

*Hermann Giliomee: Historian Autobiography*

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Professionally it is a special accomplishment for a modern historian to write an autobiography. Since the advent of postmodernism in the 1970s, the growing sense of consciousness of the self as actor and agent in a contingent universe of historical description, historians have tended to be circumspect about writing their autobiographies. Fernand Braudel's self-history of 1972<sup>1</sup> and Pierre Nora's egohistory<sup>2</sup> set the agenda for fierce contestations that by the early 2000s featured prominently in memory studies.<sup>3</sup> In the field of intellectual history and the theory of history, historians' autobiographical writings have remained a field of deep and thorough reflection. By the mid-2010s the notable feature in historians' autobiographical writings was its *interventional* nature. Typically, there is evidence of the historian as author of the self, to actively mediate and intervene in theoretical (or historiographical) forays in the text.<sup>4</sup> Hermann Giliomee's latest study can be categorised in the current context of the autobiographical historian as active participant and (empirical) theoretician exploring the project at a deeper level than would normally form part of the mainstream historian's focus. In terms of theorisation, his focus clearly has a pronounced political history inclination, based on many years of actively working in the field of South African studies as both historian and political scientist, frequently sharing his vast knowledge with key role players in public life.

It is therefore with good reason that the book is both a rewarding, but simultaneously a disturbing read. On the one hand, we have potentially one of the most prolific Afrikaans historians of the late 20th century narrating his personal observations and experiences since the 1950s – an era of Afrikaner greatness –

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1 F Braudel, "Personal testimony," *The Journal of Modern History*, 44(4), 1972, pp. 448-467.

2 J Aurell i Cardona, "Autobiographical texts as historiographical sources: Rereading Fernand Braudel and Annie Kriegel," *Biography*, 29(3), 2006.

3 J Winter, "The memory boom in contemporary historical studies," *Raritan*, 21(1), 2001.

4 J Aurell, "Making history by contextualising oneself: Autobiography as historiographical intervention," *History and Theory*, 54(2), 2015, pp. 244-268.

to the recent past of a rapidly transforming South Africa. The rewarding part of the study is to take note of the personalised glimpses into the world of a native “Bolander”, who could hardly properly speak and write the English language, but nevertheless was absorbed into a very exclusive intellectual space of South African Anglo-Saxon culture. In this context, he has played an important role in sharing with South Africa’s English speakers valuable insights into the mind and thinking of their Afrikaans-speaking counterparts.

The study is partly a narrative of how a single Afrikaner, qualified in the field of history (primarily mainstream Afrikaner history), became part of the proverbial simulation process of the Afrikaners’ thinking at the University of Cape Town, where, as of the 1980s, the future South Africa was under intense investigation. His emigration from the heartland of Afrikaans intellectual thought in Stellenbosch, is the disturbing part of Giliomee’s personal discourse. It was both painful and a relief, interspersed with a logic of its own. The study deals primarily with the top intellectual layer of a unique African community. However, when Giliomee does look at mainstream Afrikaners, he interestingly foregrounds observations on his cameo study of the coloured Afrikaners of Stellenbosch and the bad deal they had from the former apartheid leaders.<sup>5</sup>

The study is a jewel for historiographers and intellectual historians of South Africa. In retrospect, it becomes more than apparent how the discourse on South Africa and its Afrikaners has changed. Giliomee makes it clear that he is an Afrikaner and is passionate about the language and the people who consider themselves part of the Afrikaans community. For the intellectual historian Giliomee describes the cultural landscape at the University of Stellenbosch in the mid-1950s – a perfect and typical middle-class Afrikaans-speaking South African in a world – not unlike a South African version of an American Ivy league, or British (Oxbridge) institution. He comes across as a typical history nerd, but one with a bent for seeing something different in the Afrikaner cultural environment where trend-setting political ideas of the ruling National Party and the Afrikaner Broederbond were in a constant state of innovative incubation. At the student level, organisations like the Afrikaanse Studentebond and a vast array of related institutional groupings, thrived on a path dependency determined by deep Afrikaans intellectual cultural, religious and political thought.

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<sup>5</sup> HB Giliomee, *Nog altyd hier gewees: Die storie van 'n Stellenbosse gemeenskap* (Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 2007).

As a graduate with a leadership record and sound academic credentials he briefly worked at the South African diplomatic service in Pretoria where he honed his youthful journalistic skills, before joining the staff of the History Department at the University of South Africa. It appears not to have been too good an experience. There was the positive exposure to a more liberal academic environment. But UNISA was also where he met his academic nemesis – Floors van Jaarsveld. Giliomee acknowledges the genius of Van Jaarsveld, but he evidently met up with the mercurial historian when he was increasingly drifting from being a historian with fairly liberal European nationalist ideas, to a formidable conservative 1960s Afrikaner historian. While at UNISA, it was soon a foregone conclusion that Giliomee would be seeking a career in academia. As alumnus of Stellenbosch, he jumped at the chance of returning south. Back at Stellenbosch Giliomee, against the grain of his peers and seniors in the History department, was eager to do contemporary history. However, PJ van der Merwe's presence was still pronounced and a strong conventional classical history scholarship approach prevailed in the department.

After completing his PhD Giliomee spent a year in postgraduate studies at Yale, under Leonard Thompson – one of the leading liberal historians of South African history. Thompson had earlier been a victim of a typical Floors van Jaarsveld historiographical attack on the 'appropriate nature' of South African history. The matter would obviously have featured in talks between Giliomee and Thompson. At the time, Giliomee was in a critical phase of his evolution as a critical historian. After the USA encounter he was a changed man. Back at the History Department Giliomee became an outsider for propagating alternative and new learning content materials for the students. It was considered strident with the mainstream Afrikaans university system thinking. Giliomee explores the different mentalities and systems of communication amongst academics at the country's top Afrikaans and English universities of the day. The academic reader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to realise how the academic landscape in South Africa has changed since the mid-1990s.

Giliomee's generation represented the mature adult cohort of South Africans who intensely experienced the Soweto uprisings of 1976. They also responded in a highly diversified manner. Some became more conservative; the vast majority followed the prevailing thinking of the governing National Party; and a third group started articulating an alternative view of looking at their own community and the emergence of a rapidly changing South Africa. Giliomee formed part of the "oorbelig" intellectual leadership. In his writings and engagements

with South Africans in many walks of life he was a spokesperson for his generation shaping the mentality of a changing society. He was a critical Afrikaner articulating a different view of mainstream South Africa.

For South African historical studies, Giliomee's departure from Stellenbosch, was beneficial, especially for a younger generation of historians. It was, as he explains, largely as a result of the Afrikaner Broederbond, that he departed for UCT. It was there, under the influence of many of the top liberal humanities and social science scholars in the country and a multitude of valuable friendships, that he would, in time to come, edit and expand, in conjunction with Leonard Elphick, the seminal *The shaping of South African society*.<sup>6</sup> The study would set the trend for significant changes in South Africa historical scholarship in many parts of the country.

Giliomee had an impeccable political track record and very special connections. As a historian teaching academic politics, he had access to key role players in South Africa's corporate sector – both English (British and American) and Afrikaans. At the same time, he and some fellow Afrikaner intellectuals started *Die Suid-Afrikaan*. They were at the forefront of a new way of thinking about South Africa and its population, of which the Afrikaners formed a small, but significant part. This journal would become the feedlot for a new critical generation of Afrikaners. In the Afrikaans media Giliomee maintained ties of friendship with the leading Afrikaans journalists who fearlessly sought to pursue a line of *realpolitik* while propagating the government's policies. He also maintained strong ties with a former colleague and rising politician, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert.

Giliomee spends a considerable part of the book in propounding his Afrikaner credentials. There is literary and poetical justification for his autobiography. He had staked his claim as specialist historian with a ground-breaking *biography* of South Africa's Afrikaners.<sup>7</sup> A time of relative isolation from direct contact with his people, enabled him to formulate a lucid group word portrait. Despite being outside the fold he thrived. Giliomee was far more influential in shaping the minds of a new generation of South Africans increasingly critical of bush wars and government's half-truths shared in the country's legislative assembly. Moreover, government came under fierce attack from the outside world. International isolation loomed large on the political

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6 R Elphick, and HB Giliomee (eds), *The shaping of South African society, 1652-1820.*, 1986 ed. (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1979).

7 HB Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people* (Charlottesville, VA, University of Virginia Press, 2003).

and economic horizon. Internally the opposition was no longer confined to South Africans of colour and the English-speaking liberals. Amongst the people arrested by the security police were also Afrikaans youths who refused to abide by the laws of the land.

Throughout the book the autobiographer layers his views to come over as an even-handed historian who has the interests of the Afrikaner at heart. His foray into the 'dismal' history of the University of Stellenbosch's language policy since the 1990s, underlines his depth of knowledge on the nature of the lines that had been drawn in the sand to maintain Afrikaans as language of choice at the US. He also relies on the views of leading Afrikaans writers and fellow academics for coming to a better understanding what direction to chart into an uncertain future. His elitist connections do not put Giliomee in a favourable position to always understand the mind and thinking of all Afrikaners and their fellow South Africans at grassroots level. He later compensated, in part, for that by writing a cameo history of Stellenbosch's coloured community, he rightly describes as his fellow Afrikaners.<sup>8</sup>

Politically Giliomee is well-versed in comparative studies in democracy, strong democracies and near-authoritarian regime systems. Much of his insights were garnered from valuable contacts with overseas academics, extensive reading in the process of grappling with the problematic politics of South Africa since the 1970s. When it comes to raw political power and leadership Giliomee is a past master. His analysis of the Afrikaner leaders of state is incisive. But there are also flaws. If he wanted to make a symbolic statement in sharing at some length PW Botha's 'silence' during the cabinet discussion and the decision to pave the 'Rubicon' way for South Africa's transition, it is not clear what he was looking for. Perhaps he could not understand the mind of a Free State Afrikaner (Botha) who in the Cape Province cut his teeth as young leader of the National Party. Similarly, in his assessment of FW de Klerk, Giliomee argues, there simply was no proper and effective leadership. A debate between himself and FW de Klerk's chief of staff, Dave Stewart, on the matter does not enlighten the reader properly. Maybe the copy-and-pasting of a blog text into the autobiographical manuscript was an easy way of escaping from accounting for a complex time in South Africa's political system. Perhaps it may even be that Giliomee is sensitive to the still angry crowd of right-wing Afrikaner leaders who have remained steadfast, since the early 1990s, in their negative assessment of De Klerk. Fact of the matter is that FW de Klerk

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<sup>8</sup> HB Giliomee, *Nog altyd hier gewees...*

(himself a conservative NP leader) had to consult the political looking glass of his day at a time when, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the role of South Africa in Africa and the rest of the world, was subject to substantive change. In the northern parts of the country, there was not the comfort of inching up to moderate coloured South Africans. The vast majority of black South Africans were resident in the northern parts of the country. They were angry and impatient, to say the least. This was the key stakeholder group of which De Klerk had to take note in the process of transition.

The industrial heartland of South Africa, as result of the diminishing easy mineable mineral resources as of 1973, was set for entering a phase of post-industrial development, partially as a result of globalisation. FW de Klerk had to facilitate the process. That was, at most, all the government of the day could do. The onset of a phase of uncertain creative destruction – most evident in the demise of the National Party – starting in the early 1980s, left a South Africa in which not only the new power brokers, but the Afrikaners as a community, were subjected to states of consciousness of constantly having to re-invent themselves.

Much symbolism can be read in Giliomee's exposition of the 'Battle of An-dringa Street' in the early 1940s. The autobiographer outlines how he managed to retrieve from popular memory the clash between white Stellenbosch students and coloured people at Senitzky's cafe where the Stellenbosch students thought the coloured townspeople were 'uppity' when they tried to press to the front to secure a copy of the English Cape Town newspaper reporting on a symbolic student protest in Cape Town's Adderley Street, to a moment of silence for the Allied forces fighting the war. The incident additionally informs the modern reader how much in demand an English newspaper was in Stellenbosch in former times. It also sheds light on the bitter conflicts between Afrikaners of all shades. There are many more interesting reflections in the book. Giliomee's autobiography is worth the read, even if it is disturbing in places. It was a good investment in cultural capital on the part of his publishers to support the project. Giliomee is an important transitional figure in the history of the Afrikaners' adaptation to contemporary South Africa. The fact that he wrote most of his seminal texts in the English language made it possible for an often-misunderstood cultural community in South Africa to reach a critically important reading community. This study is bound to serve the same purpose.