–1968*

Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2019

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Howard Phillips is one of South Africa's pre-eminent academic historians, best known for his meticulous pioneering research on the social history of medicine in South Africa. Latterly, since the arrival of Coronavirus, he has enjoyed a public profile as a widely consulted expert on the history of pandemics.

In addition, however, Phillips is the premier historian of the University of Cape Town (UCT), a graduate of that university, and a member of its staff in the Department of History. Intimately involved with UCT over decades, in 1993 he was the author of *The University of Cape Town, 1918–1948: The Formative Years* (UCT Press) and we are grateful that one of its sequels has now been published. This most recent account of the two decades that follow is an important book, well written and insightful, and a powerful reminder to us that universities in South Africa, as elsewhere, are reflections of current society but also embryos of future society – our mirrors: past, present and future.

UCT under Apartheid is not a dry institutional history. Phillips has been able to bring to life the university and its enveloping society during two decades that were, as is well analysed, transformative in every respect. During this period, the size of the university, its academic scope, its relationship with the state and its regional location, its teaching methods and its research agenda changed irrevocably.

The organisation of this book follows a structure similar to *The Formative Years* and it works extremely well. The short opening and closing chapters situate UCT within the global and national environments – “UCT and the World in 1948”, and “UCT and the World in 1968”. How different those worlds were is examined in detail in Chapters 2 to 11.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of UCT's administration and management, deftly introducing senior staff and their personalities, decisions, and views, frequently critical of them, but always fair. The physical landscape of the campus is the topic of Chapter 3, following Winston Churchill's observation that “we shape our buildings;

thereafter they shape us” (p 24). The architectural style did not remain true to the original dictates of 1929, when the move to Groote Schuur estate took place, although high ‘quality’ remained the objective (p 25). Between 1948 and 1968, a time of economic growth, no fewer than nineteen new buildings were constructed or started and were to become, in fact, a second UCT, designed by 28 different architects or practices working independently of each other. The city authorities transformed Rhodes Drive into a freeway, which “decisively split the two parts” (p 28). Thus, for much of the two decades that are the subject of this book, UCT was a noisy building site, while students and staff battled for office, teaching, and parking space. The comparative photographs from 1949 and 1967 demonstrate the change dramatically (p 35).

Having set the scene of the managerial and physical environment, Phillips’s central chapters, 4 to 8, delve into the specifics of the transformation of the academic project at UCT. Each chapter – which can be read as standing alone – deals with a suite of related disciplines at UCT and details the changes in staff, students, philosophy, content taught, and educational principles. Chapters are titled “Pure Science: The Faculty of Science”; “The Applied Sciences: Engineering and Medicine”; “The Professional Faculties: Commerce, Law, Education, Architecture and Social Science”; “The Arts: Musical, Liberal and Fine”, not all of equal length. This is a multi-disciplinary *tour de force*, analysing the strengths and weaknesses of various departments and their staff in a turbulent period not only within the South African political and social environment of the time, but also wrestling with the insertion of African scholarship and research.

The writing style in this book is deft, but trenchant, often critical, and always relating to the essence of the title: UCT and apartheid. It is this focus that enables Phillips to provide readers with fresh insights into the institution and its society. Chapter 10, “Colliding and colluding: UCT and the apartheid state”, should be required reading, for Phillips has been able to synthesise from the previous chapters an analysis that gets to the heart of these two decades (pp 259–273). “Academic freedom” was certainly the watchword of UCT between 1948 and 1968, but the extent to which that was possible within “the juggernaut of apartheid” (p 259) while attempting to retain some form of racial integration is unravelled. UCT, like Wits, was subject to contrary pressures that were difficult to control. As remains the case, South African universities are dependent on state funding for their existence. Although money was not withheld by government, Phillips chronicles the numerous members of staff and students who were subject to banning orders for their political beliefs, statements and actions. The Mafeje affair looms large in this chapter. Nonetheless, despite some tactics against the government, as Phillips makes clear, UCT “was reluctant to rock white-created segregationist conventions” (p 269).

Chapter 9, “Reaching out: UCT and the wider community”, gives an account of how UCT fitted into, or did not fit into, its local landscape of “town and gown”, while Chapter 11 explains changing student life in these years, including changing gender

relations and roles, the workings of the Student Representative Council, cohorts of students, dress codes, sports, and life in a university residence at a time of growing student protests worldwide. But always there is the sense – as was the case in fact – that the voices and aspirations of black Africans did not find expression at UCT until a much later time.

In his Preface, Phillips addresses his “Readers”, conceiving that they will be “diverse and wanting different things from the text” (p viii). He identifies at least nine possible categories, and this reviewer resonates with more than half of the intended audiences. That the author’s “holistic, multi-sided examination of UCT” (p ix) is successful, and complex rather than over-simplified or didactic, is a tribute to this gifted historian.

It is not unusual to end a review by commenting on its sources and the evidence on which the book is based. However, this review is written in the aftermath of the devastating fire of April 2021 that destroyed parts of the UCT campus, some of its buildings and other infrastructure, but also some of its manuscript and other collections. Phillips has included a note on his sources, explaining the two archival repositories at UCT without which his book could not have been written: the Administrative Archives and the Special Collections Division of its library. He describes the latter as “... varied, encompassing the private papers of individuals or organisations ... departmental, society and student journals ... annual prospectuses and handbooks ... complete run of government publications ...” (p 341). *UCT under Apartheid* is richly illustrated (although many of the images are not of very high quality), mainly from visual sources in the “splendid BUZV collection in the Special Collections Division ... abundant images of the many sides of university life through posed and action photographs, snapshots, press photographs and cartoons. Only a tiny selection of these appears in this book, alas” (p 342).

Like any professional historical publication, the endnotes span many pages of small type; in this case, some 50 pages (pp 343–392). Even the most cursory skim through these notes attests to the value of the manuscript heritage held by UCT. All scholars will sincerely hope that, once the final tally of damage has been done and the restoration efforts have been successful, the notes in Phillips’s book are not all that remains of many of them.

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