

Tribute to Prof Harold John Cooke (1927-2019)

*Masego Ayo Mpotokwane**

Prof Harold John Cooke passed away in Wales on 16 April 2019, a day after his 92nd birthday. The Mancunian did his Bachelors Honours degree at Manchester University in 1948, followed by Masters at the Cambridge University in 1951. He earned his PhD at the old University of East Africa in 1969. Since 1967 Prof Cooke has over forty-seven papers in journals with some presented at conferences or symposia. He was one of the founding members of the Kalahari Conservation Society (KCS) in Botswana, a member of the Botswana Society and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

The Administrator and His Influence at UB

From 1951 to 1969 Cooke worked in Tanzania, as District Officer and Education Officer. For two years from 1969 he was a school headmaster at a secondary school in Manchester. In 1971 he joined University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS), Gaborone campus, where he became the founder of the Department of Geography, with the late Prof. Silitshena. The department started with four staff members and 24 students. Among the first students were Prof Mazonde, Prof Modisi and several foreigners. Prof Cooke was head of the department until his retirement in 1991. He presided over the department's change of scope and name to the Department of Environmental Science (ES). Initially focused on training geography teachers, the new mandate included the broad area of natural resources management. Graduates from the department are found in natural resources management positions in Botswana and elsewhere and many are still secondary school teachers. During his time the department grew to be amongst those with the highest students' population at the University of Botswana (UB).

Prof Cooke is well known to many people in Botswana because he was an active member in the country at symposia, conferences, and public talks that focused on the management of natural resources. He had a passion to clarify and position the science about wise use of natural resources at UB. He emphatically and repeatedly used the expression 'wise use of resources' instead of 'conservation' because he said conservation could be a confusing concept. He favourably considered the International Institute of Remote Sensing and Earth Science (ITC) in the Netherlands, as the ideal centre for training his department's staff in various areas of natural resources. I suspect he was attracted to ITC after his work with its staff, notably Prof Verstappen and, possibly, Dr van Gils. Prof Cooke accepted the cost effectiveness of remote sensing for natural resource management in a vast country such as Botswana.

The first Mpotokwane in the Department of Environmental Science (DES) teaching staff was trained at ITC. The second, yours truly, followed. Two more were sent to this robust theory and practical work training institute. In the early 1980s, the department hired a young beautiful German, Ms Jutta Breyer, an ITC graduate, to teach remote sensing, mostly aerial photography. All DES students were prescribed a healthy dose of remote sensing. Remote Sensing, Cartography and map reading are still part of the DES culture today. During his time the department took students to different fieldwork areas. The 'hands on' culture, which Prof Cooke promoted, prevails in the department. Budgetary constraints temporarily halted the culture. Fortunately, it is being revived as a Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA) requirement. The revival proves Prof Cooke and his colleagues were right.

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The Teacher

Prof Cooke was a very good teacher. His lectures were one of the highlights of my time at UB. He frequently used videos and slides to illustrate features alien to us such as oceans, tropical soils, volcanoes and meteorological phenomena. The impact of such, during the pre-television days of the late 1970s in Botswana, was immeasurable. The Prof was disciplined and a disciplinarian. Some of my first year class mates, excited with the UB freedom to smoke, enjoyed smoking during class. Prof Cooke did not allow it. He emphasised the need to protect the non-smokers from its involuntary negative effects. He was way ahead of the country's law then, which allowed smoking anywhere anytime. My friends and I used to mimic his loud and emphatic voice which was like that of an army drill commander.

I later discovered that he had a slight hearing impediment, which explained his few decibels higher than usual voice. He always marked and returned scripts promptly, calling each student to pick theirs during class. I figured out that it was his way of learning the students' names. He did not like students' poor performance. He always questioned his staff on why a student did not do well and what was done to remedy the situation. His British humour was welcome when it seldom surfaced during class. I remember one occasion where he showed a slide with a person seemingly purposelessly standing facing away from the camera, on an open grassy landscape. Prof Cooke was quick to say 'this person is not doing what you think he is doing, he is just standing there to give scale'. It was a useful interjection as the murmuring suggested our minds had gone back to our rustic roots! His knowledge of Botswana landscape was phenomenal. He seemed to have walked on every grain of soil in this country. He used a lot of pictures and slides from different parts of the country to great effect for our learning.

The Social Being

Prof Cooke enjoyed social occasions with the department staff at the end of each academic year. His house, Plot 2609 Zebra Way in Gaborone, was the frequent meeting place. His wife, Sylvia, would be an active participant during each occasion. The events had abundant tasty home cooked food. I once inexplicably went one week early at his house for such a get together. The potentially embarrassing moment was diffused when Cooke fed and released the bachelor. His favourite party piece was pulling his body up a door frame and rolling his legs in between the hands before releasing to land to a thunderous applause. It was always a hair raising moment for me because he always did it after taking a few drinks. John was an outdoor enthusiast. He had plenty stories from his wilderness experiences which he often narrated. During my last communication with him around 1999, he told me that he had relocated from Manchester to Wales. One of the attractions in Wales was a mountain next to his house which he planned to climb frequently.

Prof Cooke was a motor mechanics do-it-yourself (DIY) enthusiast. He maintained his Land Rover, BF260. The members of the department were once invited to lift the Land Rover engine for him to fit it back, after some major repairs. I could not miss such an occasion because, as you may guess, there would be plenty tasty food afterwards.

The Legacy

'He is one of the select few who left a legacy' were the words from a friend when I informed him that Prof Cooke is late. To transform the Department of Geography into the Department of Environmental Science was a major contribution. During his time the staff, students and the range of specialisations in DES grew significantly. Prof Cooke put the department at several vantage positions to influence the outlook of environmental or natural resources issues in Botswana. At my first meeting with him on arrival from my study abroad, he told me he had handed over my name to work with Department of Town and Regional Planning (DTRP) from 'next week' for the development of the National Conservation Strategy (NCS). I established

many working relationships during that assignment. Many DES staff have contributed to the thinking, policies, Acts, regulations, boards within government from a natural resources perspective because Cooke felt it was our role to do so.

In the mid-1980s, DES ran an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) training course, through the Ministry of Local Government and Lands. It was attended by many public officers as a precursor to the Botswana EIA Act in 2005. Before the 2005 EIA Act was launched the NCS Agency consulted the department on the finer aspects of the draft bill for comments through a short workshop. After his departure, the DES initiated the John Cooke Prize to be awarded to deserving students. So far the prize been unsustainable due to lack of sponsors, but we remain hopeful.

John Cooke's autobiography, entitled *One White Man in Black Africa: From Kilimanjaro to the Kalahari, 1951-91* is an interesting account of his 30 years adventure in Africa. The funny titled book has on line reviews that suggest it provides evidence that he benefitted from Africa. A former UB colleague recently asked me if John Cooke was 'the man who wore shorts throughout the year and rode his bicycle, along the UB corridors, to his office?' That was possibly the most physically recognisable trait of John Cooke. I heard the bicycle rattle past my office at almost the same time daily when he reported to and knocked off from work. He was a meticulous time keeper and a dedicated administrator.