

## Article

# Rebels with a cause of their own: a personal reflection on my student years at Rhodes University, 1961-1965<sup>1</sup>

Edward Webster

I arrived at Rhodes University in February 1961 to register for a BA degree. I had developed a deep interest in the study of history, partly because I had recently returned from a year hitch-hiking and working as a waiter, then rapidly promoted to barman at Battersea Park Funfair in London, and later a farm-hand in Europe. I had been deeply impressed by the visible depth of Europe's history as seen through its ancient monuments. I had continued home via North and East Africa. These travels had aroused my curiosity in the process of decolonisation that had begun in Africa reaching a climax in 1960 when 12 states were to become independent. The 'winds of change', Harold Macmillan dramatically announced in Cape Town in 1960, had reached the southern tip of Africa.

Macmillan's speech made the future seem like a simple act of decolonisation – you pull down the Union Jack and you return 'home'. But this was not to be – and that is what made the journey I was about to embark on so much more difficult, more painful and, in the end, more challenging. Indeed, for me, it was the start of a long voyage, 'full of adventures, full of things to learn'.

Because of the existence of a relatively large and cohesive settler population in Southern Africa, events were to prove a lot more complex, violent and bloody than Macmillan's gentle metaphor of a 'wind' evoked. Instead of a steady march to national liberation in Southern Africa, 1960 was the start of what the veteran scholar/activist John Saul has described as a 'thirty-year war', a ruthless counter-revolution that began in South Africa with the banning of the key political institutions of the national liberation movement and only ended in 1990 when Mandela was released.

But this moment of freedom in 1990 had been preceded by large scale sacrifices as the movements of national liberation in South Africa, Rhodesia, Portuguese East Africa and South West Africa embraced armed struggle and the settler communities of South and Southern Africa dug in their heels in defence of 'white civilisation'.

Growing up in the Eastern Cape, and the Transkei in particular, and being a descendant of the first British settlers of 1820, meant that bloody conflict between coloniser and colonised was not unfamiliar to me. 'Kaffir wars', 'Frontier Wars', 'wars of colonial dispossession'; the words changed but the contested nature of our presence in Africa was part of my memory of growing up in 'settler country'. This was brought home to me sharply in my second year at Rhodes when a white family in my home village in the Transkei were brutally hacked to death by Poqo, the military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Terror spread throughout the village as the small white community armed itself in anticipation of another 'kaffir war'!

This is the context – and my memory of it – in my early years at Rhodes. Rhodes University was the logical place to be for someone from my social background. My parents were schoolteachers drawing modest salaries from the Cape Education Department and there were four children in the family; I was going to have to find my own way through university on bursaries and scholarships. I had matriculated from Selborne College in East London and, besides, Cecil John Rhodes conjured up the exploits of my 'heroic' ancestors.

Today a 'gap year' is quite common; at that time it was considered unwise and I was warned that I would be bitten by wanderlust and not want to study. Quite the opposite was the case. I took to Rhodes like a duck to water. For the first time in my life I had a room of my own and time on my hands to read. I was fascinated by the insights that I gained from an outstanding generation of lecturers led by the indomitable Winnie Maxwell. Opinionated and demanding, she inspired me to read widely, encouraging me to go on to do an honours degree in history. I was especially taken by the origins of the welfare state and the social regulation of the market through the formation of the British Labour Party (out of the 'bowels' of the trade union movement, as Atlee rather graphically put it) and its social democratic programme. Sadly, with the exception of David Hammond-Tooke in social anthropology, not many of my lecturers had time for research and seldom published. But, they took teaching seriously; a characteristic that made a life long impression on me.

Two points about the study of history at Rhodes in the early sixties need to be made:

Firstly, it was entirely about the thoughts and activities of Europeans, and the English in particular. Africans, we were told, did not have a history because they had no written language and, as a result, there were no documents to examine. 'QED', as Winnie was fond of saying.

Secondly, the approach to history was voluntarist. It was about great (white) men shaping national and world events. Marxism, I was taught, was determinist and teleological and did not allow for individual choice.

Then something happened in my honours year, which was to change my intellectual life. The honours course consisted of five papers, a paper on seventeenth century England, two papers on the Age of Anne (1702-1710), a paper on Europe between the two world wars, and a long essay which I wrote on changing patterns of land ownership in early eighteenth century England.

While reading on seventeenth century England I came across a book by the Marxist historian Christopher Hill, recently appointed Master of Balliol College, Oxford. Instead of the endless tales of kings and queens randomly being beheaded, Hill argued that the English civil war could best be understood as a transition from feudalism to capitalism. The scales fell from my eyes; here for the first time was a pattern that made sense of what previously seemed to be haphazard events. It was close to midnight when my fellow student Pete Kallaway arrived in my room. He found me in a slightly euphoric state insisting that I had found the key to history. I wrote furiously through the night and eagerly presented the next morning to the class my 'intellectual discovery'.

But the response was a put down. 'Laddy', Winnie Maxwell said, 'history is not a railroad and you should beware of simple answers to complex and individual events. This is not a sociology class and we are not socialists!'

Well that set me thinking; what exactly is sociology and what is socialism? I wrote to Christopher Hill and told him that I had enjoyed reading his book and would like to study at Balliol. Not surprisingly, Hill never replied, but I did eventually go to Balliol – not to study history but politics, philosophy and economics – known as a PPE.

To explain why I took this turn we need to step outside the classroom and the cerebral world of books to the more basic instincts that drive a 20-year-old male... And it was of course these instincts that proved more decisive in shaping the journey that I had embarked on. Let me illustrate:

It was the practice at Rhodes at that time that men and women were strictly segregated into different residences. Furthermore, the lives of women students were under tight surveillance by female wardens who insisted that all residents check in not later than 11:00pm – a practice that seems to have been widespread at universities in the English-speaking world at that time. After all these wardens were *in loco parentis*!!

It so happened that I had developed a relationship with a female student in Beit House that led us to test the limits of the rule that she should be in residence by 11:00pm. Over time we began arriving late. The wardens, mindful of their duties, had invented a disciplinary regime called ‘gating’. Essentially these innovative wardens had introduced a precursor to what was to become ‘house arrest’. If a student were a mere one minute late they would be confined to their bedrooms for one night; two minutes, two nights; and so on.

I was outraged. I decided to challenge what I considered an unjust rule. It was clear to me that I would have a lot of support in such a campaign, so I decided to run for the Students Representative Council (SRC) on this ticket. Not surprisingly I was elected to the SRC at the end of my third year in 1963.

In those days members of the SRC took themselves very seriously. We used to wear suits to our fortnightly meetings and followed the formal rules of debate. I soon found myself deeply involved in what today we would call student politics. However, we did not have the kind of access to University management that SRCs won in certain progressive universities in the seventies; we were not represented on Senate nor were seen as a part of University governance.

Sharp ideological differences had emerged a few years earlier amongst students over the process of decolonisation unfolding around us. On the one hand, there was a small group of liberal minded students – largely in the department of philosophy, many of whom were theology students influenced by Dantjie Oosthuizen, as well as Clem Goodfellow in history, and Terence Beard in politics – who were sympathetic to the claims of the African majority. On the other hand, there was a large majority of students who wanted nothing to do with politics and were, when pushed, sympathetic to a mild form of white domination.

Pressure was also building up at a national level where the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was increasingly coming under the influence of people close to the liberation movement. This was to

culminate in a speech by the President of NUSAS in 1964, Jonty Driver, in which he called for NUSAS to become the student wing of the liberation movement. As you can imagine this confirmed the worst fears of students at Rhodes who were still smarting under an earlier attempt by a liberal-dominated SRC under the leadership of Basil Moore to pass a resolution condemning colonialism. This led to a conservative backlash and the mobilisation of the silent majority who flooded the Great Hall in large numbers to defend their heritage. Evoking the first setbacks of independence in post-colonial Africa they shouted rhetorically and aggressively, 'What about the Congo?!'

I was very much aware of the conservative views of the majority of students at Rhodes when I joined the SRC. It shaped my approach to student politics and made me aware of the limits of any liberal political project at Rhodes at that time.

Inevitably, however, my exposure to the more radically minded student leaders such as Robin Margo at the University of the Witwatersrand and Adrian Leftwich at the University of Cape Town (UCT) broadened my political consciousness. Apartheid's social engineering was being implemented under the direction of Hendrik Verwoerd, and the Transkei, along with all the other 'homelands', was being prepared for 'independence'. John Vorster, as Minister of Justice, had ruthlessly crushed all opposition. Business had been brought on side as the South African economy grew at an unprecedented rate. And Rhodesia was booming having recently declared Unilateral Independence. Arguably white domination was at its historic height in South and Southern Africa in 1965.

It was against this background that a small group of young, white, English-speaking intellectuals established the African Resistance Movement (ARM), an early attempt at the sabotage of public installations designed to 'bring the government to its senses'. One of their sympathisers was in my residence, Cory House, and, in a roundabout way, sounded me out as a potential recruit. I responded by observing that if such a strategy were to be embarked upon it would simply solidify white resistance to change. It was a sensible response that turned out to be very fortunate for me but very tragic for those who were persuaded on this strategy. One of their members, John Harris, a young schoolteacher, planted a bomb in 1964 in the Johannesburg railway station killing a civilian and badly maiming a young girl. He was found guilty of murder and hanged. The other members of the ARM were soon rounded up and given long jail sentences. The whole episode made a

profound impact on me, as it did to many others of my generation, serving as a sober warning of the consequences of badly conceived political strategies.

In 1964 an overwhelming majority elected me as a moderate candidate President of the SRC. But my commitment to ‘moderation’ was soon to be put to the test by the relentless logic of the apartheid bureaucracy. If it was the unreasonable residence rules that drew me into the SRC, it was rugby that drew me into anti-apartheid politics.

In general, rugby players at the time – and indeed today – did not have much interest in politics and were certainly not known for their liberal views. But at the start of the 1965 season, the Bantu Administration Department (or BAD as we used to call it) banned black people from watching rugby on the Rhodes Great Field as it was a ‘white area’. As a member of the team I made it quite clear that this was unacceptable and that we should protest against it. After all, I told my teammates, blacks were our keenest supporters.

I proposed to the student body – with strong support in the student newspaper, the *Rhodeo*, edited by my friend Roger Omond – that we undertake a one-day sit-in from sunrise to sunset on the steps of the library as a mark of protest at this unacceptable violation of the rights of black people. Of course we were influenced at the time by the civil rights movement in the Southern States of the USA and their non-violent desegregation struggles in particular. Not surprisingly we sang ‘We Shall Overcome’.

Of course the government did not change its mind until many years later but it was, for me and for the over one hundred students who participated, our first public anti-apartheid act. Although the protest could be dismissed as a futile moral gesture, it was part of a process of politicisation. It also brought into the open the sharp divide that was emerging among us at the time; between those of us who participated in this sit-in such as Johann Maree, Jacklyn Cock, Roger Omond, Charles von Onselen, Tim Couzens, John Sprack, and David Webster, who were now seen as rebels. Indeed, I remember being confronted by a fellow rugby player after the sit-in who said to me that he was disgusted by the behaviour of the protestors. He asked me if it was true that we had sung ‘communist’ songs such as ‘We Shall Overcome’. When I replied that we had sung this song, he said he was very disappointed in me, as he had voted for me as SRC president as he thought I was a moderate but now he realised that I too was a communist.

Yes we had become rebels, but we were rebels with a cause of our own. We were protesting on behalf of black supporters to watch *our* rugby not for non-racial rugby teams or the right of all players to participate in the same league. In fact, it never occurred to us to consult with our black supporters or to form any sort of an alliance with them. Yes we were rebels – but it was *our* cause, not theirs.

We went on our separate journeys but the directions changed somewhat; for me it was no longer primarily the past that caught my imagination, but the present. Above all, I wanted to understand how society worked and how to change it. So I decided to study further in the social sciences. I applied for the Eastern Cape Rhodes scholarship. I was short-listed but quite early on in the interview a question was put to me by a member of the selection committee that sunk me. I was asked how I felt about racial integration in schools in the light of recent experiences in the United States where white girls were being raped by ‘negroes’ and where it was leading to ‘a nation of half-breeds’.

I was offended by the question and, in spite of a subtle attempt by the chair, a liberal minded classicist by the name of Currey<sup>2</sup> to steer me away from responding, I plunged in and replied, ‘I think racial integration of our schools is inevitable, desirable and, if I get this scholarship, I would like to return and teach at an integrated school in South Africa or Southern Africa’. (A racially integrated school, Waterford, had been recently established in Swaziland after the government had forced the well known black school, St Peters in Rosettenville, to close as it was in a white area.)

My questioner responded by declaring that I was a traitor to the white race. I was given no protection from the chair, or any apology for this gratuitous insult. The incident more or less terminated the interview. Unbeknown to me I had been clashing swords for some years with my questioner, a notorious racist by the name of Harold Sampson, in the columns of the *Eastern Province Herald*, where he was a regular correspondent under the pseudonym of ‘The Reader, Grahamstown’.<sup>3</sup>

I was disappointed with this setback but not surprised. Mid-way during my honours year Winnie had warned me, in her inimical Scottish accent, ‘Laddy, you are spending too much time on the three R’s – Rugby, sRc, and Rosie’, the cause of my earlier clash with the warden of Beit House. I had been neglecting my academic work and had now to pay the price. It was a hard lesson to learn made more difficult by the fact that Sampson had abused his position as a member of the selection committee by pursuing a

private racist agenda. The fact that he got away with this sort of behaviour underlined, for me, that the racial injustice that provided the foundations of the University was of little concern to the Rhodes establishment at that time. This, too, was a hard lesson to learn!

My options were narrowing. I now doubted the feasibility of a liberal project in South Africa. I had recently read an unpublished article by Michael O’Dowd, a director at Anglo-American. In this article O’Dowd, drawing on modernisation theory and WW Rostow’s book sub-titled ‘a non-communist manifesto’, argued that industrialising societies go through stages where there is sharp inequality but they ‘mature’, reforms are introduced and a modern welfare state emerges. He suggested that South Africa was going through these stages and that in the eighties major reforms would begin and that by the end of the century we would have evolved into a welfare state.

Ironically, O’Dowd was using the same flawed teleological methodology of orthodox Marxism where history is seen as economically determined – but it was an appealing idea at a time when apartheid seemed invincible. I decided to apply for an internship as a trainee management executive at Unilever in Durban. The professor of Education, a Broederbond by the name of Koos Gerber, had vowed to block any appointment I was offered at a government school in South Africa. In this context O’Dowd’s argument seemed an attractive alternative; a career in management in a large multinational company would be a way of contributing to change while offering an exciting new adventure.

So, for the first time in my life, I boarded an aeroplane in Port Elizabeth for an interview in Durban. I was wined and dined at the Edward Hotel on the beachfront and was offered the job immediately. O’Dowd proved to be half right; the economy was to be the crucial opening for change, but not because of any change of heart by management. Change would have to be forced onto management through the power of the black working class; this was apartheid’s Achilles heel. How I was to reach this conclusion and the journey that I took to find it must be left to another occasion. I certainly would not have reached it were it not for my intellectual and political partner, my wife Luli Callinicos.

By the time I eventually arrived at Balliol a year after the student revolution of 1968, the world had changed and so had I. I immediately threw myself into reading any banned book on South Africa I could lay my hands on. It was catch-up time for me as I discovered the de-Stalinised Marxism

of the New Left with its idealistic commitment to participatory democracy. In particular Marx's notion of alienation caught my imagination and, after writing my final examinations, I took a temporary job in the Morris car plant outside Oxford, determined to experience at first hand alienation on the assembly line. This proved a learning experience for me, as it was here that I came across shop stewards for the first time and their extraordinary ability to disrupt production at the slightest grievance. Is this not, I thought to myself, the key to the non-violent transformation of South Africa? Does the power of the black majority not lie in the workplace?

This is, of course, another story, the story of how we came to broaden our rebellion beyond our 'own cause' to the cause of all South Africans for a common, non-racial and egalitarian society. Instead of speaking on behalf of black people, I was given the opportunity, when I returned from England, of building, in Durban in the seventies side-by-side with black workers, organisations of their own in which they could exercise their collective power in a strategic way. While for some white intellectuals it may have been, as my colleague Sakhela Buhlungu has so evocatively written, a case of rebels *without* a cause of their *own*, for me it was *my* cause too as my commitment was now to a class project that went beyond the narrow confines of race.

My personal journey was proving to be long and full of adventure. Rhodes had helped prepare me for the long intellectual and political journey my fellow rebels and I had embarked upon. We took different directions, encountered different challenges; but with the seven I mentioned who participated in the sit-in on the library steps in 1965 I would claim a common trajectory as critical intellectuals.

Johann Maree was to play a central role in the seventies in reviving the independent trade union movement in Cape Town and is a key contributor to a critical economic sociology in South Africa; Jacklyn Cock wrote a classic book on domestic servants in the Eastern Cape and has become an internationally renowned feminist; Charles von Onselen wrote a number of classic books on the lives of black working people and is a leading international scholar in social history, Tim Couzens pioneered the study of African literature in South African universities in the seventies and is a leading literary scholar. Roger Omond worked closely with Donald Woods at the *Daily Dispatch* and was forced into exile after Steve Biko was killed. He wrote a number of important anti-apartheid publications before he died of lung cancer in 1997.

The two participants who were not South Africans – John Sprack from Southern Rhodesia and David Webster from Northern Rhodesia – became the most politically committed. Sprack became active in the British trade union movement and a leading activist in the anti-apartheid movement in London. David Webster was a central scholar/activist in the revival of an internal democratic opposition to apartheid in the eighties and was tragically assassinated on May 1, 1989. David showed a quality seldom found in academic life, the courage to speak truth to power and act on these beliefs in a context where you are put at risk.

I have not mentioned all of those who participated in this protest, nor those who were not present, such as Peter Kallaway (who went on to write a number of important books on education under apartheid) as he had already left Rhodes.

What had begun as a ‘cause of our own’ had widened to a much broader project that went beyond its beginnings. A small group of intellectuals had emerged who were, in a modest way, to go on to influence, through their scholarly research and their actions, the way we understand South African society, and how it could be changed. Our contributions do not fit comfortably into orthodox accounts of white opposition to apartheid, but they can help build a critical tradition in our universities and, above all, at Rhodes.

The need to draw on this critical past has become urgent now that universities are being drawn more clearly into the marketplace as well as into national developmental goals. It is also important to interrogate this past; whites under apartheid were not, any more than blacks, a homogenous, undifferentiated group. There were differences of class, ethnicity, region, and above all, ideology between whites just as there were these differences among other racial groups. To over-generalise about whites – or any other ‘racial group’ – is called racial prejudice and is a product of colonialism. Indeed the dubious pseudo-scientific concept of ‘race’ is itself a social construct of colonialism.

Clearly the journey has not ended. It is a long journey, ‘full of adventures, full of things to learn’. We must not hurry; there are many surprises still to come.

The Greek poet Constantinos Kavafis (Cavafy), in his poem ‘Ithaca’, a metaphor for life’s rite of passage, captures best my feelings about Rhodes in its centenary year:

When you set out for Ithaca,  
ask that the journey be long,  
full of adventures, full of things to learn.

...

that there may be many summer mornings  
when with what joy, what delight,  
you will enter harbours you have not seen before;  
and will stop at Phoenician trade-ports,  
acquire beautiful merchandise,  
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
and sensuous perfumes of all kinds,  
as many sensuous perfumes as you can.  
Visit many Egyptian cities,  
to gather stories of knowledge from the learned.

Have Ithaca always in mind.  
Your destination is to arrive there;  
But do not hurry the journey in the least.  
Better that it may last for many years,  
That you cast anchor at that island when you are old,  
rich with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting that Ithaca will give you wealth  
Ithaca gave you that splendid journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing more to offer.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.  
You have acquired such wisdom, so much experience,  
that you will have already realised what these Ithacas mean.

*The Penguin Book of Greek Verse.*  
(ed) Constantinos A Trypanis, 1971.

## Notes

1. I have written this on vacation on the island of Ithaca. I do not have any documents or contemporaries to check my memory.
2. I cannot remember Currey's first name. Currey was the author of a history of Rhodes during its first 50 years.
3. HF Sampson was a professor of law at Rhodes who had been called to the bar in London and South Africa. He was a St Andrew's, Grahamstown, Rhodes Scholar in 1910. He published, a year after I was interviewed, a deeply racist book titled *The Principle of Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Voortrekkerpers, 1966.