

Robert Carl-Heinz Shell (1949-2015)

~ A tribute ~

Kenneth R Hughes
University of Cape Town
kenneth.hughes@uct.ac.za

On February 3rd this year, there passed away a historian who cast a giant shadow over South African history writing. This was Robert Shell (1949-2015), and the shadow that he cast was both literal and metaphorical: literal, in that he was well over six foot tall, and metaphorical in that his exceptional education and close involvement with modern international trends, such as quantitative social history, made him a unique and outstanding figure among South African historians.



I first met him when he was a student at UCT in the early 1970s. Chris Saunders was his mentor, and the famous British historian of Africa, Robin Hallet was also an early influence. At this time the new social history was coming in strongly – writers like Edward Thompson sought to rescue British working-class history from the “massive condescension of posterity”, and classic books from the Annales School were being translated into English from the French. A fortunate encounter with local historian Achmat Davids also helped focus Rob’s interests on the Cape Muslim community. In those years he also began a life-long passion for reading in the Archives – and he discovered a uniquely rich source on the functioning of Cape slavery – in the papers of a long-time British resident at the Cape- Samuel Hudson. But it must be said that it was very unusual at that time for English-speaking historians to concern themselves with pushing back into the period of Dutch rule at the Cape – which is what Rob did, being strongly convinced that slavery was a searing and formative experience in the history of South African race relations, and that the original foundations had been laid in the Dutch period.

But his career took a unique turn, when as a result of a series of fortunate accidents, he was invited to go and study at Rochester, in upstate New York, with the famous Marxist historian of American slavery, Eugene Genovese. Rochester, at that time, was slated to become a major intellectual centre for left-oriented social history, for in addition to Gene Genovese and his wife, the formidable Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the campus was also a home for the American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, whose writings reflected a uniquely powerful blend of the ideas of Freud and Marx, and who at that time was also writing penetrating essays on the social basis of black politics. Rob's induction into this environment was by total immersion – in his first week he was pressed into joining a picket-line being manned by graduate students! Rochester was very exciting, in more ways than one. Something of Christopher Lasch's ideas about the family must have rubbed off on him – because this was to be a major theme of his later writings. But despite the fact that the Genoveses' ideas about the fruits of Merchant Capital were highly relevant to the study of colonial South Africa, Rob somehow found abstract Marxist theorizing uncongenial and his empirical bent of mind was far more influenced by the work on quantitative methods of analysis of large-scale social data, offered by another member of the Rochester faculty, Stanley Engerman. Rob had been an early enthusiast for the use of the personal computer (at that time a rarity), and he was sufficiently much of an aficionado that a few years later he was selected by commercial developers to join an elite group of pioneers who tested and tried out new software intended for social scientists. Later on, Rob's unique knowledge of the resources of the Cape Archives, and his command of quantitative methods allowed him to supply South African data regarding the bodily development and height of slaves, to be fed into the Nobel Prize-winning work of Robert Fogel, Engerman's long-term associate in the study of American slavery. (This work uncovered an amazing fact: the extension of human life-span during the industrial revolution was in major part due to the growth in human stature – tall people tend to have fewer diseases and live longer.)

As his time at Rochester drew to a close he found himself romantically involved with a fellow history student Susan Charlotte Ladd – and one bright morning, they decided to elope to Cape Town, and get married. They established themselves in a flat in St Martini Gardens – ID du Plessis was a neighbour – and Rob found relevant and congenial work, helping to create displays on Cape slavery at the Cultural History Museum.

Alas, the marriage did not last and Rob grew restive, feeling that it was essential for him to move on and acquire a proper position in academe. So after a short while he was enrolled in the Ph.D. programme at Yale University under the watchful eye of noted South African historian, Leonard Thompson, who had been – together with the anthropologist Monica Wilson – the moving spirit behind the ground-breaking *Oxford History of South Africa*. At that time, South African studies at Yale were very strong: but as at Rochester, Rob found inspiration and mentoring in places other than the ones originally planned – he developed a particularly strong relationship with the veteran American historian Ed Morgan – author of *American slavery, American freedom*.

While at Yale, he also encountered the new trend towards neo-marxism in South African studies. Rob was not impressed. To Rob and other Liberals of my generation, Marx and Freud were serious stuff, but the logic-chopping of the Parisian pedant Louis Althusser was not – and it seemed to us that Althusser’s own “epistemological break” if it had been followed, would have been a big set-back, sure to replace modernity with Aristotle.

In his years after leaving Rochester, Rob developed a number of important collaborations. One was with Rick Elphick, whose institutional base at Wesleyan, put him within commuting distance of New Haven. Together they wrote a seminal chapter on the Khoi-khoi, Slavery and Intergroup relations in the landmark compilation on South African social history edited by Elphick and Giliomee, called *The shaping of South African society*, whose first edition came out in (1979). The chapter soon attracted wide-spread academic attention, and it’s account of slavery in the VOC Company years – particularly the extraordinary institution of the Company’s Slave Lodge (which among other things provided brothel services), has been widely cited in the international comparative literature. Less noticed but just as important was it’s pioneer attempt at slave demographics. Trying to get a handle on the size of the slave population, and it’s relation to the slave trade, was to be a big part of the effort Rob expended in the years before and after his Yale thesis.

Another collaboration which was very important for Rob was with the Canadian historical geographer Leonard Guelke – here they were concerned with mapping the land-holdings of the trekboers as the frontier expanded during the long 18th century.

And his private life prospered: his second wife Sue Nicolaysen (born Susan Schneier), had also been trained as a historian – her graduate work had been

devoted to African tenant-farming in the old Transvaal, and she retained an interest in history despite giving it up for a first marriage to Wits academic Louis Nicolaisen. But she was independently wealthy and when she married Rob her money bought them a lovely 18th century inn overlooking a lake in the Connecticut woods, where Rob was able to establish his dream – a quantitative historian’s laboratory filled to the ceiling with books and computers, located alongside their home in an outhouse.

Together Rob and Sue had a daughter – Elisabeth. But as before the idyll did not last, the marriage broke up, and Rob experienced another rocky period before he fell on his feet once again, with the offer of a tenure-track Professorship at Princeton.

At that time Princeton was widely regarded as having the best history department in the world – and Rob was very privileged to enjoy day-to-day contact with such luminaries as Peter Brown, Lawrence Stone, Robert Darnton, and Natalie Zemon Davis. But, just as at Yale, the zeitgeist caught up with him, and he found himself reacting against strong winds of doctrine which were gusting around the movement known as post-modernism. (As Shamil Jeppie nicely put it: Rob was unenthusiastic about POMO because Rob was most definitely a child of the 18th century Enlightenment!)

To be a candidate for tenure, he needed to turn his Yale PhD on Cape slavery into a book. So for several years he was hard at work on the volume which was to become his main enduring legacy: *Children of bondage. A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838*.

The book has many unusual features, but the one which first strikes the reader as one turns the pages is the immense number of graphs and pie-charts. This is quantitative history rendered visible. The anecdotes and the narrative are there (Rob loved to tell stories) – but the regular flow of numbers is constantly present also to give reassurance about the nagging question: how representative are these stories, how general is this analysis? This surely is the right way to do social history when it is not micro-history – and it marked a big advance on the Wilson-Thompson *Oxford History of South Africa*.

(But alas, this has not been maintained, for in this regard, as in some others – the more recent *Cambridge History* marks a distinct step backwards.)

But there are other less obvious virtues – such as Rob’s attempts to firmly ground social history in the Annales tradition and the economic analysis of

slavery which he learnt from Stan Engerman. Another is Rob's general mastery of the comparative literature on slave societies so that both the uniqueness and commonalities of Slavery at the Cape can be properly judged and measured.

One major feature, which was controversial at the time of writing and has remained so – is Rob's emphasis on the role of socialization into the family as part of the working of slavery in the domestic domain. This "Family Model" was one of Rob's most original contributions – (but is perhaps ripe for revision in this post-Freudian age.) The phenomena he wrote about certainly are part of the historical reality – but is his analysis correct? Doubt persists, but so far nobody has risen to the challenge of giving a better explanation.

Another major intellectual contribution was more of a question than a thesis. This was to point out that conversion to Islam was a huge feature of Slave society at the Cape – it was not as if the Cape somehow was uniquely successful at importing Muslim slaves. Readers of Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, roll* will recall the tremendous impact Genovese assigns to the cultural and social aspects of the creative encounter with Christianity undertaken by the slaves in North America. Yet in South Africa this did not happen and Islam seems to have won out repeatedly whenever there was competition with various Christianizing forces. Rob seems to have been the first historian to have seriously felt the challenge of needing to respond to the urgent question: why?

One old answer was to suggest that the high prestige of political exiles like Sheik Yusuf made Islam attractive to outcast and socially excluded individuals – but Rob was not satisfied with this answer – there needed to be some concrete advantage for the individual convert – this is not a blind process of following in the footsteps of charismatic leaders. His first thought was to stress the attractiveness of Islamic rituals such as the daily prayers, and also the significance of communal rites and ceremonies marking the stages on life's way. Another thought was the relative handicap for Christianity of slaveholders fearing that Christian conversion would lead to emancipation. Rob achieved something of a first in international slavery studies by uncovering the relatively liberal canons of the Calvinist Synod of Dordt (1618) on the subject of baptism and slavery – (even David Brion Davis, author of that magisterial work *The problem of slavery in Western culture* (1964), didn't know about Dordt.)

Rob returned to this problem again and again and in his later reflections, such as the synthetic account of Islam at the Cape which he wrote for the volume *The History of Islam in Africa* edited by Levtzion and Pouwels (2002), many different factors possibly swaying the choice for or against Islam are put into the balance and brought under scrutiny.

About Rob's later career I do not want to say much. He returned to South Africa, and an appointment at Rhodes. The skills he had acquired as a historical demographer could be utilized on the local scene and he joined up with South African professional demographers and became an early AIDS activist.

But in University politics he was something of a stormy petrel, and his criticism of the leadership at Rhodes University earned him the unrelenting hostility of that powerful clique. Rob enlisted in any number of worthy causes, but he was not always careful or judicious in what he wrote when he entered into controversy (as his lawyer, Sarah Christie, had to warn him on a number of occasions). Yet the savage and totally disproportionate revenge to which he was subjected by the Rhodes management was a dark day in the history of Academic Freedom in South Africa – his protests about academic harassment themselves lead to intensified persecution, and so virulent was the hatred with which he was pursued that he was prevented from landing an alternative appointment at Stellenbosch. (This was one of those near-misses which left us all impoverished and about which one can only register a sense of opportunities snuffed out). In the end friends and admirers at UWC had to step up to the plate with a stopgap appointment to do research and a little teaching in history and statistics.

However, while at Rhodes his personal and private life took a decided turn for the better, when he met and married his third wife. Sandy Rowoldt spent her entire career working as a librarian (first at the Cory Library then at UCT) but she has also had the passion and commitment of the true historian, and in Rob's final years turned out to be a wonderful intellectual companion and helpmeet to him, as they embarked on a whole series of enterprises to provide tools for the working historian and multimedia resources to help put Cape history on the map.

Throughout his career Rob enjoyed interacting with students – and he had attracted some very gifted students (such as Shamil Jeppie), and also with colleagues from other academic disciplines and from foreign academic communities.

In these last years too he received remarkable recognition from outside the historical profession, as when Archbishop Tutu (a friend and fan from Rob's UWC days) suggested to the government of Mauritius that Rob might be a suitable person to preside over a one-man commission to enquire into the long-run effects of Slavery and Indentured Labour in that part of the Indian Ocean World. Activists and politicians from Third World Countries, have on a number of occasions called for reparations to be paid for slavery analogous to Germany's payments to holocaust survivors. But the analogy is somewhat forced and tendentious, and anyway, it is not altogether blindingly obvious who should count as next-of-kin for either victims or perpetrators. So this task was likely to be a political hot potato and fraught with difficulties whatever happened. Rob nonetheless thought he saw a way forward, hoping he could get large companies who had profited from exploited labour in the past, to fund contemporary community projects – (and it would have been most interesting to see how this worked out in practice) – but alas, a shift in the kaleidoscope of alliances in Mauritian politics put pay to experimenting with these ideas.

From his youth Rob had been known to be a hefty consumer of tobacco – and this may have been what finally caught up with him, when in 2014 he was diagnosed with cancer. Like many people in this position he fought back – and Sandy bravely stood by him as he suffered agonies due to irradiation and chemotherapy. One high point was a late visit from his daughter Elisabeth, who after a separation which had lasted many years flew in from Brazil, to spend time with her father on his death-bed. When it came the descent was swift.

Throughout his life, Rob had been prolific in turning out short articles for the journals (usually from his latest discoveries in the Archives), so readers of his work became familiar with vivid vignettes – such as his story about slave children feasting on the silkworms they were sent to look after – or unforgettable characters, such as Rangton of Bali.

But there were also larger projects many of which remained unfinished at his death.(One such, which was very close to Rob's heart was that the Van Riebeeck Society should publish a properly annotated and adequately representative, selection from the Hudson Papers).

Sandy will be carrying on with this legacy. We wish her all good speed.