

ISG NEWSLETTER MARCH 2023

This month saw the International Studies Group begin the second decade of its existence. The occasion was celebrated on Wednesday evening by a cruise and barbecue on the Modder River. We were privileged to be joined by Dr Glen Taylor, head of UFS' Division of Research Development, who has very generously funded the ISG from its inception; and to host Professor Mucha Musemwa, Professor of History and Dean of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand. Once we were underway, Professor Musemwa delivered a truly inspirational talk, reflecting on his own intellectual trajectory and career development. With his permission, it is reproduced below.

While all ISG members are encouraged to publish widely, it is unusual for a PhD student just starting out to do so. Special congratulations, then, to Nicola who has a chapter in an edited forthcoming book, *Scarcity in Zimbabwe*; as well as an article which will appear in the *South African Historical Journal* later this year. Lotti has a co-authored article in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (which can be accessed here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03057070.2023.2182982>); and Una has been invited to present a paper, 'The Return of Husbands: Male Labour Returnees and Women in Botswana, c.1970 to the present', at the 'ECAS2023: African Futures' conference in Cologne at the end of May. Bryson also has a fully-funded invitation to attend the same conference; and Michael has been elected as a member of the Australasian Animal Studies Association (for which see here: <https://animalstudies.org.au/member-profiles/9070/glover-dr-michael>). Well done, all of you.

Una enjoyed a particularly busy month, having also delivered a paper, along with Hyden, Joseph, and Keabaka, at a 'Democracy in Africa' workshop held at the University of Bologna, a university with which the ISG, through the good offices of Professor Arrigo Pallotti, enjoys regular exchanges.

Our Stanley Trapido and Ramblers seminar series both met in the course of the month, and thanks once again to Hyden and Innocent for their exemplary organisation.

Ian Phimister,

30th March 2023

“From Rural Herd Boy to History Full Professor and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Wits University: An Intellectual Trajectory”.

I am very grateful to Professor Ian Phimister for inviting me to be part of the celebration to mark the beginning of the second decade of the founding of the International Studies Group (ISG). This is not the first invitation from him as I have been here on more than one occasion to deliver papers at the ISG Stanley Trapido Seminar Series, albeit, my most recent one having been on Zoom for obvious reasons. So, in many ways, I do not feel like a stranger nor do I even feel like a gate-crusher to this celebration. Although each and every occasion I came here to present was a special one for I always went away enriched and mentally nourished and challenged by the myriad ideas and probing questions from different generations of the young minds being mentored at the ISG, today’s moment is a very special one for me, for I have been given a rare opportunity to share with you my personal reflections on how far I have come from being a mere rural herd boy who started his education at a rural primary school and ended up being a History Full Professor and just three months ago was appointed as the Executive Dean of one of the biggest and top faculties of Humanities in South Africa, at one of the eminent universities in the country and on the continent. It is my modest hope that my story will inspire some of you to scale even greater heights than those scaled by your mentors.

In tracing my intellectual growth and development trajectory, I will not bore you with details of my boyhood. Those details are the subject of my chapter **entitled: From ‘Nature Study’ to ‘Nature’s Archives’: Reflections on a Journey into Environmental History**”,

in the book *Archives of Times Past: Conversations about South Africa’s Deep History* (Wits University Press) which only two weeks ago won the best 2023 NIHSS Non-Fiction Edited Volume – a copy of which I am donating to the ISG library as a gesture of my appreciation of decades of friendship and mentorship I have received from Professor Ian Phimister as well as my association with the ISG cohorts that have come and gone and also those who are still here.

I begin by noting that what drew me to academia were the opportunities it provides for intellectually stimulating work, a passion for my field of study, History in general, but Environmental History in particular, and the opportunity to teach and to contribute to the production and development of new knowledge and train a new generation of young scholars. As such, the volume of time and energy one invests to succeed in

graduate school, and then to commit oneself to an occupation in academia is critically important to simply ignore. But it can be hard to recollect this commitment when one is confronted by seemingly immutable and multiple challenges that appear to be conniving to take away a golden opportunity to attain a higher degree or academic job, promotion, etc. However, in some cases such ostensibly unassailable problems are often undermined by the commitment of those who have devoted their whole academic careers to help others even as they too face their own challenges especially as the higher education terrain is changing at such a fast pace to keep abreast of anything.

My academic journey has been broadly shaped by the ever-present “trinity of academic life” commonplace at every research-intensive university namely research, teaching (including supervision) and service. My talk is therefore roughly divided into these categories.

But before I do that, please allow me to state from the outset that I have been deeply involved in the South African higher education landscape in various capacities for a period of 27 years to date. After my primary education, I went to Mazowe Secondary School, a Salvation Army school just outside the City of Harare, where I obtained my Ordinary Level Certificate in 1984. I proceeded to Hartzell High School, a United Methodist mission school near the City of Mutare, where I attained my Advanced Level Certificate in 1985. In 1986 while most of my friends chose to register for a Law degree, I opted to enroll for a BA General degree at the University of Zimbabwe. In my second year of the degree, I was moved to the BA Honours Class after maintaining high grades in all my subjects. In 1988, I graduated with a BA (Honours) degree in History. After obtaining my Honours degree I was fortunate enough to get an Overseas Student Scholarship at the University of Cape Town. I studied there for an MA

degree from 1991 till mid-1993. This is where I met Prof. Phimister and since then we have remained in close contact and I have benefitted from his consistent mentorship, and as he often likes to say, Comradeship! Here, I focused my research on the social, political and urban lives of Africans in Cape Town's first major African township, Langa, in the period from 1927 to 1948. This was at a time when black urban-social histories were in vogue with a dedicated focus on "history from below". After completion of my Master's degree, I immediately enrolled for a PhD degree in 1994 with Prof. Phimister as my supervisor. But before the end of that year I was offered a one-year temporary junior lectureship in the department of History at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. It was not an easy decision for me to make as I was not sure about what would happen to my PhD studies once I started working and facing what I had heard were the exacting demands on one's time at UNISA with its huge numbers of students at the time. Wise counsel from Prof. Phimister saved the day when he read the then unfolding political situation just after the democratic elections of 1994 accurately. He urged me to go and explore academia and gain experience even if it was to be for only one year but who knows what this might turn into as the job market was very likely to become highly competitive from then on, he argued. I took up the advice and embarked on a one-man Great Trek from Cape Town to the capital, Pretoria, not by rail but by air! While at Unisa, from 1 April 1995, work demands made it impossible for me to continue with my PhD studies such that I was forced to de-register.

However, towards the end of my first year, my contract was extended by another year but this time the temporary junior lectureship was converted to a permanent but still junior lectureship. By the end of the second year of my tenure at Unisa, I was growing impatient at the lack of progression to a more secure position and the lack of time to pursue my doctoral studies. I started applying for scholarships at overseas universities and was lucky to be awarded the MacArthur Fellowship tenable at the University of Minnesota and at the end of 1998 I headed off to North America to begin my doctoral studies under now Regents Professor Allen Isaacman who is no stranger to the ISG.

It was here that I experienced something of an **intellectual turning-point**. It was still here in the MacArthur Interdisciplinary Programme that I got an opportunity to study

environmental history for the first time and began to develop an intellectual interest in the subject. But this is not how I started off at the university. Like all doctoral students I was required to do three years of coursework. As a student in African history, I took courses in this field and also in geography, environmental sociology, and African American literature. I did not expect to study environmental history, at all. This discipline had emerged as a new field of study in the 1960s, and when I arrived at the University of Minnesota the history department did not offer courses in it. But a separate graduate programme in this field had been established in 1989 by Africanist historian Professor Allen Isaacman. As a doctoral student in African history, I was expected to take this programme. This was a turning-point in my intellectual life.

But a separate graduate programme in this field had been established in 1989 by Africanist historian Professor Allen Isaacman. As a doctoral student in African history, I was expected to take this programme. The programme aimed to promote the development of an interdisciplinary community of academic staff and graduate students who were devoted to the study of global change, particularly as it was seen from the global south. The programme was not simply about environmental change. It also addressed issues related to peace, conflict, security, justice, human rights, development, and international cooperation between the USA and so-called developing countries.

From these various courses, I learnt basic lessons about environmental history. First and foremost, the environmental historians I was studying sought to move on from the idea that nature was a mere backdrop to human action. This was a new perspective for me. Most of the history I had previously studied at school and at university had been about political history – the history of conflicts between different social groups and national states, often with the focus on the actions of leaders (who were usually men). Sometimes my lecturers also covered themes in economic and social history – for instance, topics in the history of trade and industrialization, the history of slavery, relations between men and women. But we learnt little about the roles played by nature in human affairs; for example, the impact of drought and disease, or of changes in climate. Nor did we learn much about the impact of human action on nature. Now, at the University of Minnesota, I learnt that engagements with the natural world have always been a central part of human experience.

Secondly, I found out that although environmental history first developed as an academic discipline in Europe and North America, African environmental history had a life of its own.

Environmental conditions in sub-Saharan Africa were markedly different from those in Europe and North America. A new approach to environmental history in Africa was emerging. Many historians of Africa had assumed that in the times before colonialism Africans had misused their lands, and had caused serious environmental degradation. In this view, colonialism had brought ways of caring properly for the land. I found, however, that a new body of scholarship in African environmental history was challenging simplistic assertions of this kind. Historians were now arguing that colonial development practices did much harm to the African environment. They were also arguing that African rural communities were far from being simply victims of these colonial interventions. They had sought to deal with the problems that they faced in the colonial period in practical ways.

Thirdly, I was struck by how environmental history thrives on an engagement with new source materials. This means going beyond the traditional written archive. It compels the environmental historian to learn from other disciplines such as geography, geology, anthropology, art history, biology and archaeology. In the absence of documentary sources, the creative use of other sources, such as dendrochronology, becomes crucially important. (Dendrochronology is the study of tree-rings to tell us about the history of climates in the past.) As a historian once put it, there is a previously unimagined wealth of data stored in 'nature's archives'.

A fourth distinctive feature of environmental history is its ability to help explain what is happening to the environment today. I think here of droughts, floods, air and water pollution, climate change and global warming. Environmental history emerged in the 1960s in large part in response to rising environmental problems brought about by the effects of industrialization and urbanization. This in turn led to environmental activism. Study of the past became essential in order to explain the origins of a particular environmental problem, how it had evolved over time, and what role human beings had played in causing it.

Lastly, I learnt how environmental historians were incorporating key categories of analysis used in social history, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity and generational difference. As I was also doing coursework in various aspects of African social history, I had become quite familiar with these categories. I was persuaded by the arguments made by both environmental and social historians. They tell us that although general histories are important for understanding the world today, all too often they fall short in their analyses because they do not pay attention to the local features of a particular place.

This, therefore, colleagues, comrades, and friends, became the firm basis for launching my then budding career as an environmental historian. I wrote up a dissertation which was able to reflect a fusion of social and environmental history approaches. It was titled 'Struggles over water: the history and politics of water supply services in Makokoba Township, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 1894-1992'. I presented it at the University of Minnesota in 2003. It formed the basis of the book which I published some years later, titled *Water, History and Politics in Zimbabwe: Bulawayo's Struggles with the Environment, 1894-2008*.

In my other works, I have continued to be influenced by interdisciplinary perspectives. I have also continued to work within networks of scholars committed to advancing scholarship on the significance of water in the environment. These scholars come from a variety of different disciplines. They share the view that the study of water and its governance cannot be confined to one approach or field of analysis. I continue to impress upon colleagues who are pre-occupied with contemporary issues that the present has to be linked to the past in order to get a fuller understanding of current problems.

To date, my own research emphasizes, drawing from multiple and affiliate disciplines (e.g., environmental humanities), continuously question nature-culture binaries to construct rich and dynamic narratives of human-nature or inter-species interactions, and have shed light on the colonization and de-colonization of water as well as contemporary struggles over access to this key resource as well as other environmental resources by the poor. My research offers critical insights into struggles

over identity, social and environmental injustice at the hands of authoritarian and democratic regimes in Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively. These issues continue to be of enduring importance in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens of the Southern African region. I have published widely on these issues and at the beginning of 2022 my scholarship was re-rated from a C2 to a B-3 by the National Research Foundation. The communication I received from the NRF justifying the B-rating read:

“The reviewers recognised you as an established historian and internationally respected scholar in the field of environmental history, notably through your research into the role of water in state formation and urban planning in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Your scholarship was recognised as path-breaking in demonstrating the possibilities of interdisciplinary research bringing environmental history, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic dimensions together to understand the Zimbabwe's colonial and post-colonial histories. They agreed that your scholarship has afforded you recognition in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Continental Africa and beyond. This growing international standing is evidenced in international collaborations, in well-respected scholarly books and tenure of administration positions in international environmental journals and professional organisations/associations.”

TEACHING

So, I returned to back to UNISA to resume my teaching responsibilities in 2003 Just after I had been promoted to the rank of Senior Lecturer at the end of 2007, I left UNISA to join Wits University on 1 January 2008 as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History.

Since then, I have a solid and coherent record of sustained contribution to teaching, curriculum design and development as well as supervision of postgraduate students. I possess a broad experience in teaching at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. To date, I have supervised 9 PhD students all of whom are gainfully employed and have gone on to publish books, chapters, and articles in top-notch and reputable avenues.

SERVICE:

Service or to use the most preferred turn of phrase –Academic Citizenship – falls into two categories, i.e., service to the discipline and profession and service to the institution (department, school, faculty, and university committees).

Membership of Professional Societies and Roles on Boards:

Over the course of my academic career, I have rendered a meaningful contribution to the advancement of my discipline and profession in various capacities. As I will demonstrate below, the various roles I have played not only represent my service to the discipline but also signals my intellectual standing and recognition as I have either been invited or nominated to assist in these capacities.

Firstly, I am a paid-up member of various discipline-related societies such as the Southern African Historical Society (SAHS), African Studies Association, the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH), the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH), the International Water History Association (IWHA) and the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO). A critical highlight of my membership of most of these organizations is that I serve in their executive committees/boards. With respect to the SAHS, I first served this body as its Treasurer for 3 years and then I was elected as its Vice-President (2013-June, 2015). I subsequently took over as its President from July 2015 to June 2017. As I write, I currently serve as a member of the board of directors of international organizations of (a) the *International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations* (re-elected last year for another three-year second term), (b) the *International Water History Association* (IWHA) and (c) the *European Society for Environmental History* (ESEH). These are the ultimate professional and reputable societies within the discipline of Environmental History in particular and History, in general. Such recognition and participation in these august bodies in the domains of history speaks volumes about

my growing stature. Beyond service to purely environmental history organisations, I am currently a member of the Board of Directors of the African Studies Association; was for 10 years a senior advisor on the American Council of Learned Societies' African Humanities Program of which several of the ISG current fellows and alumni have received AHP awards. I am also the current Chair of the Board of the Public Affairs Research Institute based in Johannesburg.

These roles put me in good stead to be promoted to the rank of Associate Professor in October 2013. In 2017, I was appointed as the Head of the School of Social Sciences for a 5-year term. I was promoted to the rank of Full Professor of History in 2021. As I started my second 5-year term I was appointed as the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities. On 30 September 2022, I was elected and inducted as a Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (MASSAf).

As I end, my academic and university executive trajectories have been closely intertwined. Of course, I could never have excelled in the latter without the former. A personal commitment I made upon assuming the position of Head of the School of Social Sciences was to ensure that I would continue to research, write, and publish and not be sucked into what many still perceive as an administrative position. Yet, I flipped this perception to good use because I simply understood and treated my position as Head of School as one geared towards providing intellectual leadership to the School support by a strong administrative edifice to ensure the success of the academic enterprise. I also ensured that I needed to lead the School by example, i.e., to continue to publish and serve as a model to those I lead. I made a personal commitment that I would not complete my first 5 year term as Head of School before I had been promoted to a Full Professorship – and became one of a few heads of schools to have accomplished this feat. A word of advice to those who aspire to go on a similar trajectory as I have whether they are aiming to be promoted to the professoriate or any academic rank for that matter or the executive trajectory – please respect the TRINITY of academic life: research, teaching, and service. They are intertwined and almost inseparable. Over competence in one will not compensate for your deficient capabilities in the other domains of academic activity!

Long, Live the ISG, Long Live. Aluta Continua!