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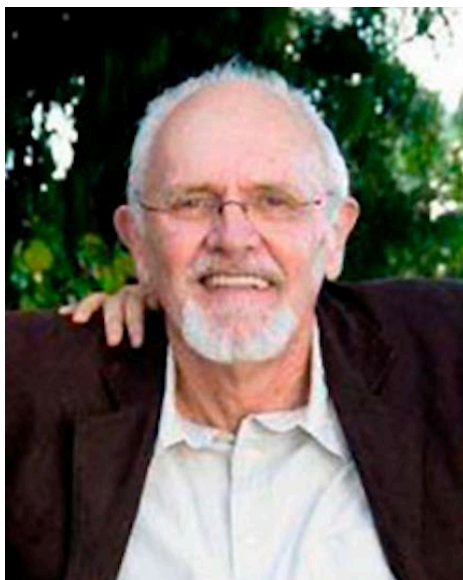
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OBITUARY

Jeff Guy: A Life – Historian, Teacher, Passionate Citizen and Gifted Writer



Jeff Guy, 2008. Source: Campbell Collections, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

On 15 December 2014 a renowned historian of southern Africa, Jefferson John Guy, known to all as ‘Jeff’, passed away suddenly on his way to board a plane home to South Africa. The news of his sudden passing was received with sadness and shock across the world of historians of Africa and British imperial history, and a wide circle of friends and family. Jeff, born in 1940, was 74 years old and he had overcome serious physical challenges in the preceding ten years. His last days were marked by energy and vigour and his mind was bursting with ideas and plans for writing and new work as he prepared to return to Durban. Jeff Guy spent his last weeks engaged in a successful visit to England where he reconnected with peers – some from his days as a PhD student of Shula Marks and her cohort, many of whom are now based in London, Oxford and in Cambridge. He spent time in late November and early December continuing research into his own family history as part of a paper he was preparing for a planned book about the entangled criss-cross-empire biographies of many historians, to be edited by Antoinette Burton. He talked with absorption about this paper in the last days of his life. But the major purpose for his trip to England had been undertaken in response to an invitation to address a 200-year

anniversary conference in honour of John William Colenso, held at St John's College, Cambridge, at the end of November. Those who were lucky enough to attend this conference (and I was one of them) attested to his arresting lecture, addressing the historical, ideological, theological, political and social consequences and significances of the life of John William Colenso. It had specific reference to his lengthy life and then death in the Colony of Natal, but also to his education, his moral outlook, his linguistic and writing skills, and the context of his life in England even before he embarked for southern Africa, as well as to the work and thinking of Colenso's descendants and supporters.

Renowned for his powerful formal lecturing and presentation style – despite his own ambivalence about, and deep agonising over, lecture preparation – Jeff's lecture that day was as rich, sharp and powerful a presentation as he had ever given. The organisers of the conference requested his paper's inclusion in the special edition they are bringing out later in 2015. So we know there will be at least one posthumous paper from the pen of Jeff Guy to savour, argue with, and ponder over in months to come. Historians of Africa, philosophers, theologians, anthropologists and biographers attended the conference, and Jeff was able to spend time with the renowned Cambridge-based historical anthropologist Jack Goody – where the two men talked about their mutual obsessions with the vicissitudes of orality and literacy in world history, a theme Jeff returned to in many of his works, notably in a paper taking up many of Goody's arguments, published in this journal.¹ Jeff explained to Jack Goody that he had begun to mull over the complexity of orality inside of literacy even as an undergraduate university student in South Africa in the 1960s.

The possibility of a university education had not been a certain route for Jeff when he left school in the then province of Natal in the late 1950s. With an uneven matriculation pass and shaky family finances, Jeff had to work in a range of positions, many involving outdoor physical labour, for several years across southern Africa before he had achieved the rewriting of two matric subjects and the amassing of enough money to enrol for a degree at the then University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, where he soon switched from English to History, as his passion fixed on the past. His peers recall his deep philosophical engagements, musical and narrative talents, his love of the physical environment and obsession with birds, and his political incisiveness and wit.

By the time he moved to London in the mid-1960s, Jeff's interest in the Zulu Kingdom and its history – and to re-orienting the history of Natal and Zululand towards the majority and away from settler accounts – and his commitments to progressive and left interpretations of colonial and working people's history were already firmly in place. While a teacher in London, Jeff formed part of the first cohort of PhD students that would, in the ensuing years, gather around Shula Marks, giving life to the justly famous seminars on southern African society and history in London, seminars out of which so many landmark dissertations and monographs, as well as collected paper editions, emerged, marking out the so-called Revisionist School of Southern African History. Here in London Jeff began to forge a research and writing trajectory that would shape the next 45 years of his life, immersing himself in meticulous archival research, and drawing on linguistic, archaeological, photographic, philosophical, oral and contemporary research into evidence

1. 'Making Words Visible: Aspects of Orality, Literacy, Illiteracy and History in Southern Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 31, 1 (1994), 3–27.

of pre-colonial labour and kinship forms and of economy and society in the era just before and during settler expansion in southern Africa. His considerable historical imagination was alive to the challenges of method and theory and he began to draw out themes that would later animate mainstream historical writing – but were prescient in the 1960s and 1970s in African scholarship: ecological revolutions wrought by human agency; gender and labour at the centre of African society; masculinity and war as intertwined thematics; and the complexities and salience of lineage politics in state-craft. At all times he paid close attention to the machinations and shifting energies of imperial and colonial policy and practice. His reading from the 1970s through the last years of his life was shaped by a deep engagement with British Marxist historians; with debates within social history; with works on the history of class and empire; and with biographical scholarship on Victorian life and times. A fascination with peasant revolutions and agrarian history led to his large library of Maoist-inspired texts from South East Asian and Latin American authors, and this rather more iconoclastic interest (from the perspective of African history scholarship at the time), both availed and was linked to his distance to the left of the paradigm of nationalist Africanist history writing that was, at the time, riding a tide of support and enthusiasm. He was also deeply committed to reading the anthropological and archaeological scholarship on the region, and papers and books on The Bios (bio sciences, bio sphere, biology, biodiversity) – the life of the plants, creatures and landscapes of southern Africa. He never lost these enthusiasms and as late as the last years of his teaching life before formal retirement he would take off for archaeological sites and digs with graduate and undergraduate groups, feeling at home in bushes and rocky crevices, with bones and artefacts, as much as he was passionate about the archives that framed his tri-continental frontier: imperial archives in London; the provincial and state archives of South Africa; and the unique collection bequeathed by Killie Campbell to the then University of Natal and the region's people, known today as 'Campbell Collections', and based in Durban.

While still in London as a doctoral student Jeff met and married Naimi Haque and then, after defending his PhD, he spent nearly 15 crucial years teaching and researching in the History Department in Lesotho, at the Roma campus of what was called the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Naimi was at the centre of a home filled with music, shared food, and a warm welcome for students and visitors then and into the future. Jeff is remembered today by colleagues and ex-students from this era as a powerful and driven teacher, and he also supervised a cohort of young women and men who went on to take up research and political positions in the post-colonies of several countries in the region. This is also where he met and formed a lasting collaboration with a graduate student and then colleague, Motlatsi Thabane, and where they began to work on the oral history of Lesotho's male migrant workers to the South African gold mines. They began presenting their work at conferences in the 1980s, for example, the memorable gathering at Wits University's History Workshop conference in 1984.² His two children, Heli and Joe, were partly raised in Lesotho, and then in Norway, where he took up a post as history lecturer at

2. Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea: A Participant's Perspective.' University of the Witwatersrand, History Workshop, 1984, published a few years later as 'Technology, Ethnicity and Ideology: Basotho Miners and Shaft-sinking on the South African Gold Mines,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 2 (1988), 257–278

the University of Trondheim, immersing himself in debates about society and technology, the industrial revolution, and modernity and its discontents with his colleagues there. Together they were committed to drawing on his Africanist scholarship to give wider resonance to European debates in these fields until rapid and far reaching political changes in South Africa opened up the possibility of a post in his country of birth. He resigned from Trondheim in 1992 and took up a position in, and then became head of department at, the University of Natal, Durban, soon thereafter.

Between 1992 and 2005 Jeff pioneered the complete rethinking of the history curriculum in Durban, and drew on a wide array of people skilled in developing new approaches to history and to undergraduate teaching in the fledgling democracy to do this. His energy was infectious and in addition to crafting new resource methods, to cajoling and compelling colleagues into a feverish cycle of writing and re-writing lectures and trying out new approaches to undergraduate history, he also committed his own energies to first year teaching (unlike most of his professorial peers) and to teaching outside of the university, at the Workers' College, set up by and for adult women and men in the harbour-front area of the city. This was a time of great exuberance and energy in the country and historians and students, colleagues and peers of Jeff well remember (with admiration, exasperation, and some exhaustion) the years 1994 to 2000. In this period he and his collaborators laid the foundations for one of the most vibrant history departments in southern Africa, drawing together a large cohort of Honours, Masters and Doctoral students, at the core of which was Jeff's commitment to excellence in first year teaching and his support for the weekly research seminar, with pre-circulated papers, discussed with energy and zeal, and often followed by trips to the Jazz Centre for two hours of discussions about history, interspersed with digressions and debates about emerging and lasting musical forms.

In the History Department in Durban Jeff's colleagues were allowed to experiment, bring new ideas to fruition, and to throw themselves into the work of teaching and research, knowing that they had Jeff's full support. I was privileged to be in this space – not encountered since then in my working life – where I could, then not yet 30 years old, argue and vigorously disagree with him, and yet know he would support me in what I saw as revolutionary course plans and new methods of examining students. He demanded hard work and passion, not slavish loyalty – and so he inspired this in the people he trusted and drew around him, giving us all in turn enormous leeway and support. In the early 2000s both the wider society, and the University of Natal, shifted – amalgamation with several other campuses, a new form of hierarchical management style at the University, and the pressure to create outcomes from learning directed to the market – sapped Jeff's energies, undermining his teaching projects, and coincided with several health crises. His healing process saw a renewed commitment to writing and scholarship and between 2001 and 2013 he produced a flow of monographs, learned papers, popular articles and lectures, interventions into archive policy in South Africa, and to the development of a series of public engagements around history that brought him wider attention in the region. He argued against the banality of 'tourism as history'; against the reification of tradition and claims to chiefly authority in the service of new political agendas – especially around land acquisition by an elite. At the same time he engaged in vigorous public debate about space and access for the working people of the city – access to safe streets, to the beaches, parks, and libraries and to the fruits of the mind. He was an impassioned supporter of a landless

urban movement of the poor, besieged by city and national political forces, and unjustly and violently attacked, known as *Abahlali Basemjondolo*. In all these forms of debate, intellectual engagement and thought, Jeff was living history as everyday practice, with all of his curmudgeonly, witty, obsessive, at times astonishingly generous but often bad tempered passion at the fore.

Between 1971, when he published one of his first research papers, 'A Note on Firearms in the Zulu Kingdom with special reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879,'³ and until last year, Jeff authored a series of papers whose theoretical claims and insights have animated many works of historical scholarship and which have been cited repeatedly in publications. Highlights include his much cited paper, 'Gender oppression in Southern Africa's precapitalist societies'⁴; as well as 'Ecological factors in the rise of Shaka and the Zulu kingdom'⁵; 'The destruction and reconstruction of Zulu society'⁶; 'Class, Imperialism and Literary Criticism: William Ngidi, John Colenso and Matthew Arnold'⁷; in 'Battling with banality'⁸ and in 'Somewhere over the rainbow: the nation-state, democracy and race in a globalising South Africa'.⁹

In the last weeks of his life Jeff Guy gave attention and thought to the legacy of John William Colenso and his shaping role, not only in the events of the last decades of the nineteenth century in southern Africa, but also to the way that Colenso's mind and methods shaped opportunities for engagement with the stuff of the past, and with alternative paths to the future, beyond our present. Jeff Guy's work will, I think, be read and studied like Colenso's, two hundred years from now, and he will be remembered, by some perhaps as a teacher, innovative thinker or as an impassioned citizen and friend, but certainly by most as the author of these singular works of historical scholarship:

The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879–1884 (Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd, 1979 and republished by the University of Natal Press, 1999).

The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814–1883 (Ravan Press of South Africa, 1983)

The View Across the River: Harriette Colenso and the Zulu Struggle Against Imperialism (New Africa Books, 2001).

The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion (Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2005).

3. 'A Note on Firearms in the Zulu Kingdom with Special Reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879,' *The Journal of African History*, 12, 4 (1971), 557–570
4. 'Gender Oppression in Southern Africa's Precapitalist Societies,' in Cheryl Walker, ed., *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (London: James Currey and Cape Town: David Philip), 33–47.
5. 'Ecological Factors in the Rise of Shaka and the Zulu Kingdom,' in *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1980).
6. 'The Destruction and Reconstruction of Zulu Society,' in *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa* (London: Longman 1982).
7. 'Class, Imperialism and Literary Criticism: William Ngidi, John Colenso and Matthew Arnold,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23, 2 (1997), 219–241.
8. 'Battling with Banality,' *Journal of Natal and Zulu history*, 18, 1 (1998).
9. 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow: The Nation-state, Democracy and Race in a Globalising South Africa,' *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 56, 1 (2004), 68–89.

Remembering the Rebellion: The Zulu Uprising of 1906 (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006).

and for his final, epic, nearly 600 page study:

Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal: African Autonomy and Settler Colonialism in the Making of Traditional Authority (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013).

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