

## ***Social and Intellectual Trends at Rhodes in the Early Sixties and Seventies***

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### **Arriving**

When I arrived at Rhodes in 1962, the only graduates I had ever met were doctors, priests and teachers. I had never seen a university before. Uncertain as to what to expect, I remember nervously drifting to a table in the dining hall not yet fully inhabited. At the head of the table next to me sat a timorous young student from Durban aiming to study English and Law. His name was Tim Couzens. Directly across the table sat a rather rough looking chap with a villainous Welkom accent who seemed a bit out of sorts in this English milieu. His name was Charlie van Onselen. At the time, I was to the left of most new students. Tim Couzens was studiously middle of the road, and Charlie was on the fierce combative right. For the three of us, Rhodes was a place of impassioned argument. Debate started on that very first evening. Charlie was a year or so later to wake one morning having shed his right wing views. The three of us, from very different backgrounds, were not initially friends at all. Friendship grew as we sharpened our respective wits in our disputes at the dinner table. Forty-two years later we remain friends.

### **Experiencing**

Rhodes in the early Sixties was an extraordinarily lively campus. There was a remarkable degree of debate among students and among students and staff. Most of the students lived in residence, and those who did not usually lived in the many private houses which had survived between the residences, or at the Rhodes ends of High Street and New Street. Being so near the residences, most digs were effectively part of the campus, differing only in not having visiting hours, gender segregation, or wardens. Students in Res viewed digs' students with a certain envious curiosity. Incidents of wondrous Lawrentian passion were pruriently assumed to happen there. Very few students had motor vehicles. One car I remember was a 1932 Ford convertible coupe with dickie seat. There was also an AJS 500 single cylinder motorbike which seemed to pass rather randomly from student to student with scant attention paid to license or insurance.

There were very few students at Rhodes at the time – about 1600. It was the custom that school leavers (but not older students) had to wear a small placard

for the first few weeks declaring name, the school attended, and the course they intended pursuing. This led to students knowing the names and study directions of most of their fellows. No doubt many of the staff found this useful with first year students as well. This practice, long since abandoned, was greatly beneficial to student interaction.

In the residences, and more particularly in the dining halls, one found oneself in close contact with students from the whole gamut of disciplines. One would thus find oneself confronted by atheist philosophy students doggedly arguing with scandalised theology students. Prim physicists would look askance at poets and painters, and left wing politics students would find themselves in fierce debate with conservative geology students. Zoology students would defend Darwin against fundamentalists. To the bewilderment of almost everyone, there were Maths students exchanging Maths jokes, and amidst all of this intellectual excitement, a coterie of students of the Beaux Arts looked down on the rest of the rest of the campus as philistines.

In this intense buzz one would hear talk of the lecturers who inspired students in other departments, and of the nature of intellectual debate in those disciplines. The names of F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot resonated in lit crit. Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard were the doyens of Anthropology where nuances of Functionalism prevailed. From philosophers, one heard of the apostasy of Ernest Gellner. The names of I Emmanuel Kant, Bentham, and James and John Stuart Mill were bandied about, and the merits and demerits of Utilitarianism were debated. Talk centred on the fallacies of Bertrand Russell, the ethics of Cairncross, and the wisdom of Hume. Politics students would discuss the universal franchise and the virtues and weaknesses of Mill, Marx and de Toqueville, while Psychology students introduced one to Freud and Jung. Although some students simply talked rugby and the next Kaif Krawl, and retired to their books as specified by syllabi, many others found themselves in the midst of intense debate for most of their waking hours, whether at the dinner table, the Kaif, or the many and well patronised student pubs. For these students, Rhodes was an incredible and intellectually explosive twenty-four hour university.

It was into this world that I, as a rather confused Free State farmer's son with a poor school record, suddenly found myself at the beginning of 1962. I was at this time vaguely looking for a religious home and was equally looking for a political home. Having found school a long, pointless, and dreary experience, I found Rhodes a mind-blowing, exhilarating explosion of debate that was totally new. Suddenly, I found that a religious home did not have to be in one of the established Christian Churches, but could extend to agnosticism or even atheism. A political home did not have to mean the family tradition of the United Party, but could be the Progressive Party, the rather daring Liberal Party, the ANC, or even the Communists. My parents who had every reason to

expect me to fail at university, were astonished at the end of my first year to find that I had got a number of firsts.

The great strength of Rhodes at the time lay in the contact among students, and to a lesser extent among the students and their teachers. The resulting networks served the students for the rest of their lives. Though I have not been an academic for many years, I remain very active intellectually. I owe this to Rhodes. I do not feel a similar debt to the private school where I slumbered for years, or the London School of Economics where I was a postgraduate student for some time. The only LSE fellow student whose name I still remember, I remember because she was my girl friend.

Looking over my bookshelves forty years after being a student at Rhodes for books acquired at that time, I find the whole gamut of books in the liberal idiom of South African social studies. It is not always easy to remember which department prompted their purchase, but these books accurately reflect the liberal/radical academic perspectives of those times.

In the Sixties, the various disciplines tended to be very separate in methods and parameters. Thus Historians with the rare exception of Economic Historians such as Ashton, rarely used statistics even when as with the industrial revolution, these were available. Neither did Historians often look at the hidden assumptions underlying their dialogue. Sociologists in turn would often discuss historical phenomena with scant historical knowledge. The same disciplinary exclusivity characterised most of the arts.

But a clear countervailing tendency could be discerned. A very definite cross-fertilisation was taking place in student thinking in related subjects in the humanities. Here, the intense contact among students of different disciplines acted as a wonderful counterbalance. Amongst the students with whom I found myself in daily debate and argument were Tim Couzens, Charles van Onselen, David Tucker, and James Buckland, and our areas of interest were respectively History, Sociology and Political Studies, Literature and Law, Psychology, Philosophy and Theology, and Social Anthropology. The boundaries of these various disciplines taught at the time as very separate entities became blurred in student discourse. This was a fertile source of new ideas. This blurring of disciplinary boundaries was sometimes a source of severe irritation to our mentors, but I am sure it informs our thinking to this day. If one understood the strange world of functionalism and institutionalisation was one so very far from Marx and the hegemony of commoditisation? If one understood and integrated these ideas, was Majeke's proposal that missionaries were agents of conquest willingly or otherwise, so absurd? Was the seemingly vast chasm between Anthropology and Marxism really so great? If one accepted these broad theses, could the writer or artist be seen to be isolated from society, as critics in other disciplines seemed to assume? If the totem pole maker was subject to functional or institutional analysis as in Anthropology and Marxism, why not the poet or

sculptor? What was the role of the historian in a world of functional or hegemonic explanation?

Student dialogue at Rhodes was probably well ahead of its time. This, I am sure, was due to the degree of student contact. The Anthropology student at Wits went home and had supper in Sandton. The Anthropology student at Rhodes found himself sitting down to supper next to a Marxist, a poet, an historian and a sociologist. In the next ten years a rapid tendency to cross-disciplinary research took place.

Evidence of the extraordinary cross-fertilisation of disciplines is to be seen in Tim Couzens's interest in South African History, and in Charles van Onselen, then studying Psychology, whose work today seamlessly straddles History and Sociology. Other circles of friends at the time included Jackie Cock, Eddie Webster, Peter Kallaway, and Allan Fletcher. The latter was poached to work in the USA by IBM in the Seventies.

It must be understood that my interpretation of these issues is that of a student of the time. The departments that I had immediate contact with were Sociology, History, Politics, English and Psychology. Rhodes was characterised by academics of a broadly liberal bent, and while I was often fiercely critical of this tendency, we should not dismiss it. The students in the Sixties were in many instances of a rather conservative orientation, and a liberal academic and political perspective did in that context constitute a necessary and critical perspective, just as it does in many traditional and repressive societies today.

### **Intellectual Influences**

The academics who had the most influence on me were James Irving of Sociology, Winnie Maxwell of History, and Terence Beard of Politics.

#### *Sociology*

James Irving was the Professor of Sociology. He was a Glaswegian who had found his way to Cambridge on a scholarship for working class lads. At Cambridge he studied Icelandic sagas among other things. He had been active in the British Labour movement and he had lectured in China. There, he took an interest in Mandarin linguistics and culture. This linguistic exposure informed much of his teaching, as did the epistemological perspectives which flowed from it.

I remember James Irving as a tall bald man with a hole through one of his front teeth. From this tooth a startling whistle would punctuate lectures at intervals. He had a wry humour and often seemed to be reflecting on himself and human nature as something wonderfully absurd and funny. James Irving combined a delightfully nuanced wry and sympathetic observation of humanity with an acute and eclectic mind. He was active in attempts to uplift the

down-trodden of the various communities in Grahamstown and integrated those concerns into the content of his classes. I best remember him during my Honours year, when I had frequent seminars with him. He had an extraordinary talent of anticipating exactly the intellectual direction one was going in. He recommend books, leapfrogging one's mind at an extraordinary rate through the material.

Irving was a socialist and a determined one, but his best friend was fellow Scot and determined liberal Winnie Maxwell. They took sharp but sympathetic digs at each other's ideological foibles in lectures which the brighter students would pick up.

The Departmental approach under James Irving was of a broadly Fabian or British Labour party bent. We were schooled in the great early British social surveys of the poor by Townsend and Roundtree. We confronted the great work of Thomas on the integration of Polish peasants in the USA, and had, of course, to come to terms with Durkheim, Pareto and Weber. In the tradition of British socialism of the time, Marx did not feature much. James Irving was not active in the political party sense. He was, however, very active in trying to foster institutions of civil society in the black and coloured communities. This he saw as the essential foundation to social change, and the emergence of leadership structures. While the political route was more glamorous for students, Irving argued that the emergence of institutions of civil society would be a less vulnerable and more meaningful path to change.

The general sociology of the time was taught, but with an underlying stress on the epistemological implications of cultural and institutional change. Irving's interest in socio-linguistics underpinned this orientation. A solid grounding in research methods and statistics was also given. There was a strong emphasis on social surveys and the methods of social research. The demographic follies behind the apartheid ideology were often glaringly exposed by the findings of survey research. Computers were then gigantic and arcane machines, and electronic calculators not yet available. We used slide rules for the statistics. I still have my one complete with instructions, but can't remember how to use it.

The Sociology Department in the early Sixties consisted of James Irving, a senior lecturer, Hilston Watts, and a tutor, Harry Cohen. This tiny department was at the time responsible for producing a formidable number of professors and academics who took up posts in Universities throughout the world.

### *History*

The professor of History was Winnie Maxwell. She was a formidable Scots woman who kept her faded gown pinned with a clothes peg. In that innocent age, she would wander between the desks narrating while chain smoking the cigarettes of students which she would steal as she meandered around the lecture hall. Winnie Maxwell was a social, economic and political liberal but a

very hard taskmaster with both students and staff. Apart from the mandatory section on South African history, there was heavy emphasis on British political history. In these respects, Rhodes was typical of the English language universities in South Africa. While South African history was not taught from a Voortrekker or settler perspective, the teaching was decidedly imperialist in orientation, and a missionary perspective was often stressed. Nonetheless, works such as Majeke 'The Role of the Missionary in Conflict', were mandatory reading, though they were treated highly critically. When I went to lecture at Wits in the early Seventies I was astonished to find that this work was not in their library at all, and had to be ordered.

Winnie Maxwell published very little, but like the Sociology Department under James Irving, her Department produced a remarkable number of esteemed academics who populated universities internationally. Her strength lay in a demand for thoroughness, in the wonderful empathy she showed for historical personae, and in the flowing narrative and romance she managed to inject into what could have been a dull chronology. This inspired an abiding interest in history amongst her students.

### *Politics*

Terence Beard was the epitome of a liberal. He was not only a liberal by academic temperament, but was a very active member of the beleaguered Liberal Party around which all radical activity coalesced. Those who were tempted to more direct action, and those who were of a more socialist persuasion congregated on the fringes of the Liberal Party. Because he was at the very edge of what the government was prepared to tolerate, Beard was very careful not to let students draw him into party political debate in lectures and tutorials. People in similarly exposed political positions such as Clem Goodfellow and Norman Bromberger were also cautious. When I look at my bookshelves today, I suspect that every book prescribed for Terence Beard's Politics course is still there, and some I still re-read.

### **The Significance of the Sixties Rhodes' Experience in a National Context**

1961 was a year of apartheid at its most virulent and confident. Vervoerd and Vorster were at the helm and all other political persuasions were heavily beleaguered. In white politics, the old United Party was trying its best to survive the fraught times by being all things to all (White) men, and the newly formed Progressive Party which favoured a qualified but non-racial franchise, had lost most of its MPs, leaving Helen Suzman as its sole representative. Any party to the left of the Progressives was subject to police harassment. In intellectual debate, the situation was equally fraught, with an ever more powerful

government looking with increasing menace and disfavour on any university or university department that was overtly liberal in its orientation.

The old liberal Universities had been forbidden to enroll new black students from 1959. For ideological reasons, Fort Hare and the branch at PE had just been forcibly detached from Rhodes. In 1961, there were still a number of black students who had been at Fort Hare, and who were allowed to complete their studies at Rhodes. The more politically daring students were to be seen in the company of these Fort Hare students.

Universities were in justifiable fear of their funding being cut off. Rhodes was the smallest of the liberal universities, and probably the least solvent at the time. The financial vulnerability of the University was exacerbated by the loss of its two satellite campuses. It was at this time that The South African Institute of Race Relations lost its state funding in favour of the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs which was a Broederbond-controlled organisation strongly in favour of apartheid.

Most of the senior academics at Rhodes in 1961 had been to Oxford or Cambridge. Most of the junior academics had either been to the same universities or had been taught by Oxbridge academics. Though most of them were not politically active, many were broadly of liberal or Fabian opinion. By Fabian I mean that they were of Social Democratic tendency. So close was the community that students knew from conversation with other students what the political and religious tendencies of academics were. It is currently common in South African debate to find liberals viewed as conservatives, reactionaries, fascists or worse. In the Sixties liberals were viewed by the government and the SABC as Communists or worse and if active in politics, persecuted.

In their formal duties at lectures and seminars, those lecturers who were most suspect by the government and police scrupulously avoided party politics. Members of staff who were less exposed in their off campus activities were perhaps more daring during formal activities. I thus remember Guy Butler, Winnie Maxwell, and Professor Wilde of Psychology as being more openly condemnatory of the idiotic aspects of apartheid ideology and National Party historiography than colleagues who were far more daring in their off campus activities, and hounded by police.

Staff and the more daring students were unsure of the limits of resistance, and unsure of the consequences. It was equally unclear how long apartheid would last. Some thought such an absurd and unjust phenomenon could not last long, and gambled on its quick demise. Some staff and students and other South Africans who made this assumption, were to spend many years in custody or exile as a result. It was a time when the limits of state tolerance were being uncertainly challenged, and one in which the competence of the emerging South African police state under the truculent B.J. Vorster was being nervously tested for patience and tolerance. For nervousness and uncertainty the closest parallel to the Sixties was probably the era of the Eighties. The difference was,

however, that the Government under Verwoerd and Vorster seemed supremely confident, while the government of P.W. Botha was fumbling uncertainly into an unknown future. A number of times as a student I arrived at a lecture to find that the professor, lecturer, tutor or a fellow student had been arrested, banned, or had fled the country the night before. The parameters of resistance were narrow and constrained, though doubtless tested by too few.

### **Rhodes in the Early Seventies**

After three intellectually barren years at LSE, and a harrowing year at the Broederbond-controlled and inspired UDW (then housed at Salisbury Island), I returned to Rhodes as a Sociology lecturer in 1970. At this time, students and academics who had been studying abroad during the student revolts in Paris, London, and America in the era of opposition to the Vietnam war began drifting back to teaching posts at the liberal universities. These students returned with an infusion of New Left thinking. The works of Marcuse, Ralf Milliband, Perry Anderson, Robin Blackburn, Barrington Moore, and others began to have a strong influence in Sociology, Politics, and Psychology, and a few years later in History at Rhodes.

I found the return as stimulating as had been my arrival and experience in my student days. In the third year class there were about ten students. Amongst them were Rudi van Kemenade, a very pompous student of Philosophy, Doug Hindson studying Economics, and Tony Emmet and Jill Strellitz studying Psychology. After a week or two in which they cautiously summed me up, it was no longer necessary to lecture this group. One had only to posit a few theoretical propositions, and a furious debate would break loose. The lectures always overran their allotted time, to the intense annoyance of those needing the lecture room for the next lecture. The debate usually then adjourned to the student cafeteria, and often continued into the night at my cottage or in one of the pubs thronged by students. This was the most exhilarating class of students by a wide margin that I have ever encountered at any university, and three of them still visit me on the farm where I now live.

In the mid Seventies, Poulantzas and Althusser started to excite the more innovative students. These students seemed to me to be uninterested in being drawn into debate the terms of which were essentially humanist, open, and liberal. The obscure language of this work transliterated from the French, was an ideological marker, worn with exclusiveness and pride. This language precluded debate. Student discourse often took place amongst the converted in student digs. The most striking parallels it seemed to me were the Scholastics of the early Middle Ages, and the Grand Theory of Talcott Parsons in the late Fifties. It was entirely alien to my nature, and to the vibrant open society I had known Rhodes to have been, and I hated it. I left Rhodes and returned to my family farm. Fortunately, the phenomenon of an exclusionist orthodoxy was

short-lived, and Rhodes soon reverted to a climate of open and vigorous discourse.

For me, the legacy of Rhodes has been a social and academic richness that continues to inform my intellectual endeavours to this day.