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PHOTO COUVERTURE:

Les réserves du Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel MEN durant le déménagement Janvier 2013. Le MEN est un lieu important pour les études africaines à l'Université de Neuchâtel présentés dans cette newsletter (image : Alain Germond, MEN).

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RENCONTRES • BEGEGNUNGEN • ENCOUNTERS

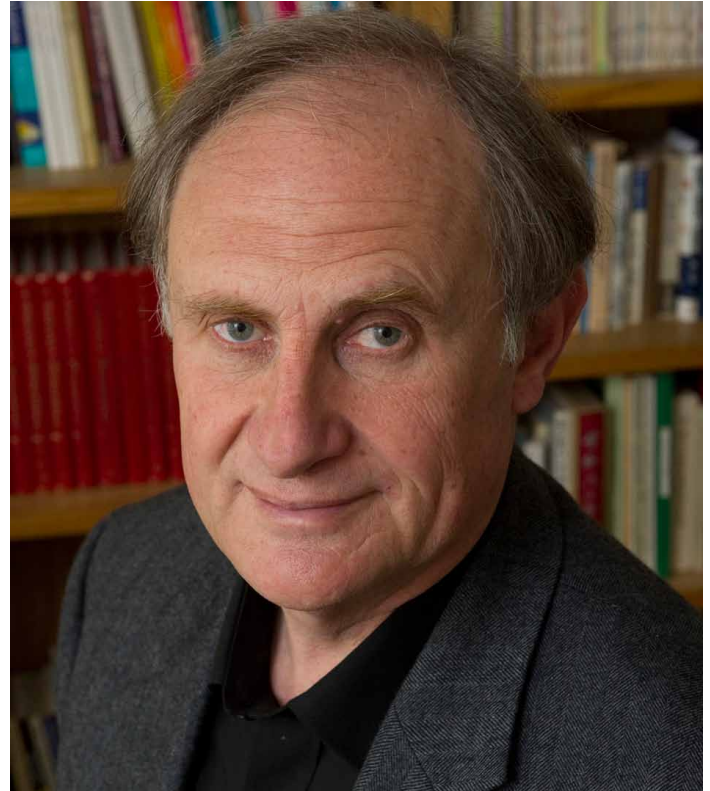
William Beinart, University of Oxford

■ PATRICK GROGAN AND TANJA HAMMEL

The Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel through the Department of History welcomed William Beinart, the well-known historian of South Africa and former Director of the University of Oxford's African Studies Centre, for a two-week visit in late September 2013. Aside from presenting papers on *African Local Knowledge* and *Mines, Migrancy, and Marikana* as well as attending various research seminars and workshops, he met with two PhD-students in History to reflect on his career as well as the current state of African Studies.

History, for William Beinart, is the “great omnivorous, totalising discipline”. He treasures “its capacity to incorporate everything without being restricted to any particular research techniques or topics”. His own career reflects this virtue. His list of publications includes themes ranging from nineteenth-century southern African rural political economy and agrarian history to contemporary African local knowledge systems via a general history of *Twentieth-century South Africa* (2001), his best-selling monograph. However, it has been as an environmental historian that he has become most prominent, and his co-authored books on comparative environmental history – *Environment and history: the taming of nature in the USA and South Africa* (1995) and *Environment and Empire* (2007) – have been particularly well-received.

Beinart grew up in apartheid-era Cape Town, where his father, a law professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT), hoped his son would follow in his footsteps. Although Beinart would study law in his undergraduate degree, it was history which particularly excited him. “At school I had got very interested in history, in addition to

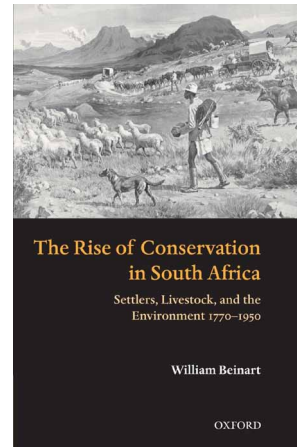


which I had already become a very political person and history seemed to me to be a route to politics, a way of understanding politics in South Africa”, he reminisces. Having grown up in a liberal family, he remembers spending his youth “absorbed in national politics”, joining the Progressive Party’s youth wing at the age of 15 and, later at UCT, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) organisation. Studying history thus seemed a natural step. “For me, history appeared to be an opportunity to provide more depth to political critique and to understand ideologies by looking at the past through political eyes.”

Having abandoned law to embark on a post-graduate career in history, Beinart also moved away from direct participation in politics. Nevertheless, for Beinart, the process of research has always remained a highly political act. “Through my research I have aimed to cross boundaries by understanding and expressing the vantage point and experiences of people who did not have much power while looking critically at those who did”, he explains. “Whatever the project, I have always been aware of the political implications and always tried to find a way of restoring the less powerful into the historical record.”

After completing a Masters’ degree in Commonwealth Area Studies and the first year of a doctorate in African history at SOAS in London, Beinart returned to South Africa at the beginning of 1976, where, with an already-established interest in rural societies, he obtained a temporary research position at Rhodes University which enabled him to live a “completely different” life in a rural, African community in the Pondoland region of the then Transkei homeland. For a white, urban, male South African in the 1970s, this represented perhaps the ultimate crossing of boundaries and it was here that his interest in environmental history and conservationism awoke. In Pondoland, he witnessed the tensions between a state that sought to introduce conservationist

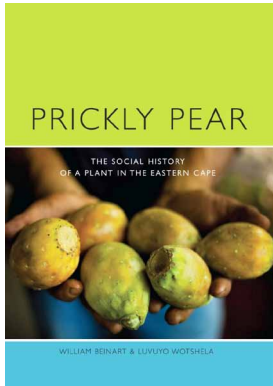
agriculture as well as other betterment policies, and local residents, who rejected such external interventions in their agricultural practices.



Thereafter, Beinart returned to the United Kingdom, finished his doctorate and moved to a post-doc in Oxford in 1978, where, he recalls, he shared many of the criticisms of such policies reflected in the contemporary critique of development theory and practices. He applied these ideas to conservationism in various articles around this time, but also became fascinated by the emerging sub-discipline of environmental history that was generally less hostile to conservationism. In the process, Beinart also came to the realisation that “trying to understand other people’s historical experiences” is often surprisingly “unpredictable”. His research provided evidence of both positive

and negative aspects of conservation, and led him to explore not only rural African experiences but also the history of conservationist ideas in Africa. Increasingly, his research discouraged him from employing concepts built on “dichotomies such as state versus peasant”. Instead, he began to appreciate the importance of “thinking in a more long-term, comparative context which could take you down many paths”. His approach in *The rise of conservation in South Africa: settlers, livestock, and the environment 1770-1950* (2003) focussed on white settlers, but he argues, in this vein, that “post-apartheid historians need to have the freedom to look at white his-

tory” while “finding approaches that are both critical and empathetic” and which move “beyond populist critiques of conservationism”.



In his most recent publication, co-authored with his former student Luvuyo Wotshela, on the *Prickly Pear: The Social History of a Plant in the Eastern Cape* (2012), Beinart has sought to adopt a more “vivid, descriptive, even humorous” style of writing, “to let sources speak more for themselves, particularly by making use of oral material” as he did earlier in his career. As the first social history based around a plant in South Africa, Beinart is quick to add that “the book contains strong theoretical points”. With a longstanding interest in the hybridity of scientific knowledge, Beinart is about to publish a book on African local knowledge of livestock disease

with Karen Brown. Together they plan to extend this project to explore the efficaciousness of local therapeutic techniques. Beinart is also researching a “more popular, illustrated” history of wildlife documentary film in Kenya and hopes thereafter to go back to themes of rural social change and rebellion on which he has been conducting research throughout his career.

Beinart taught at the University of Bristol from 1983 to 1997 before relocating to the University of Oxford where he played a crucial role in establishing the African Studies Centre in 2002. He declares himself “terribly optimistic” about academic studies of this region. “African Studies in Europe are thriving”, he argues, “not only at Oxford

and elsewhere in the UK but also at the University of Basel as well as in Germany, France and elsewhere.” African universities are also re-emerging from a period of difficulty when they generally “tended to struggle to generate doctoral candidates”.

This interview is the first in a series of video interviews with eminent scholars visiting the Centre for African Studies Basel. An ever growing corpus of testimonials shall allow to trace the development of the field. The edited video-interviews are made accessible on the website of the Centre: www.zasb.unibas.ch.