

COMMEMORATING SOME MILESTONES OF THE SASHT AND “YESTERDAY AND TODAY” – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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It is indeed a privilege to be celebrating a quarter of a century since the formation of the South African Society for History Teaching. *Yesterday&Today* was at that stage already five years old. It created a platform to interact with teachers and lecturers involved in history teaching. Subscriptions had reached a thousand within two years – part of the growth was due to some of the education departments enlisting all the schools under their jurisdiction.

In spite of the positive picture, the very first year was difficult from a financial point of view, as we had to get sponsors for each issue. The impetus to launch *Yesterday&Today* in 1981 came from two institutions, RAU and the Goudstad Onderwyskollege (GOK) History Departments. Prof Pieter Kapp and myself, and later Johan Horn could possibly be seen as the driving forces during the first decade of the former “Yesterday and Today/Gister en Vandag”. During the nineties, the organisational headquarters of the journal moved to the University of Stellenbosch due to the closure of Goudstad. Prof Kapp kept *Yesterday&Today* alive for quite a number of years, but in 1997 he had to abandon the project due to dwindling subscriptions. However, Professor Elize van Eeden of the North-West University soon came to the rescue and revived *Yesterday&Today* with the support of people like Jimmy Verner and Patrick McMahon. In this way not only the journal, but also the SASHT was given a new lease on life.

I must congratulate all of you who have persevered during these years, especially those that rose to the occasion when the odds were against them – eventually achieving remarkable success. Well done.

Returning to the founding of the South African Society for History Teaching (SASHT) in 1985 – a steering committee consisting of Johan Horn, Frik Stuart and myself was at the UNISA conference where a constitution and organizational framework were established. In 1986 this framework was endorsed at the RAU-conference, and a first committee was elected to manage the Society. Initially, we did not have clarity on the focus of the Society – only those who were training history teachers were targeted – but, fortunately, a broader vision prevailed and the Society was envisaged as an umbrella organization to improve history teaching in general. Administratively, the Society was subdivided into regions to function on a local level (not all of

them equally effective). Of course, the Society and *Yesterday&Today* were closely linked as partners in this endeavour. Fact was, that if the journal was struggling, the Society was affected, and *vice versa*.

Looking back at 30 odd years it is apparent to me that we were lucky enough to always have a few individuals who were selflessly pouring their energy and talents into this important effort to build our common historical heritage and historical consciousness. I salute all of you, those who made their humble, but vital contribution, at local level or by writing a brief letter or article and those putting forward marketing suggestions, attending the conferences and/or inspiring a learner to participate.

In my whole career, I've always felt that history was more than "*one damn thing after another*" (Toynbee). Therefore, I still feel a keen appreciation for Baraclough's wise words expressed during his inaugural lecture way back in 1966: "*When we study the past, we study it not for its own sake, but for the light which it throws on the destiny of man.*" I endeavoured to enhance this attitude during my involvement with both the Society and *Yesterday&Today*. Be that as it may, it seems to me that the Society was, generally speaking, successful in bridging academic and cultural divisions which at times surfaced during our divisive past. In a very real sense we succeeded in building a multi-cultural approach to our past. We fostered debate and controversy, but if people so choose they could indulge in restructuring the past detached from contemporary issues.

Initially we had to rely almost entirely on contributions by Afrikaans speaking educators with the exception of people – the ones I remember- like Tony Cubbin and Rob Siebörger. Soon the colleagues of JCE like Rosemary Mullholland and Gauteng teachers like Jimmy Verner, Stephan Lowry, Patrick McMahon and others joined. Most of these eventually became prominent members of the Society. It would, however, be an injustice not to mention core contributors and supporters of those early years – people like the late Beytel van Niekerk, Charles Wright, Juanita Kloppers, Frik Stuart, Johan Olivier, Arend Carl, Simon Kekana and other staff members from GOK, Unisa and later US who administratively kept the ship afloat. Jorn Rüsen from Germany became a respected member and gave the Society together with Henry MacIntosh and Falk Pingel an international flavour. Rüsens' in depth and conciliatory contributions over the years were indeed highly appreciated.

During the past 30 years many issues of a diverse nature were addressed at the former SASHT bi-annual conferences and in *Yesterday&Today*. The effort to come to grips with our reality was to me a core component. Contributions by Giliomee, Van der Ross, Mohamed, Rüsen, Kapp, Gebhart, Kallaway and others in this regard were constructive. The late eighties and early nineties represented to my mind a highlight during the first two decades in terms of attendance of conferences – the 1992 Vista conference hosted over two hundred delegates, if I remember correctly. This was also reflected in the contributions for *Yesterday&Today*. After this, the political uncertainties

impacted negatively on the Society. Fortunately at the turn of the century it became clear that mutual trust between stakeholders had been restored and lost ground regained. The Society now became fully representative of our diverse rainbow nation.

From my personal perspective, I enjoyed controversy and debate and issues like political literacy, the changing political landscape and the Human Sciences Research Council Report on history teaching in the late eighties, appealed to me.

Many a contribution on curriculum change also fascinated me. Of course there could also be different perspectives with the focus stronger on classroom practice and the exams which were often covered in detail. The contribution of the “Georg Eckert Institute” in Braunschweig, to facilitate reconciliation between different perspectives on our past, certainly represents a highlight. A number of retreat meetings at the Sparkling Waters Hotel near Rustenburg in the nineties, sponsored by this Institute, are testimony to this input. It certainly helped to build a common future. It seems to me the last decade established the Society and “Yesterday and Today” as a viable academic journal and Society incorporating the technological and cultural reality of our world in all its dimensions. This certainly represents a major breakthrough.

The road ahead would require an open Society that values History for the past; but more importantly, use it constructively to interact and debate different perspectives on a variety of issues. And indeed there are many contemporary issues that can benefit greatly from a balanced historical input. The place of proper historical education can simply not be denied lest we forget Cicero’s warning that he who neglects his/her past will remain a child forever – indeed!

Sources:

J Baraclough, 1967: *History and the common man* (London, Historical Association, *Yesterday&Today*, Nr. 1-33).

MH Trümpelmann, 1988, *Enkele gedagtes oor die vakdidaktiek as wetenskap en die onderrig van Geskiedenis* (Johannesburg, RAU-publikasiereeks, A184).