



Interviews, Commentaries, and Viewpoints

Interviews with Notable Australasian Africanists Norman Etherington

This a lightly edited version, reprinted with permissions, of the scholarly podcast streamed as *Africa Past and Present* Episode 116, February 13, 2018 at <http://afripod.aodl.org/2018/02/afripod-116>. The interviewers were Peter Alegi, Professor of African History at Michigan State University and Peter Limb, President of AFSAAP. Norman Etherington is a titan of African history in Australia, having taught from the 1970s at the universities of Tasmania, Adelaide, and Western Australia.

Norman Etherington is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Western Australia, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and Royal Geographical Society, past president of AFSAAP and the National Trust of South Australia, and research affiliate, University of South Africa. He has a Ph.D. from Yale and is author or editor of numerous publications on South African history, imperialism, and missions, among them *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in South-Eastern Africa, 1835-1880* (Royal Historical Society, 1978), *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854* (Longman, 2001), *Missions and Empire* (Oxford, 2005) and *Mapping Colonial Conquest* (UWA Press, 2007). The interview focuses on his distinguished academic career and influential works on missions and empire in Southern Africa, as well as his latest books *Indigenous Evangelists & Questions of Authority in the British Empire 1750-1940*, with Peggy Brock, Gareth Griffiths and Jacqueline Van Gent (Brill, 2015) and *Imperium of the Soul* in Manchester's 'Studies in Imperialism' series (2017). Among other important collections, he contributed to *The Cambridge History of South Africa*.

PETER ALEGI

Welcome. What inspired you to become a professional historian?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

I was a Yale undergraduate and at the end of my B.A. I was offered a teaching fellowship in the hopes that that might attract me to an academic career. That was a very enjoyable year, but notwithstanding, I went to Law

School, also at Yale, and after the first year, I realised that History was really my calling. I couldn't see myself as a lawyer while I enjoyed the study, so I went over to the History Department and said, will you have me back, and they said yes, so I was enrolled. In my first year of coursework, I attended the very first seminar on African history ever to be offered at Yale, which was run by Prosser Gifford and Bill Swanson (Maynard Swanson as he would be known to South Africans). As my major essay, I followed Bill Swanson's advice to write something on the Aborigines Parliamentary enquiry in Britain in 1836-37. I was quite struck by how influential the testimony of missionaries was. Later, when looking for a Ph.D. topic, even though my major field was British Empire and Commonwealth history, I went back to those missionaries and devised a thesis topic that was intended mainly to assess the influence nationality and theology had on missionaries in South Africa. I wrote a lot on that, and by the time I put the final thesis together I had three times the number of words to meet the limit. But I had discovered that my most interesting findings were not about missionaries at all, but about Africans who joined mission stations, who became Christians and changed their lives, patterns of economic behaviour and family affiliations, as the result of that. So a thesis that started out being fairly Eurocentric ended up being African-centric and that is how my first book came about.

PETER ALEGI

You have focused quite a bit on the area that today we call KwaZulu Natal and you talked about all the different motivations that the African Christians, or *kholwa*, had to 'take the cloth', but what would you say is the correlation between spiritual, economic, and other forces in the lives of African clergy in the 19th century in this region?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

I think a major factor is that while in the first instance mission stations, even when they had plentiful land, found it difficult to attract people to the message of Christianity, the people who *did* join mission stations found that literacy and numeracy were very powerful tools in the developing colonial regime. Whereas non-Christian traditionalists were having difficulty coping with the new economy, they were making headway. So for them success in life was accompanied by the new religion and they associated the two, even if other people tended not to.

PETER LIMB

Another angle here is the role of the African convert in politics. In some of your early writings, you explained why the indigenous ruler of the amaHlubi people, Langalibalele, ‘ran away’ from settler authorities in the 1870s. You continued looking at these issues recently in *Indigenous Evangelists*, where you tackle a quite different tussle of Africans with white authority, Reverend John Langalibalele Dube vs. the Natal Governor at the time of the Bhambathana Revolt. Indeed, questions of authority lie at the heart of this book where you dwell on persecution of black missionaries. To what extent can we talk of *African* missionaries increasingly being in charge of various spheres in their own lives?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

By the 1890s two important things had happened in Natal; KwaZulu Natal as it is today. First, what had looked like British authority advantaging black literate Christians who were economically aspirational, now a change in colonial policy had given decisive control of politics, the political sphere, back to local white farmers and settlers in the town. Yet at the very moment the colonial regime was clamping down, the second and third generations of African Christians were finding themselves capable of effective political argument and this was a force that once started never went away. The clampdown by colonial authority came too late to suppress literacy and political knowledge. The other thing is that, in ways we do not still totally understand, Africans took control of Christian evangelisation. This was outside the mission station setting; it was on farms and in towns, at the diamond fields and at the goldfields, and a new, very powerful evangelical force was under way. Mass conversions began to take place at the end of the 19th century which had never happened before in southern Africa. At the same time it has to be said that traditional authority had taken a blow due to the suppression in wars of independent African kingdoms, especially the Zulu Kingdom, so there were a number of factors that came together to make African Christian politics very, very interesting at the beginning of the 20th century.

PETER ALEGI

One of the interesting things about this book, which you have co-authored with Peggy Brock, Gareth Griffiths and Jacqueline Van Gent, is how you bring Africa into dialogue with processes of change elsewhere in the world, particularly the British Empire—Jamaica, Australia, New Zealand. What do

you think we gain by working with this comparative method, through this comparative lens, about Southern Africa in particular?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

The comparative point that emerges most strongly in any comparison of religious change is the decisive role played by the local, non-colonial agents. That is crucial in every instance and it does not vary. What does vary are the political circumstances. In New Zealand where the Maori people were, by the end of the 19th century, decisively outnumbered by white settlers a process that had been occurring over quite a short time, 30 years, the colonial authorities were much less worried about the subversive content of Christianity than they were in Natal or Jamaica, where white authority was represented by a numerical tiny minority of people. White, colonial, authority in those circumstances is characterised by frequent panics, constant fear, and frequent bouts of vigorous repression. It is fun to talk to people about the comparative aspect of things as the traditional mission history with its focus on European and North American missionaries can after a while get pretty dull because everybody talks the same language.

PETER ALEGI

It also helps South Africanists, who sometimes inhabit an exceptional space in the literature?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

Yes, that's right. And let it be said that it's 50 years ago this year [2018] that I made first landfall as a researcher in South Africa doing my Ph.D. The way we think about doing African history has really broadened and changed in a number of ways. When I began taking a postgraduate course in African history the predominant school was, I think, the Wisconsin-based idea of Africanists who should be anthropologically fully conversant through fieldwork with an African society, know an African language, and the Imperial history was confided to an entirely separate group of historians in most countries. So even when I first began teaching African history I was careful not to describe myself as an Africanist or an African historian, but a British Empire historian, who happened to be very interested in the way Africa had developed and very enthusiastic about teaching that to Australian university students. In the course of the 1980s and the 1990s, everybody caught up to the importance of the Imperial connotation. So much so that in the late 20th century and early 21st century it is routine when talking about any African country to talk about colonialism, post-colonialism and it is

much easier to work across disciplines than it used to be. I never learned to speak Zulu. I suppose I continued to work across fields rather than burying myself in one. And I might say, both in respect to Natal and missions, I never intended to go on focusing my life on either Natal or religious change but it was other people who kept dragging me back, never letting me go, inviting me to colloquia and conferences and so forth. One of my thesis supervisors, Robin Winks, had taught me to take care of my notes, always keep them properly indexed and abstracted. He gave me a tool which enabled me to write things now—I wrote an article last year which drew on some notes taken in the 1960s, some in the 1980s, some in the 1990s, and some as recently as three years ago. So I will express in this little talk my debt to Robin Winks for talking me into this and my stubbornness in persevering with it.

PETER LIMB

Well, we are glad that you kept those notes, Norman. Turning to another of your great interests, the study of empire and imperialism, your latest book is *Imperium of the Soul*. I think it is a *tour de force* of empire and culture, with plenty of connections to South Africa. One angle you have is architectural history, on Herbert Baker, architect of empire, his work crafting monuments of empire in South Africa and India. Another angle is personality, through the prism of interaction across the generation that included Baker and Sigmund Freud, and novelists such as Rider Haggard, John Buchan, even the arch-composer of empire, Elgar: you talk about his Gordon of Khartoum Symphony. Not to mention layered personalities such as the poet Kipling who was another to have a South African experience during the Boer/South African War, when he took a turn as journalist on *The Friend* newspaper when the British occupied Bloemfontein—I have been reading that journalism lately. You move through the sphere of that work to Joseph Conrad and finally, even majestically, Lawrence of Arabia. So, there are a lot of characters in this complex, nuanced book. Can you just sketch the broad contours of this work and explain the significance of what you call the political and aesthetic imaginations of Edwardian imperialists?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

The best way to approach this is by telling you how it came to be and to do that I need to stretch right back to my undergraduate days at Yale, my final two years, when I was in an Honours Program called History, The Arts and Letters. It demanded of the students that they have a pretty high degree of ability to deal with art and architecture, music, and literature, as well as

history though history was very central to it. Those interests have stayed with me my whole life. When I went to Natal, the second research trip, I met the late Jeff Guy, who became a great friend of mine. We were both doing research in the Pietermaritzburg Archives at the same time and he called my attention to Rider Haggard. He was interested in Rider Haggard as an imperialist whom he didn't like. But I hadn't read a great deal of Rider Haggard as a boy and I started reading him while I was doing research on my second research trip to Natal and to London in 1974. This led me to a day in the archives where I was reading this report from the Secretary for Native Affairs in Natal to the Colonial Office and I realised that he was describing the plot of *King Solomon's Mines*. That led me to uncover the links between Haggard and Shepstone and to write something about it. But at the very same time I was there I was in touch with a literary scholar who had been an undergraduate friend, then also in London, Walt Reed, who has just recently retired as a Professor of English from Emory University, Atlanta. He was very interested in psychoanalysis at the time and my conversations with him led me to write first a conference paper then an article on Rider Haggard, imperialism, and the late 19th century intellectual environment from which Freud as well as Haggard emerged. That was published in *Victorian Studies*, a good outlet, and I began to toy with the idea then that the approach might apply to other people. In 1980, I applied it to John Buchan and became so convinced of the value of it that I decided not to publish any of my work on this. Every five years or so I would tackle a different character but I put the results of my researches aside, wrote extensive essays, and didn't give conference papers about them. Meantime I always had this dream of a book in my mind that would do this. You mentioned three books coming out in the last three years; they came out in different circumstances. The *Indigenous Evangelists* emerged from a research grant leading to collaborative research from 2008 to 2010. The *Big Game Hunter* on Frederick Selous arose out of a publisher's commission; I researched it in six months, wrote it in six months, and you can read it in a day. But *Imperium of the Soul*, that was a work really of a lifetime.

PETER LIMB

Let me ask you here perhaps a Janus-faced question to bring this back to African history and ask whose empire was it in these cultural spheres. On one level, this book is certainly about these Masters of Empire. But what might all this paraphernalia of empire—such as for example the imposing Union Buildings in Pretoria that Baker constructed, or Haggard's novels—what did they all mean to black people and how might the empire and its

African subjects have influenced all these monumental works. I was just wondering how Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' might fit, or not fit here; to paraphrase an historian quite insensitive to African history, namely Hugh Trevor Roper, who spoke derisively of the 'gyrations' of Africans across history. In other words, what do all these Masters of Empire, the Soul of Empire, mean for the subjects of empire?

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

There are two questions here. On one level, to these creative conservative imperialists Africa represented savagery in the Hugh Trevor Roper sense, and the twist on that which Freud seized on among other people of that era, was that these people realised that within themselves was a savage who could not be suppressed and whose subversive messages were omnipresent albeit in the subconscious. In the end, the apparatus of suppression became somewhat analogous to the Imperial apparatus of subjection. Now nobody much thought about what the impact of this literature was on African intellectuals and, in fact, I think it is a subject worth investigating. It certainly is worth somebody to do a Ph.D. because you will see there is a little Epilogue after the Lawrence of Arabia chapter in the *Imperium of the Soul*, in which I talk about some of the African intellectuals who emerged in the 1950s and 60s and the way they responded to that literature. It is quite remarkable that in some circumstances, important writers in certain situations, the first time they read Rider Haggard was with enthusiasm. They were identifying with the white explorers and not with the imaginary African people encountered. That is a question whose answer really awaits further research.

PETER ALEGI

Speaking of African subjects, I was teaching the other day about the state-building and migration taking place in the early 19th century in Southern Africa which you cover so nicely in your book *The Great Treks*. I remember years ago the book stirred up quite a bit of controversy among South African historians. Could you share something about how a history of mobility in Southern Africa stirred up a hornet's nest, what the criticisms were, and how you came back to those criticisms and even made it into the pages of academic journals? Graduate students are now taught by people like us to really acquaint themselves with these debates and incorporate those insights into their own research.

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

I was commissioned by a publisher, Longman, to write a book for a series they called ‘Turning Points in History’, specifically on the Great Trek. That came about because I had become a participant in the debate started by Julian Cobbing on the so-called *mfecane*. My approach to the Great Trek, on which I had never read the Afrikaner version, was drastically reshaped as the result of rethinking the *mfecane*. Having got this commission I thought: when am I ever going to get a commission as good as this. I made a number of important methodological decisions. The first was that it was not going to be a book that rode along with the colonialists and advancing white frontiersmen as they encountered African people. It would be focused on African people encountering those forces, and embedded not necessarily in their point of view—difficult for any historian to recapture at this distance—but from the perspective of that side. This meant not focusing on anybody of authority or influence in the Western Cape or Britain, but focusing on the great interior of Southern Africa when the Bantu language speakers congregated, by far the most populous section of the entire subcontinent. That was one important methodological consideration. That I would situate my perspective not on the frontier but on the interior and watch as these encounters took place.

Secondly, I wanted it to be a history of all Southern Africa. The starting point was, that one of the results of the expansion of the Zulu Kingdom and other upsets, slave trading et cetera, was that some established political groupings moved quite far away from their original homelands. I realised that this movement was not a new feature in Southern African history but a long established one, analogous in some ways to what we see in the Western Sudan. Control of persons and control over labour was always more important than territory. For that reason, it had to be not a history of South, but Southern Africa.

Then I made what I thought was an independent logical decision that I would not use any racial terms in the book. I would never refer to Blacks all Whites and those terms would only crop up when people who were subjects of the book used them themselves. I had no idea at the time that I was doing this that the novelist John Coetzee had made exactly the same decision when writing *Waiting for the Barbarians* and his book on Michael K. I think many people still have difficulty in coming to terms with history that departs so much from established narrative structures—the frontier, the advance from the Cape—my focus on the interior, the focus on mobility and the refusal to accept what became for a time under apartheid a colonialised racial order, the refusal to acknowledge that as some eternal fact about southern Africa. I think many established historians looking at this were perplexed. Paul

Maylam had written a book called *A History of the African People of South Africa*; that was like a piece of segregated history. I did not want to do segregated history. I had some qualms about people accepting me with my background and experience as someone speaking on behalf of African people but I did not imagine that I was speaking on behalf of African people, but myself. Rather like Edward Gibbon when he sat down to study the Roman Empire. Occupying some Olympian mountain-top and watching with great interest what was going on down below and trying to catch, through documents, the voices of people caught up in these big processes of change.

Incidentally, I would like to do the next chapter of that sometime. I finished that book at 1854. I would really like to go on and may within the next year or two take up the story 1854 to 1912.

PETER LIMB

We would certainly love to read a sequel to that. Maybe we can move towards bringing this very interesting discussion to a conclusion by thinking about the way you use this book to develop the historical landscape, craft a narrative, and invite the reader to imagine these movements of people. At the beginning of the book, I remember, you use the metaphor of an eagle flying high, not over the Mother City, Cape Town, but over this heartland. This focus on the landscape was something very evident in the work of John Coetzee. I heard him recently in Adelaide give a reading where he compared the South, from Argentina and Chile to South Africa and Oceania speaking in this way to the landscape. This leads me to a final question about maps and cartography. Some years ago, you edited a beautifully illustrated work comparing maps in Southern Africa and Australia. The question that comes to my mind is: What can cartography tell us, or not tell us, about history? And here I am reminded of another recent splendid book on South African surveying and cartography by Lindsay Braum.

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

Yes, it is a great book. I will tell you how I got into the cartography. I had always loved maps. When I was 10 years old, I plastered my bedroom with National Geographic Society maps of the whole world, every one that I had. So the interest in maps goes back a long way. When I was preparing to write *The Great Treks*, I realised that there were many parts of the landscape that I needed to familiarise myself with by seeing them, those parts of southern Africa that I had not visited. To prepare myself I set out to collect all the old maps I could, because the modern map is useless in telling you where Mzilikazi might have been, or what the group names were that were used in

the Eastern Cape, for instance. But on the early 19th century maps of different parts of southern Africa people really emerge, you can see them on the map. When I set out to use these old maps to find places, I discovered that they were often wildly inaccurate because they had been compiled by cartographers, usually in England or Germany, drawing on information that they got out of books or reports of travellers.

I also realised that not only were these maps useful in my attempts to chart the movements of people and to understand what so-called ‘tribal’ names might have meant in the early 19th century, but they also enabled me to see Southern Africa from the point of view of people who lived in the era that I was writing about. A lot, maybe most historical cartography, is focused on the matter of getting the map right, correcting errors; there is a narrative of progress that goes along with it. But there is another aspect of historical cartography that I seized upon, which is seeing the world from a different point of view, from the point of view of people in different eras, using the maps that they drew on to understand their mind-set and how they saw the landscape. So that is how that came about.

PETER LIMB

I am sure this interview will be very useful for many people trekking across Southern African history and culture. Thank you, Norman Etherington for talking to *Africa Past and Present*.

NORMAN ETHERINGTON

And thank you for having me on.