

Patrick Harries: Historian who put African studies on the map

1950-2016

PATRICK Harries, who has died in Cape Town at the age of 66, was a South African historian who advanced the internationalisation of African studies after being denied a key position in the field at the University of Cape Town.

Although his pioneering research and expertise made him eminently qualified for head of African studies, UCT was battling accusations by the previous head of the department that its teaching of African studies was too eurocentric.

This made it difficult for the university to justify appointing a white man to that position.

The University of Basel in Switzerland, where he had worked before, wasted no time offering him the post of head of African studies, which he took up in 2001.

Over the next 15 years he established African history as a serious discipline at the university and made it the hub of a network of Africanists who, drawn by his international renown, went there to learn from him, attend seminars and conferences and do research.

In addition to supervising more than 30 MAs and 15 PhDs, he delved deeply into the largely unexamined archives of missionaries from Switzerland. Their work in and contributions to Africa were not well known by even the Swiss themselves, until Harries, in what became a steady stream of publications, brought it to their notice.

He convinced the Swiss that

even though they were a non-imperial country, they had had long and fruitful contact with Africa mostly through missionary work. He showed that this missionary work went way beyond religion.

In 2007, he published *Butterflies and Barbarians: Swiss Missions and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa*, pointing out that Swiss who came to Africa were highly educated practitioners of science, be it linguistics, etymology or anthropology.

His hero was the missionary anthropologist Henri Junod. He showed how Junod standardised the Shangaan language, compiled dictionaries and classified plants and insects.

He showed how through people like Junod the Swiss were introduced to the idea of Africa, and how they responded to it.

Harries's presentation of the missionary record was typically nuanced. He did not hold them up as agents of colonialism or of civilisation, but simply described what they were doing and what the effects of their activities were.

Harries was born in Cape Town on May 31 1950, and matriculated at Rondebosch Boys' High.

After graduating at UCT he joined the staff. His mentor was the English liberal Africanist historian Robin Hallett, an Oxford university graduate who came to UCT because no one in Britain took African studies seriously enough for him.

Harries was deeply inspired by Hallett's fairly original proposi-

tion at the time that not only did Africans have a history but that they were agents of their own history.

Harries was in the front ranks of Marxist/radical historians who obtained PhDs, in his case in 1983, from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University.

His chief interest and focus of research was in the people who



NUANCED: Patrick Harries

Harries showed mineworkers were greater agents of their destiny than was acknowledged

came from Mozambique to work on the mines in South Africa, specifically Kimberley, between 1860 and 1910.

This culminated in his first major book, *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa, c 1860-1910*, which was widely celebrated as not just a piece of labour history but a major contribution to the understanding of the modern evolution of Southern Africa.

In the words of then professor of African history at Harvard University, Leroy Vail, it heralded the arrival of "a major new voice in Southern African studies".

What was new, and controversial, in the eyes of the radical/Marxist school of history to which he had himself subscribed was the importance he attached to the broader cultural aspects of migrant labour. Marxist historians, with their exclusive focus on economics and labour, tended to ignore such aspects.

What they saw were acted-upon victims of capitalism. Harries showed that they were greater agents of their destiny than the Marxists were prepared to acknowledge.

He disagreed with leftist historians who saw the compounds where the miners lived as prisons.

He pointed out that the compounds were also places where they created a new cultural identity and where they were exposed to literacy and Christianity. They were transformed into a new working class but they had agency in this process, he wrote.

He also pointed out that African mineworkers in Kimberley were better paid than coal miners in Europe.

He gave their lives a richness beyond what Marxist historians were prepared to acknowledge, and this did not go down well.

Before going to university, Harries hitchhiked through Africa and worked on a building site in France while playing on the wing for the local rugby club.

By the time he got to UCT he was broke and had to work as a hotel's night manager to fund his studies until the vice-chancellor, Sir Richard Luyt, suggested he apply for a bursary.

As an academic he put much time and effort into organising bursaries and raising funds for impecunious students.

Trawling through archives in Britain, Harries, who returned to UCT in 2015 as emeritus professor of history, did important new work on the slave trade along the East African coast, conditions on the slave ships, the anti-slavery patrols of the Royal Navy which intercepted these ships, and the fate of those, many from Mozambique, who were liberated from these ships and brought to the Cape.

He was preparing a large database on these liberated Africans when he died of a heart attack.

He is survived by his wife, Isabelle Vauthier, whom he met in Switzerland, and from whom he was separated, and his daughter, Emily. — *Chris Barron*