

Terence Ranger as Rhodes Professor of Race Relations, University of Oxford

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My contribution focusses on Terence Ranger's period as Rhodes Professor of Race Relations and Fellow of St Antony's College at the University of Oxford (1987-97). It was a relatively brief period in his long research and academic career, which spanned around 60 years from the mid-1950s to the publication of *Writing Revolt* in 2013. But his decade in Oxford was important to him as recognition in the academic world, as the highpoint of a rewarding career, and for the access it gave him to a large and talented cohort of doctoral students. Terry stayed on partly in Oxford after retirement so that he remained connected with colleagues there, and with the institution, for far longer than his 10 year tenure of the chair.

Although Terry was influenced by his early experience as an undergraduate and postgraduate at Oxford in the 1950s, where he researched a doctorate on Anglo-Irish history, this was not the experience that shaped his career.¹ He found his academic identity and passion when he went to a lecturing post at the University College of Rhodesia in 1957. Terry's sojourn there till 1963 left an indelible impression on him personally as well academically and he became primarily a historian of Zimbabwe.

In most respects, Terry had defined himself as a historian before he returned to Oxford in 1997. His early books and articles on African resistance and African agency were researched and written when he was in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and the United States. He was an Africanist at heart and held firm to his early ideas that we should collectively make the study of African agency central.² When in Tanzania, he researched his highly original exploration in popular cultural history - *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa* (1975). He had long been interested in grass roots protest, as well as nationalism. As disillusion set in about African nationalism, and peasants became a more central concern in African Studies, he became absorbed in debates about localised, rural religion and politics – manifest in *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War* (1985). He continued to work out these themes for the rest of his career.

Terry's most famous book by far was the *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), edited with Eric Hobsbawm. It was a product of his years at Manchester and his membership of the editorial board of *Past and Present*, which put him at the core of British social history networks. Along with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (also 1983), it must be one of the most widely quoted history books. Both popularised the argument that traditions and identities were socially constructed and they swept down a highly receptive channel in academia at the time. Africanists had already developed such approaches to ethnicity and identity; in this way, concerns in African history penetrated beyond our relatively small subfield. In this and other respects, Terry acted as an important interlocutor. Perhaps African history, together with South Asian and that of other colonised zones was more important in influencing the mainstream than we think. (Despite these achievements, it was only after the accolade of an Oxford chair that he was belatedly elected to the British Academy, at that time high and dry, in 1988.)

¹ In 'Terence Ranger: Life as Historiography', interviewed by Diana Jeater, in History Workshop online, History at Large, July 16, 2011, Terry talks in detail about his thesis.

² *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* (1967) and *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia* (1970).

Terry's period as chair of the editorial board of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* for 15 years (1977-1992) also largely coincided with his years at Manchester. Although he never edited the journal, he was unstinting in his engagement and support, in his readiness to read papers, and in organising conferences through the Journal. In the mid-1980s, he backed James Currey's risky, but highly successful endeavour to establish an independent African Studies publishing house. Terry enabled James to publish his manuscript on *Peasant Consciousness* and threw himself into soliciting and reading manuscripts. These included David Lan's *Guns and Rain* (1985), which in some respects echoed Terry's approach in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* and became one of Currey's best-selling books.

Terry brought all these long-established concerns to Oxford. He was hugely energetic before he arrived in Oxford but his period there was characterised by intense commitment. The very verbal character of Oxford academic life suited him ideally. In addition to lecturing, he organised countless seminars, and had many opportunities to present his work, both in general lectures and detailed research papers. Academic life in Oxford, more so than in most universities, provided the opportunity to blur boundaries between work, pleasure and leisure. Seminars at 5 were followed by drinks and supper. Large numbers of visitors came through. This pattern suited him and he truly flourished in Oxford where it was possible to create a critical mass of postgraduate students, postdocs and visitors. Terry talked wonderfully, and unstoppably, drawing on an extraordinary recall not only of books and articles, but people, places and conversations. He was the best presenter of academic papers that I have heard – often without a paper – and he had a continuous audience in Oxford. Shortish terms and a generous research fund gave him time and money to travel to Africa. In his first academic year, Terry was away in Zimbabwe from 3rd May to 18th September. He travelled frequently for extended periods in these years and deepened his already strong roots there.

The Rhodes Chair of Race Relations was founded in 1954 with an endowment by Rhodesian Selection Trust group of copper mining companies. They in turn were largely owned by American Metal in the United States and Anglo-American in South Africa. The endowment had no connection at all with the Rhodes Trust, so that the name was (and remains) confusing to outsiders and many in Oxford. The donors wanted to mark the centenary of Rhodes's birth and noted that his colonizing thrust north from the Cape had opened the route for the mining industry in Zambia.

While the chair was unfortunately given a generic title, the negotiations and the memorandum of agreement focussed largely on southern Africa. The donors were concerned about the polarisation of race relations in the region and at that time, Rhodes was still seen by some as the forerunner of a pragmatic, centrist, anglophone approach. This southern African focus was recognised in the appointment of Kenneth Kirkwood in 1954. A 35-year old liberal lecturer in Sociology and Politics at the University of Natal, with strong Zimbabwean connections, Kirkwood was appointed above more experienced academics, notably in anthropology, and this probably signified the interest in some more practical contribution to regional race relations. Kirkwood did a good deal to develop an interdisciplinary focus on Africa during his 32 year tenure, and he supervised doctoral students who became significant figures in the field. But he did not do much research and writing and African Studies needed academic leadership.

The endowment that funded the chair not only covered the professorial salary but set aside a small amount for travel and research. Kirkwood had not spent much of this and the fund accumulated through the years in a way that it would not now be permitted. (Deeply concerned about financial deficits, the University of Oxford now insists that all endowments

are fully spent on an annual basis.) This enabled Terry to employ a full time research officer and administrative assistant, Phyllis Ferguson. She played a major role in organising seminars and conferences, hosting the many visitors, and co-ordinating – for the first time - a termly Bulletin of events relating to African Studies throughout the University.

Terry soon found, however, that he had to fight for resources. There was a hiatus of a year between Kirkwood's retirement and Terry's appointment. In that space of time, St Antony's turned four of the five rooms that were allocated to Kirkwood to other purposes, and when Terry arrived, he had access to only one. The College bursar thought that the chair had the resources to pay rental for rooms but it took some time for him to colonise a group of three in the old Victorian house at 66 Woodstock road. Kirkwood had accumulated a considerable library but there was no longer space or money to manage it and the books and pamphlets were donated to History, Anthropology, Geography, Queen Elizabeth House, the Balfour library at the Pitt-Rivers museum and to Rhodes House.

In his inaugural Terry noted his discomfort in bearing the title of the chair, but then tried to address some complexities in Rhodes's legacy in Zimbabwe. Rhodes was, surprisingly, not always seen as an oppressor and appropriator of land. African people around Bulawayo had a memory of him as someone who struck a verbal deal with the Ndebele chiefs, promising that they could keep some of their land, including the Matopo hills. In later years, the chiefs contrasted Rhodes with land hungry settlers and with conservation officers who wanted to create a national park in the Matopos free of people. 'This myth of Rhodes's promise', Terry explained, 'formed the core of the moral economy of Matabeleland and the constant reference-point for African political demands until the early 1950s'.³

But of course, Terry distanced himself from that heritage and also developed something of a manifesto for African Studies. He emphasised the importance of learning from Africans as much as teaching about Africa. In the summer before he took the post, he travelled to six African countries to make connections and solicit input. And he was a little cautious of the expanding discipline of Development Studies, as well as the many international agencies that had taken up African issues: 'all this aid to Africa and development of Africa *could* smack of Rhodes or of Livingstone, unless it is also *with* Africans and responsive to African realities. He spoke of the 'need to repudiate power and patronage while honouring our Oxonian ancestors'.

Terry also spoke optimistically of a 'developing cluster of Oxford's African Studies'. Initially he perhaps thought he was going to encounter problems largely from traditionalists in the University, such as those who identified with Trevor Roper's (his supervisor's) view of African History. To his surprise, his difficulties came more from those who identified themselves as people on the left. This proved disconcerting because although he did not claim to be on the left, Terry had always seen himself as a radical. He was deeply committed to fighting against racism and for African interests and this informed both his academic work and his personal relationships.

Soon after Terry first arrived, he attempted to start a more defined African Studies Centre. Kirkwood had long convened African Studies at St Antony's and the Thursday evening seminar was a well-established event. However, an alternative group of Africanists had developed largely around Queen Elizabeth House and Politics, where Africa had become a significant element in research and teaching. Gavin Williams, Judith Heyer, Stan Trapido,

³ Terence Ranger, 'Rhodes, Oxford and the Study of Race Relations'. Inaugural lecture, Oxford, 1987.

Megan Vaughan and others differed radically in approach, ideas and style from Kirkwood and they had not been able to work with him. They put their energies into QEH, Development Studies and related networks.

Even though Terry brought an entirely different approach, many of the other Africanists remained uneasy about an area studies centre developing at St Antony's - alongside those that had already been established for Latin America, Russia and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Japan. The first three have also established successful masters degrees that enabled them to build staff numbers and recruit excellent students. Gavin Williams argued that Africa should be taught through disciplines.

To the extent that African Studies had any institutional identity, this was largely in the shape of two committees: an interfaculty committee and a Rhodes Chair committee. The first met once a term and had very little in the way of budget. Terry soon took over as chair and in 1988, it included Heyer and Trapido at QEH, Wendy James from Anthropology, Tony Lemon from Geography as well as botanist Richard Barnes. The Rhodes Chair committee oversaw discretionary expenditure from the Trust and was well-endowed. It had overlapping membership with the interfaculty committee: in the early years Gavin Williams (as chair), R.W. Johnson, John Knight, Megan Vaughan and Ceri Peach from Geography who specialised in race relations. Although their membership changed, Terry could not find support in either of these two committees for a Centre - or even a centralising enterprise around the chair and (it was assumed) St Antony's. Another, separate institutional base for African Studies developed during the early 1990s when Paul Collier won a major ESRC grant for the Centre for the Study of African Economies. Collier was also based at St Antony's, which became one home for the CSAE, but insisted, even more than other colleagues, that Africa should be studied through a disciplinary lens - in this case through the Department of Economics

When he retired in 1997, Terry told me rather woefully 'in my beginnings, I thought it was my responsibility to co-ordinate African Studies ... I've discovered it is impossible to co-ordinate African Studies in Oxford and have rather tended to fall back on St Antony's.'⁴ This did not inhibit him in any way and in certain respects freed him from the complexities of Oxford politics and the time-consuming management of a Centre and masters degree. As he discovered, he 'could do pretty much as he liked'. But the lack of a co-ordinated institutional base for African studies not only led to fragmentation but made institutional continuity difficult - both when Terry took over from Kirkwood and when he left.

Terry gave regular lectures on African history, convened the Thursday seminar largely for visiting speakers, ran an additional informal seminar at which students could share their findings and also organised a Race and Ethnic relations seminar which had a global reach. While his focus was very largely on Africa, he decided at the outset that he should make some attempt to cover the field of Race Relations more broadly. This schedule generally committed him to three seminars a week and he also participated in others, such as the Commonwealth History seminar, events at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and also some at Queen Elizabeth House. The Thursday seminar came closest to a general Africanist occasion and regular participants amongst staff included Wendy James and Douglas Johnson, Tony Kirk-Greene, Megan Vaughan and Patricia Daley.

⁴ Terence Ranger to William Beinart

One of the ideas that Terry brought back with him from his African tour was enthusiasm on the part of some African academics for the opportunity to escape the demands of lecturing and visit a richly resourced university to write. The chair fund had sufficient resources to run a programme for visiting African academics, who generally came for short periods of a few months. This project won wide support in Oxford and it became a major focus for both committees. Colleagues could nominate visitors and the fellowships were awarded competitively. Visitors included Ngwabe Bhebhe, with whom Terry developed a strong relationship and co-edited a book on *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation* (1993). Nigerians were probably best represented - Gloria Emeagwali amongst the first - but visitors included Bahru Zewde from Ethiopia, Jack Mapanje from Malawi and Peter Mayende, later Director of Land Affairs, from South Africa. Obi Igwara, who had done a doctorate at LSE and went back to teach there, also visited.

A parallel process brought a few post-doctoral researchers in Race and Ethnic relations to St Antony's. Ossie Stuart was probably the key figure amongst them. He had done a doctorate on Africans in Bulawayo and developed research on 'Afro-Caribbeans in Oxford'; there was a linked project on Asian communities in the city. Terry co-edited a book with Stuart, who went to the University of York, on *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*.⁵

Towards the end of Terry's tenure the University of Oxford Trusts administration developed stronger oversight of endowments and in effect required that money be spent down. The chair therefore supported half of the costs of a fixed term lecturer in African Politics. Raufu Mustapha was appointed: he had done a doctorate at Oxford on agrarian issues in Nigeria and specialised in Nigerian and West African politics. Towards the end of Terry's tenure, Peter Alexander, who researched on South African labour history, was appointed as junior research fellow. He took over the Race and Ethnic relations seminar and also organised a large and important conference on Race, Class and Labour. Alexander was later appointed to a chair at the University of Johannesburg.

Such appointments created an exciting momentum and provided valuable opportunities to visitors, students and postdocs. But the chair's resources were put very largely into short term fellowships or into Development Studies and Politics. They were not invested into an African Studies Centre nor was there sufficient for long term posts.

Beyond his activities at St Antony's, Terry served on committees in the History Faculty, where he supervised many of his students, and he assisted with the innovative Refugee Studies Programme run by Barbara Harrell-Bond. He had signalled his interest in promoting this field from the very start of his tenure, became chair of the Advisory Board of the RSP and helped organise an international conference in 1989. This brought additional students and postdocs interested in Africa, such as Ken Wilson, who worked on environmental anthropology in Zimbabwe. Terry also served on the Minority Rights Group publication committee and the advisory board of the Centre for Ethnic Studies at Warwick. Refugee Studies proved to be the start of a major initiative in Oxford. Many of these different interests gave rise to workshops and conferences, including the annual Britain Zimbabwe Society Research day. Terry was highly adept at finding willing collaborators, who were enthused by his encouragement and often benefitted from the networks and interactions that were generated.

⁵ T. Ranger, Y Samad and O. Stuart (eds.), *Culture, Identity and Politics: Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (Avebury, Aldershot, 1996).

Terry's supervisees, most of them doctorals, were at the heart of his activities in Oxford. He supervised 35 students in all and was able to build up a cohort focussing on Zimbabwe in particular. A number produced major books on Zimbabwean history, such as David Maxwell (now at Cambridge), Jocelyn Alexander (now at Oxford), Diana Jeater (who taught at the University of the West of England) and Heike Schmidt (now at Reading). Through their publication and teaching, Zimbabwean history had remained a major focus at British universities and beyond.

Terry co-edited six collections during his ten years in Oxford. Much of his time was spent on researching and writing three books: *Are We Not Also Men* on the Samkange family in Zimbabwe was published in 1995 and the other two after his retirement. I will touch only on *Voices from the Rocks* (1999) which focussed on the Matopos National Park and surrounding areas in Matabeleland. Terry shifted his work to Matabeleland because he felt this was an under-researched part of Zimbabwe and by the mid-1980s it had become a politically troubled area. The districts south of Bulawayo that included the National park, proved a fertile and attractive focus.⁶ On the one hand it was important in settler minds, with Rhodes's farms and grave, as well as a landscape, close to Bulawayo, which featured prominently in white Rhodesia's cultural landscape. On the other, the African communities in the area proved to be important in popular mobilisation and in the development of Ndebele ethnic nationalism. The records on both the founding of the national park, and resistance to it, were especially rich. For all these reasons, the Matopos were an alluring topic. Terry started the archival work in the mid-1980s while still at Manchester, but this project took up many of his visits through the next decade. His oral work began when the National peace accord was signed in 1988.

In certain respects, this book was a continuation of his concern about peasant consciousness. He had always been interested in the grass roots elements of protest and nationalism and how this intersected with religious ideas, cults and nationalist movements. But there were new directions. Perhaps most important this book tied his older concerns to an emerging field of environmental history. He drew on the historiography focussed on colonial conservation and local responses. This had been the subject of a series of workshops at Oxford and Cambridge during the early 1980s as well as a central concern for South Asian subaltern studies. Ramachandra Guha's *Unquiet Woods* (1989) placed resistance to forest regulations at the heart of Indian subaltern resistance. Terry was not centrally involved in these workshops, but he saw how closely some of the emerging themes linked with strong strands in Africanist historiography.

Voices from the Rocks was one of the most detailed discussions thus far of the formation of a national park in Africa and certainly the fullest attempt to link this to a broader regional history of resistance. In comparison with his own early work, it also examined settler ideas in more detail. His book amalgamated three strands of historiography that had tended to develop rather separately – resistance and nationalism, the new environmental history, and religious history. Terry published articles and chapters on rain shrines, on Ndebele ethnicity, and on religion in the guerilla war based on his new research as well as a summary of themes in the book in as *JSAS* special issue on the Politics of Conservation⁷

⁶ Terence Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (James Currey, Oxford 1999).

⁷ Terence Ranger, 'Whose Heritage? The Case of the Matobo National Park', *JSAS*, 15, 2 (1989)

I think that this book came the closest to an overview of Zimbabwean history, especially when read in conjunction with his urban history *Bulawayo Burning*. It covered a long timespan, different scales and, to a greater degree than most of his books, explored aspects of the state and settler society.

It is nevertheless worth asking why Terry never wrote an overview history of Zimbabwe. James Currey, his long term publisher at Heinemann and Curreys, recalled: ‘every time I presented another Terry monograph, such as *Dance and Society*, my co-directors would say that they supposed we had to do it but when was Ranger going to produce a history of Rhodesia (or of the Federation)?’⁸. When Heinemann took over Andrew Robert’s *History of Zambia* (1976), James suggested a similar book to Terry and again when Zimbabwe became independent. But ‘he taught me to enjoy the accidents of arrival. He was not interested in formulaic publishing. He was intoxicated by other historian’s originality’. When *Peasant Consciousness* and *Guns and Rain* gave James Currey publishers a flying start, he stopped asking about a single volume history. I would add to this vivid reminiscence that Terry probably did not have the interest or the patience to carefully map the political economy of Zimbabwe over a century, or to trawl through the political history of white Rhodesia. He liked to chart new terrain, to engage with dense untouched documents. He did his overview thinking at a conceptual level, in journal articles and reviews, reading, talking and writing all in the same act. A general history was a challenge that clearly did not really interest him and in some sense that it is a loss. Perhaps he did not feel the need because his detailed books were so widely used.

Around 1995, Terry began a new project with JoAnn McGregor and Jocelyn Alexander, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and ESRC which focussed on districts to the north of Bulawayo. *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the ‘Dark Forests’ of Matabeleland* (2000) was a darker book. Another local study, it set the guerilla war and post-colonial conflict in its colonial context. His focus in three books on Matabeleland and Bulawayo was also a vehicle for critique of Mugabe’s political excesses. Yet despite his unease about Zimbabwe’s political direction, Terry remained an optimist about the ordinary people of that country and about Africa more generally. It was from him that I first heard a sustained critique of the Afro-pessimism, fashionable on the left and right in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite some frustrations with individuals and difficulties in achieving his institutional aims in Oxford, Terry clearly thrived there. He did not really have the patience, or the commitment to institutional politics, to spend long periods working to win individuals and committees to his side. He enjoyed Oxford because it was and is such a wonderful hub of people and research. Terry had a capacity to see what was good and interesting in other people’s research, to encourage them, and to place their work in a broader, developing scheme of African history. He was especially effective in sharing ideas with, and giving direction to, young scholars. He himself was constantly learning and reformulating his propositions. Terry put his ideas forthrightly and enabled you to agree or disagree – he was big man, sharing his tent but quite happy to think about challenges. He shaped our field. We will remember him, with gratitude, with fondness, and with some awe.

⁸ James Currey to William Beinart, 12.5.2015.