Editor’s preface

In his review of the Hans Erik Stolten edited History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa (2007), André du Toit disputed the claim advanced by many contributors that South African historiography had slumped into a general ‘crisis’ after apartheid. Du Toit argued that these claims overlooked the many ways in which the field remained productive and vibrant, and mistook for a crisis the decline of the ‘radical’ or ‘revisionist’ approach that had dominated the field in the 1970s and 1980s. He called for more self-reflection among historians of South Africa about their discipline’s intellectual trajectory.¹

Du Toit’s review appeared in 2010, and the pertinence of the points he raised was underscored when the Cambridge History of South Africa appeared in two volumes, in that year and in 2012. In their introduction, the Cambridge History’s editors acknowledged that the volumes were ‘based to a great degree on scholarship that preceded the fall of apartheid’, but they argued that this was unavoidable, because ‘as yet there have been limited signs of a blooming of new historiographies’. In introducing the second volume, Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager and Bill Nasson identified two conditions as being necessary to remedy the situation: first, the ranks of the profession would have to be refreshed by new entrants – and particularly black Africans – who could offer fresh perspectives; second, the postapartheid era would have to generate its own controversies capable of stimulating original efforts at historicisation.²

These characterisations of the state of the field were challenged by some reviewers, whose rebuttals echoed Du Toit. Helena Pohlandt-McCormick argued that the Cambridge History’s editors had overlooked the ‘considerable historiographical work since the early 1990s that has not only addressed the “legacies” of apartheid and colonialism’ but had also challenged the ‘concepts, chronologies, and turning points’ of radical/revisionist historiography. Keith
Breckenridge meanwhile insisted that this new scholarship had not only raised many ‘questions about the paradoxical effects of the segregationist state and Apartheid’, but had also long since transcended the limits of the radical/revisionist problematic by exploring a wide variety of themes in realms as diverse as intellectual, scientific, medical and ecological history. Jon Soske insisted that black academics had been full participants in this process – he in fact argued that the Cambridge History could have been filled entirely with contributions by them. ³

The present collection seeks to explore the abovementioned themes. It is the outcome of a project launched early in 2018, when invitations were sent to a number of historian colleagues to contribute to a publication on ‘History and Decolonisation: Perspectives on Transformation in South African Historiography’. The original working title reflected a desire to frame the initiative around the implications for the discipline of the debates that had embroiled South African universities from 2015 onwards, but that idea was soon revised for the simple reason that the themes explored by historians of South Africa extend far beyond ‘decolonisation’ and ‘transformation’, as the paper proposals soon showed. That being said, readers will find traces of the original framing in some of the chapters that follow, and there can be little doubt that decolonisation and transformation are here to stay as themes in South African historiography, given their prominence among the postapartheid controversies that the Cambridge History’s editors predicted would emerge to shape the research agenda within the discipline in the future.

The title was revised to ‘Future Directions in South African Historiography’, which reflected an aspiration to link past, present and future approaches. Beyond this, there was no further prescription. In advancing with an ‘open’ historiographical agenda, there was no preconceived notion of proclaiming any particular ‘turn’ in the literature, or of excluding from sight any sphere of active inquiry. This includes radical/revisionist historiography – readers will find that many chapters in the collection (including my own) focus on the continuing consequences of that powerful strand in the tradition.

Some justification may be needed for including the future in a project focused on historiography. The first consideration was my concurrence with those who have argued that South African historiography has expanded in multiple directions since the 1990s, and that it has in the process established numerous areas of overlap with other disciplines, but that there has been relatively little sustained engagement among historians about the historiographical implications of the work. The present collection seeks to bring the discipline’s frontiers into closer contact with its midlands, by fostering discussion about the historiographical significance of the new work, and
thus identifying leads for future research by indicating unresolved questions, novel conceptual frameworks, and fresh methods of empirical attack. The second consideration was my agreement with Ross, Mager and Nasson that historiographical innovation owes both to demographic shifts within the guild and to the willingness of historians to apply their research to emerging societal challenges. If this reading is correct, then the discipline’s continued flourishing rests to a considerable extent on the preparedness of each successive generation of scholars to make the case anew for the tradition’s continued relevance in times of change. This process is an endless one, with the consequence that no collection can pretend to be complete for all time – the chapters that follow were all written during the COVID-19 lockdown, for example, and the fallout of that crisis will undoubtedly cast a fresh aspect on the country’s historiography, as will the reverberations of the present war in Europe.

In short, the book’s objectives will be achieved to the extent that the collection furthers engagement between historians of South Africa about their craft, and the degree to which from that engagement fresh lines of inquiry emerge capable of providing an impetus for the work of the next generation of researchers to enter the field.

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Notes

