

The Future of History

Fred Morton*

Thanks for the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs' (DVCAA) introduction and thanks to you all for coming. I do not get many opportunities to speak to such an audience; I am more accustomed to having captive students under my authority who have no choice but to listen. So, I am grateful that you took time out of your busy schedules at this odd mid-week hour, which keeps you away from your homes, in order to be here. Of course, it would be natural and expected that you are thinking already nevertheless that the odds of learning anything new from the one who stands before you, this 'fossil' (as Leonard Ngcongco referred to our generation or what Thomas Tlou termed 'we antiques') –yes, the odds of picking up something worthwhile are likely pretty slim. But the good organisers of this event insisted I give this address, and I can only hope that what I have to say will give you one or two things to mull over.

Now when you read the title of my talk ('The Future of History') you may have come expecting me to proclaim that history's doomsday is fast approaching, or perhaps that I might take up swords against or in defence of Francis Fukuyama, who claimed not long ago that History itself had ended, that the long-established narrative had run its course. At the risk of overstating Fukuyama, the point he makes is that the direction of History leads ultimately to capitalist liberal democracy, which, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, has led to its triumph.

Actually, as one who has made a good living from history, you're looking at a solid fan of the subject not to mention the profession. And, as with my hopes for Tottenham Hotspurs Football Club of England, like any loyal supporter, I am always confident that the greatest victory for history lays ahead. No, I have not come to bury History or to praise it, because this area of scholarship is healthy in its own right and is here to stay.

Students keep majoring in this subject in large numbers and will continue to do so. For example, in the US, of the 1,563,000 bachelor's degrees conferred in 2007–2008, the greatest numbers of degrees were 21% in the fields of Business (335,000); while in second place at 10% came Social Sciences and History (167,000); Health Sciences (111,000); and Education (103,000) trailed in third and fourth places at 7% and 6% respectively.

The popularity of History is not hard to explain. It is global in its reach, stretches back to the origin of humanity, and covers a vast range of topics, be it personalities, trends, events, tragedies, triumphs, relationships, the doings of the powerful, the struggles of the weak, the creation and dissolution of nations, cultures, institutions, and the never-ending, mind-boggling behaviour of men and women, whether they be kind, cruel, loving, bigoted, visionary, backward, endearing, disgusting, you name it. History has no trouble attracting the curious and keeping them entertained and challenged. If it were a movie, it would have a caste of millions if not more, and run at least ten times as long as *Gone with the Wind!*

Students are attracted to History and this will not stop. Believe it or not, but what I am going to tell is actually true, and it is taken from a report based on careful research that came in two years ago (*The Telegraph* 30 May 2009). A survey of Oxford University undergraduates determined that History majors, above all others, had the most active sex lives.¹ We can thank our lucky stars for the social psychologists who came up with this breathtaking data. Oxford leads the way, right? I am not suggesting that this survey needs to be conducted on other campuses. Hey, undergraduates are mysterious creatures,

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1 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/5411494/History-students-are-most-promiscuous.html>, accessed 1 March 2011.

I still have trouble figuring them out...when I leave campus every day, I am still scratching my head about what might be going on outside the classrooms.

Speaking of the appeal of history, at present, I have the good fortune of having a large class of excellent fourth year students in my Twentieth Century South Africa course and they are among the most adventurous in my experience. Tomorrow they will begin the re-enactment of the Multi-Party Negotiating Process that took place at Kempton Park beginning in April 1993. You may or may not remember that April 1993 was a terrible time in South Africa. The optimism that accompanied Nelson Mandela's release in February 1990 had evaporated among all ranks of South Africans, and the scale of violence had been escalating to the point that South Africans feared the worst. Three years of attempts to reconcile and come up with a blueprint for the future had failed, and when the talks began in April 1993 those in attendance were staring into the abyss.

So, these fourth year students are taking up the roles played by all the parties who were there at the Kempton Park talks. They will be making speeches, arguing, debating and struggling with drawing up a constitution much as the actual attendants did. And they will do so while they are reminded of events outside the talks (actual events) that posed real obstacles to peace. All the parties who were there are represented in tomorrow's classroom: African National Congress (ANC), National Party, Inkatha Freedom Party, Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), Ciskei, Bophuthatswana, Conservative Party, Democratic Party, Afrikaner Volksunie, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Communist Party (SAPC), the Natal Indian Party and even Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO) who refused to take part in the original talks, but we have put them in there just for kicks. These sessions, which continue for the next four weeks, promise to be intense, exciting, educational and fun.

You are more than welcome to drop in and observe these reenactment classes. No notice required. We meet Thursday 10-11 and Friday 10-12. Let me know if you are interested and I will give you directions to the classroom.

No, I am not worried in the least about History's survival. It never stops discovering new ways to imagine the past and bring it to life.

Rather.... with regard to History's future, I wish to address the question as to how History is to be consumed. In other words, assuming that historians will continue to attend conferences, write articles and publish books, they also will have to face up to the fact that the way History is received and understood outside the classroom is likely to undergo fundamental change. Otherwise, if I may put it this way, History in its present form stands to lose its audience, or more precisely, its market.

We cannot get around the fact, for example, that the sale of History books (be they hardcopy or digital), is in serious decline. Apart from being attracted to books on war and biographies/autobiographies of famous people, readers of History are reaching neither for their pocket books nor their library cards. Economic downturns like the recent global recession make matters even worse.

And by the same token, most students majoring in History, who plunk down money (or their sponsors' allowance) for assigned texts and who check out books from the library to do assignments, do not read History for pleasure or self-improvement.

So what seems likely is the drift towards relative disappearance of History as we have been accustomed to experience it since Herodotus –as written text. I do not want to be misunderstood here.... I happen to be among the many happy historians who now have greater access to written text than ever before. Research that in the past took years –involving travel to repositories and patiently sifting through articles, books, and documents –has been sped up immensely by digital data bases, ebooks, and online articles, among others. I can do a literature search online, seated in my office, confident in an hour or two of finding 90% of the relevant publications on any historical topic of my interest.

This is the irony then... that practitioners of History such as myself, have more written text at

their fingertips than ever before, but the AUDIENCE who stand to learn from what we write and publish is shrinking rapidly. For example, a published article, available online, is lucky to attract more than 20 readers in the lifetime of its author. And those are the important articles. Specialisation in History is partly a cause of this. Tertiary institutions such as the University of Botswana (UB) demand that their staff carry out research and publish, and the surest way to achieve this is by generating highly specialised articles. As a rule, an author aiming at the general reader of History is not rewarded in academia. Yet it is also true that serious academics publish in the hope of attracting a wide audience, and in the past History books sold much better than is presently the case.

I am not persuaded by those who argue that History is fundamentally unattractive because it does not lead to getting a good job, apart from teaching. This may be so in highly regulated job markets, where particular qualifications must be specified for particular jobs, as is the case in Botswana, I am sorry to say.

But in job markets where employers have more freedom to choose their employees, hiring shows preference, apart from a minimal degree, in the personal attributes of a potential employee –good communication, critical thinking skills, creativity, ability to work with others, self-discipline, leadership qualities, ethical perspectives, and self-motivation are common traits among those who get job offers. In these more open hiring environments, History graduates have no difficulty competing. At Loras College (a small institution in, Dubuque, Iowa, USA) where I taught for some years, and where History was among the most popular majors, fewer than 1 out of 4 History majors entered the teaching profession, while the rest went into Law, Business, Human Resources, Librarianship, and other professions. History is a great preparation for the world of work (outside of the scientific fields). Of course, the same could be said of other majors at the university level. What counts are the qualities and attributes of the graduates I have just mentioned.

No, the shrinking numbers of regular readers of History has to be explained by some other factor. I think it has as much as any reason to do with the changing manner in which people learn after leaving formal education. We live in an age in which we are inundated with information from all directions, increasingly so as our information environment becomes ever more digitalised. The challenge to today's individual wishing to learn, is the daily, yes hourly, grind of facing into an incoming flood of information and sifting, often instantly, among the flotsam and jetsam, for those bits that seems important. Along with amazing choice has come quick choosing, greater anxiety about missing out on what needs to be known, and less time for reading single, large chunks of text.

The challenge for History, if it is to reach a wide audience, as I see it, is adjusting to the new order of things. The future of History outside academia depends on whether or not its practitioners are willing to adapt to and take full advantage of the digital environment and monitoring more closely the tastes that most approximate History. People's need for History will continue, perhaps even grow, because it enhances their three-dimensional awareness, with History providing the depth of meaning and purpose, the present the surface on which awareness is globalised, and the future, the horizon where the sense of the possible exists.

Historians will continue to research and write, and the written word will remain important to the appreciation of History, but digital representation in all forms is likely to become the primary gateway through which historians will be required to connect to their audiences. I refer not so much to digitalised books and journals, which have revolutionised the methods of preservation and access and enabled historians to carry out and disseminate their research, but rather to new, so far undeveloped, digitalised methods of historicising the mind. If historians wish to reach an audience beyond fellow specialists, they will be obliged to think anew when representing the past. Such methods will have to take into account, inter alia, 1) the changing and expanding digital environment; b) market preferences; and c) software tools that can be used for historical representation. I would now like to set out now several possibilities.

Historical Fiction

The first of these is the writing of historical fiction. Now, historical fiction develops fictional characters and interweaves them with a plot while using an actual historical period along with historical figures, as the backdrop. Examples are the classics *The Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens and Emmuska Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which use as their setting the French Revolution. I start with historical fiction as an endeavour historians might wish to consider, for a couple of reasons. First, it is something my wife Sue would want me to say up front. She did not tell me to say so, because I already know. For, you see, while Sue includes historical fiction in her reading schedule, she has yet to read the first word of anything I have ever published. Sober reminder, there.

Second, historical fiction sells. Even during the economic downturn, which hammered non-fiction sales, fiction and historical fiction had steady buyers. Historical fiction's first cousin, the historical mystery, is even more popular. I am sure you have heard of if not read Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, or seen the movie. And interestingly, younger readers are being attracted to the historical mystery genre in enough numbers to drive such authors as Alan Bradley's *Of Red Herring Without Mustard* into the top 100 books sold on Amazon.com.

Third, while there is no hard evidence that readers of historical fiction cross over to non-fiction history, their awareness of the past and an appreciation of by-gone people and their manner of ways means they stand more of a chance that they will take the subject of History seriously than will the reader who is absorbed in the present or escapes into the vicarious fantasy of potboilers, sitcoms, big brother, or the popular cinema.

Fourth, historians who turn to writing historical fiction stand a much better chance of becoming millionaires! I am myself plotting an historical novel as soon as I retire, and have already made exciting plans where the millions will go. It will be a story of an American in the 1890s, an African-American blacksmith named Jehovah Bontemps from New Orleans who escapes the racial violence that raged in the American South in the 1890s, and gets work on board a ship that eventually docks at Cape Town. He disembarks, looks around, and decides to stay. His skill as a blacksmith gains him employment with a Jewish *smouse* (itinerate trader) and he travels with him into the interior where he encounters a series of characters and challenges. Of course he is going to be gobsmacked by a stunning, headstrong Tswana maiden. Eventually, the blacksmith makes his way back to the US having experienced Southern Africa first hand and discovers that no one back home will believe his stories, as they contradict what African Americans have come to believe about Africa.

Three Dimensional Presentation

The second thought I wish to offer has to do with representing history (or at least some of it) in the most effective way to reach the mind, that is through the eye and ear, in three dimensional form. This is hardly a new idea; it has been around since the days of the Greeks, when the performance of historical episodes became popular theatre. William Shakespeare wrote historical plays not for literature classes, but for the actors who performed them and for both commoners and royals alike in the audience. At such theatres as the Globe, audiences abutted the stage and learned their History verbally through a richness of plot, character and language that has riveted theater goers ever since.

Historic drama has been around for generations and is performed in many places, but is sadly underdeveloped in Botswana. I can think of many historical episodes, and I am sure you can, too, that could be written as plays, performed, filmed and broadcast nationwide into the schools and homes in this country. Who could resist a dramatisation of the confrontation between Kgosi Sechele I of the Bakwena and his daughter, Gagoangwe, whose eye he put out; Bangwato's Tshekedi Khama's flogging of Phineas Macintosh; the Battle of Mochudi between the Bakwena and Bakgatla; the Bayeyi (Wayeyi) revolt of 1948, Kgosi Molefi's public whipping of his mother and the expulsion of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) from

the Kgatlang; intrigues surrounding the Batawana regency of Elizabeth Pulane Moremi, and so forth. What these play concepts await are good playwrights, History consultants, camera people who know framing, lighting and angles, and promoters with connections to the media. In other words, a team. These can be done right here on campus by existing Humanities programmes.

And, now that graphic and video software have reached the point of creating virtual reality, there is every reason for historians to latch on to these forms of representation to heighten the impact of their stories.

In the coverage of the ongoing tragedy in Japan,² I found on the *New York Times* website an interactive map that enabled me to zoom in and out on exact landscapes, rotate them ala Google Earth, and view photos and videos from these locations, and read explanatory text. The same concept could be applied to creating an historical map of Botswana, with downloads of old photos, video footage of the scene with a person narrating what took place there, and textual information for further reading. This site could be accessed from any schoolroom in the country, not to mention students in other parts of the globe who have a reason to hit the site. With the sophistication of skills and software already available, certain events could be reenacted visually.

One other example, when probably hundreds are available, if not now, then soon. It would be fairer to think of it as multi-dimensional representation, because its use involves graphics, videos, discussions, and role playing. I am thinking here of the possible uses of Facebook as an educational tool. With Facebook, a page full of historical material relevant to the senior secondary history syllabus can be created and maintained by university staff and students and made accessible to students and teachers around the country. It can be used for interaction through its discussion board. Again, a team effort would be required to mount such a Facebook page, involving History staff, students, and educational faculty. A webpage could be mounted and be much more effective than Facebook, but a webpage is much harder to build and operate and comes with a cost.

Cultural Heritage Tourism

Let us turn to another public audience that historians might wish to get involved in reaching. I refer to cultural heritage tourism, an industry that has yet to be developed anywhere close to its potential in Botswana. From this point, my focus will be on what opportunities I see for historians and History graduates that can be pursued right here.

I have given this topic some thought, because as a member of the executive of The Botswana Society, others and I have spent the last two years developing a cultural heritage tourism concept and business plan that we have begun to present to government departments, banks, and other potential investors. If you want to know more or wish to be involved, please contact me or the Society office at Tlale House next to the Main Mall.

Cultural heritage tourism is involved in bringing the physical past to the attention of ordinary persons in such a way that it can be readily understood and appreciated. It is a straightforward objective but one that requires many role players to work effectively. Let us say, for example, that someone was determined to make the public aware of an amazing historical site and make it possible for them to visit and appreciate it. I know of an historian and three interns of The Botswana Society who this Friday are driving to Dithubaruba in the Dithejwane hills, near Molepolole, and scout around. It is mentioned in Mike Main and Alec Campbell's *Guide to Greater Gaborone*, published by The Botswana Society I might add. This site contains numerous stone structures bearing evidence to its occupation by the Bakwena and then the Bakololo (later to become the Lozi of western Zambia), who ousted the Bakwena in the 1820s before being

² The tsunami that killed thousands and destroyed an atomic power point releasing radioactive material over a wide landscape

driven out by the Bangwaketse under Sebege. Dithubaruba is overgrown with bush and obviously would have to be developed in a way that makes it presentable and interesting.

To reach the tourism market, it will need an access road, reception and interpretation centre, maintenance and preservation staff, ablutions, interpretative displays near each structure, literature in the form of brochures and maps, and trained guides to move about with visitors. Moreover, for those who might be interested in visiting this and other such sites, the means would have to be developed to publicise its significance and features, and equip those interested in seeing the site with information to read beforehand, how to get there, whom to contact for assistance, places to eat and stay within close proximity, and all in a way that matches the needs and time available for each visitor. Imagine, then, if other sites in the area, such as Sechele's old capital of Ntsweng, situated above Molepolole, were similarly developed, tours could be provided to schools, visitors to Molepolole, as well as to domestic and international tourists within reach of the area. We need only multiply this example a hundred fold to embrace Botswana's rich physical History as a way of suggesting the potential for historians' engagement.

Let me give you another example. Today, the city of Gaborone is full of residents and visitors who are entirely unaware of its unique qualities, which speak volumes about the History of independent Botswana. Yet, apart from a Mma Ramotswa tour, there is nothing organised to explain Gaborone's features to the public, much less to people coming in to attend conferences and business meetings, or arriving as straightforward tourists. If historians were to make it their business to flesh out the History of Gaborone and present it in interesting ways, many will take notice. And I am sure that the residents of this city, who often complain about its faults, will be much prouder of Gaborone than they are at present.

Let me get even closer to home. We are gathered here in Block 243. When I saw the announcement of my own talk, I had to go to a campus map to see where I was supposed to come. And, no matter where one goes on this campus, student, staff or visitor, it is the same mystifying experience. Numbers scattered about without apparent rhyme or reason. Even if I know the number of a building or so-called block, I have trouble giving directions to others trying to find it. And yet, this institution has grown up with the nation and is studded with links to and reminders of Botswana's History. I wonder why, for example, I should be giving a lecture in Block 243, which promotes continuing Education, when instead I might be talking to you in, say, the Benjamin C Thema building. For those who don't know, Ben Thema was born in Ranaka, was a graduate of Tiger Kloof Institution, the London Missionary Service (LMS) school near Vryburg, and he went on to become a pioneer in Setswana language instruction, the first president of the Bechuanaland Students Association, the founder principal of the Tshidi Barolong Secondary School in Mafikeng, headmaster of Moeng College, and the Republic of Botswana's first Minister of Education.

Students pass to and fro on this campus entirely unaware of the history that should be surrounding them. I know that some of you are aware, but most are not, that just 100 meters from here, in the old Student Centre, in July 1982 was held the most important meeting of creative artists ever assembled in Southern Africa. The likes of Wally Serote, Nadine Gordimer, Abdullah Ibrahim, Thami Mnyele and on and on. I am referring to the MEDU 'Art Toward Social Development, Culture and Resistance Symposium/Festival' held right here on the then University College of Botswana campus, tiny as it then was. One can only wonder why this site, which might be called MEDU Hall, with explanatory plaques mounted on its walls, is still known as Block 'whatever'.

This campus has lots of History to tell but students pass through here over their four years without the faintest reminder. The one man, one beast statue stands in front of the main library but without any explanation as to why it is there. And if anyone wishes to have a tour of the campus, where do they go, and who can guide them around in a meaningful and interpretative way? Two years ago at the University of Pretoria I was given a campus tour, an historical tour, by a History major who walked backwards so that he could talk to us directly as we moved around. It was part of his training in cultural heritage.

Let me end my talk with a story that tells us something about the kind of History associated with this university. This is a story about a UB professor, and it begins with his grandmother. It begins 150 years ago, in the northern part of present-day Mpumalanga in the Soutpansberg mountains halfway between Polokwane and Messina. There among the Bakwena *baga Moletse* lived a young girl, this UB professor's grandmother. In 1846, a group of white men on horseback together with many blacks on foot, attacked this young girl's village, killed the adults or drove them away, and took the children and the Moletse Kwena's cattle and goats and returned to Rustenburg. What became of the professor's grandmother in the next several years is not known, but when she reached her twenties, she was living with other people who had been captured and brought up on white farms, but now were living in their own section of Potchefstroom. Her name had become Christina, and her only language was Dutch.

Somehow, her brother (named Stephanus), who also had been captured and brought up in similar fashion, came to know vaguely of her whereabouts and journeyed with his friend Polomane, to Potchefstroom and found her. Christina joined them and they all returned to the Rustenburg district and settled on a farm owned by Reverend Henri Gonin, a Swiss missionary serving the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Gonin bought the farm Welgeval (now situated inside the Pilanesberg Game Park) and started a DRC mission.

Over time, Christina, Stephanus and Polomane were joined by other ex-slaves, and established families. Polomane (also known as David) married Catherine, and they had seven children. Christina's brother David married Kaatji, and they had two daughters, Martha and Rebecca. Those of the second generation were all literate having been taught in mission school, both in Welgeval and Moruleng (Saulspoort), where Gonin relocated to be nearer the Bakgatla. Many of this younger group became teachers and evangelists. Christina's niece Martha later became the wife of Ramono, then Bakgatla *kgosi* at Moruleng, and bore two future *dikgosi*: Tidimane and Noel.

The third generation of Welgeval children, all born in the twentieth century, entered high schools and universities and took higher degrees. Each generation kept the surname of Moloto, which Stephanus claimed to have been his original family name and which Polomane aka David adopted. In this third generation were two of Catherine's grandchildren I now wish to mention. The first, Davidson Pelman (short for Polomane) Moloto became an educationist and, in his spare time, wrote the first Setswana novels and established this literary genre. His pioneer work is taught at this university in African literature courses. It was fitting indeed that ten years ago, the University of Potchefstroom, not far from Christina's first dwelling place as a free woman, awarded DP Moloto the Chancellor's Medal, albeit posthumously.

Which brings me to the University of Botswana. The first Professor of the Department of African Languages and Literature, in which DP Moloto's literature is studied, was none other than his first cousin, the other grandchild of Catherine I wish now to mention. He graduated from the University of Fort Hare in 1942, and at the University of South Africa he completed his University Education Diploma, BA honours, Masters, and in 1970 a Doctor of Literature and Philosophy degree for a thesis with the title 'The Growth and Tendencies of Tswana Poetry'. Six years later, Professor Ernest Sedumedi Moloto joined the new University College of Botswana and headed its Department of African Languages and Literature until 1983, a year prior to his death.

Thus, the grandson of a slave became this university's first Professor of African Languages and Literature. I saw him often, because his office and mine were in the old Humanities building (I forget the number). He was a large presence, with a voice that could boom on a par with the late Leonard Ngcongco's, and he liked striding about campus rather than confining himself to his office. And he is one of the few persons I have known who was absolutely fluent in Setswana, English and Afrikaans. But now, unless one goes to an old calendar, there is no trace of this man, whose history he never revealed to anyone. I suspect he was ashamed about his past, but I think his life represents something this university should be

proud to be part of.

I am sure there are countless stories about this campus that need not only to be told but preserved and presented to the thousands of pedestrians who walk these campus corridors every day. Historians –let me now single you out –if you are interested in reaching the public and helping them learn the History they deserve to know, there is plenty of work to do. And you can start here, right at your doorstep.

Thank you for your time.

Note

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