

OBITUARY

Stanley Trapido 1933 – 2008: An appreciation

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Stanley Trapido, braai maestro, Tokai Forest, Cape Town, c. 1980s

Stanley Trapido, one of South Africa's leading historians, died in Oxford at the age of 74 on 12 January 2008. He had, for many years, been attached to Queen Elizabeth House in the University of Oxford and was Lecturer in the Government of New States and a Fellow of Lincoln College. He was a major influence within the dominant coterie of scholars who shaped the contours of historical writing on South Africa through the 1970s and 1980s. For decades he fertilised the minds of research students, many of whom went on to achieve prominent academic careers in Britain, South Africa, Australia and the United States of America, or to pursue leadership positions in other sectors such as finance and journalism.

Stan Trapido grew up and was schooled in the Transvaal mining town of Krugersdorp, an appropriately geological spot from which to embark on his initial study interest of science at the University of the Witwatersrand. His falling in with a radical fringe of students associated with the Congress of Democrats,

however, tugged him towards political history and he completed a Masters dissertation on the ANC. Thereafter he took up a junior lectureship at the University of Cape Town before going on to Durban to teach at the University of Natal. There he met and married the woman who would be his devoted companion for almost half a century, the noted novelist, Barbara Trapido. Stan Trapido's early pieces in *Africa South* were indicative of the principal form that his penetrating historical works would later assume – the rigorous essay, whether as argument, as exploratory probe, as historiographical squib or as polished synthesis.

Leaving an early 1960s South Africa of Sharpeville and Rivonia, Stan Trapido went into self-imposed exile in Britain where, before completing his doctorate in 1970 at the University of London, he taught for several years at the University of Durham, much favoured by silver spoon undergraduates. Stan recalled one admissions interview with a snooty sixth-former there. This was an Etonian Rob Roy of impeccable pedigree, descended from 'Sir Ian Montcrieff of that Ilk', he would declare with a characteristic low chuckle. With a Ph.D under his belt Stan then moved from Durham to Oxford where he taught until his retirement in 2001 and continued to live until his death.

Stanley Trapido was truly uncommon. His no-nonsense upbringing included the experience of boxing and athletics, and an early childhood passion for cricket and rugby never deserted him, with the run rate at Newlands or The Oval always getting him into a quizzical state of mild animation. His sceptical temperament and self-effacing sensibility made him profoundly critical or quietly dismissive, not only of ruling establishments and their institutions, but also of pretentiousness. When I met him for the first time in the 1980s, it was in a Cape Town room thick with eager academic bees, mostly swarming about a grand historian of Central Africa. True to type, Stan was sitting alone on the floor, up against a sofa, ready with wry insights of a horizontal kind.

He embodied then, as ever, the most gentle and beguiling contrariness imaginable. Stanley Trapido was an exceptional researcher who embraced time-consuming archival labour. It is notable that he rose to become so influential an historian without ever producing a book of his own. Perhaps there was something in his reserved and low-key being of never really wanting to have his cake and eat it. Instead, his creativity in reinterpreting crucial aspects of South African history through a materialist lens was doled out in virtuoso slices. Yet these were always meaty. Whether written individually or in co-authorship with others, particularly Shula Marks, the offerings on Stanley Trapido's plate would have kept even Oliver Twist sated. They encompassed Dutch conquest and Afrikaner nationalism, Cape colonial liberalism, South African industrialisation in comparative perspective, British imperialism and the origins of the South African War, Boer trekker and African societies of the nineteenth-century agrarian Highveld, and the nature of early twentieth-century South Africa during and after Reconstruction. Whether in the form of journal articles or the rigorous essays mentioned above, book chapters, biographical sketches or in co-editorship of pioneering collections on nineteenth and twentieth-century South Africa, Stan left an enduring imprint on interpretation of key aspects of his country's past. His final study, a meticulously-plotted and probing analysis of the coming of the South African War for *The Cambridge*

History of South Africa, was unfinished when he first fell ill. Completed with generosity and grace by his long-time friend, Ian Phimister, it will be appearing as a chapter in Volume Two of the forthcoming *Cambridge History*.

Stan sustained an abiding interest in such things as liberalism and paternalism, Afrikaner nationalism, and mining capitalism and the South African War throughout his scholarly life, often re-thinking them in unlikely places, such as on Muizenberg beach. Fusing a large generalising capacity with a beady eye for suggestive detail, his approach to scholarship was marked throughout by an alertness to the structures of power in society, and by a scrupulous equality of attention to individuals and social classes and the real contexts in which they were embodied and deeply connected to one another, be these Cape colonial election agents or Randlords. Like other South African historical revisionists of his generation, Stan Trapido's writings owed a general intellectual debt to Marx. However, his distrust, like that of E.P. Thompson and others, of more arcane theory and fancy models of explanation make it more appropriate to appreciate him as a lucid and penetrating writer within the Marxist tradition, rather than as a Marxist.

Anyone sufficiently fortunate to have known Stan personally would have found a patient, warm and deliciously mischievous man, pottering about the welcoming Trapido lair in Oxford in the company of Barbara and their children, Anna and Joe, or sniffing the outside meadow air alongside Polly and Moley, his beloved lurcher dogs. His companionship could also be felt at its fullest in the Cape that he relished so much and in its special places that mattered to him up to the last years of his life, like Newlands Cricket Ground, the Olympia Café and Quagga Bookshop in Kalk Bay, and Stellenbosch wine estates such as Rustenberg. He was truly an exceptional man of letters, by turns witty and stubborn, benign and exacting. He will be remembered for that as much as for his mastering of Andries Stockenström and Alfred Milner, rather than of Latin grace at High Table in Lincoln College.