

William Mark (Bill) Freund (1944–2020)

Bill Freund was a prolific and gifted historian, probably best known for his outstanding works of synthesis, which combined a mastery of large bodies of literature with incisive interpretation and argument. Alongside these *tours d'horizon* (discussed below) were his monographs on topics as various as the political economy of tin mining in Nigeria, the Indian working class in Durban, and a 'developmental history' of twentieth-century South Africa.

Bill was born in Chicago in 1944, the only child of Carlo and Elisabeth, Jewish émigrés who left Austria for America in 1939. The boy's somewhat solitary childhood was spent largely in the world of books. He read voraciously (at his Bar Mitzvah he asked for and received the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*!) and was fortunate that his large high school ran a special programme for academically gifted pupils – a provision of great benefit to budding intellectuals like Bill. He identified his future role and field while in his teens: as a scholar of history.

After an undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago, in 1966 Freund began work for an MPhil and PhD at Yale. His doctoral dissertation (never published, but reflected in half a dozen articles and chapters in the 1970s) was on 'Society and government in Dutch South Africa', a study of the Batavian period of 1803–06. His research took Freund to archives and libraries in Holland, England and South Africa. During a year in England, in 1969, the young researcher made friends with expatriate South Africans – Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick, Stan Trapido and Gavin Williams among them – who deepened his understanding of contemporary South Africa. Bill felt at home in a burgeoning left scholarship.

But to his (lasting) chagrin, and to the dismay of those close to him, his Yale doctorate did not lead to recognition in the shape of a tenured post at an American university. Instead, Freund spent a decade and a half as an itinerant scholar, frequently unsure of where he might next find employment, and (he confessed later) at times close to despair. His longest stint in one place was in the History Department at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria (1974–78), and that was sandwiched between work as a librarian, brief posts in London, at a short-lived liberal arts college in New York, at the University of Dar es Salaam, at Harvard, and in 1982 at the University of Cape Town. He found aspects of academic life in South Africa congenial, and began to explore the possibility of longer-term employment there. From a research post at Charles van Onselen's African Studies Institute at Wits, in February 1985 Bill was appointed as Professor and Head of Department of the new Department of Economic History at the University of Natal, in Durban. Aged nearly forty-one, Freund found himself in his first 'permanent' or tenured academic position.

Shortly before his move to Durban, Bill Freund published *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (Macmillan and Indiana University Press, 1984). The book has been continually in print since then, and in 2016 was issued in a third edition, substantially revised and updated. It was (he wrote) concerned with 'a few general themes: broad social and economic developments, the relationship of African social forces to outside interventions and the interplay of classes

within Africa'. As these themes suggest, it was 'a materialist interpretation of history' (he preferred the term to 'Marxist history', which he felt had an unnecessarily sectarian ring), and it began with a trenchant critique of the 'Africanist' history that had flowered since the 1960s, a 'new synthesis aimed at flattering nationalist sensibilities'. Even scholars who did not share Freund's materialist approach reviewed *Making* respectfully, recognizing its concision, clarity, explanatory force and verve. It succeeded in bringing 'into one compact volume the major debates that have raged in both liberal African history and radical political economy', while its 'incisiveness and wit ... ensured a refreshing reading experience'.

His move to Durban was lasting and fulfilling, professionally and personally. Rob Morrell, a close friend, writes that Bill's happiest years were lived in Durban: 'He found levels of acceptance and inclusion that were new to him and very welcome.' Freund is keenly remembered for his years at the university: a demanding teacher and caring supervisor, a potent presence at seminars, an unfailing supporter of younger scholars and a ceaselessly prolific author. Outside the academy – but never far outside it! – his friends also recall his (in)famous participation in touch rugby, his enjoyment of food, travel, theatre and conversation. But his waking hours were very much devoted to reading and writing. While employed at the university in Durban, he wrote three monographs, co-edited three collections, brought out a second edition of *Making*, and published over fifty articles and chapters. Mention should also be made of *Transformation*, a journal founded in 1986 by Mike Morris, Gerry Maré and Bill Freund. A trans-disciplinary forum for left-wing scholarship and debate, the journal recently published its hundredth issue – and Freund remained active in it until his death.

In 1988, Cambridge University Press published *The African Worker*. This grew out of a paper on African labour and labour history commissioned by the American Social Science Research Council a few years earlier, and again revealed Freund's ability to review, condense and critique an entire field of scholarship. Writing in *African Studies Review*, Robert Mazur wrote that issues 'of class, power, and state are central to the discussion, and are dealt with in a sensitive, rather than doctrinaire, manner ... it represents state-of-the-art materialist thinking'. A third overview followed in 2007, also published by Cambridge: *The African City: a history*. By about 2000, Bill's appreciation of Durban took a typically academic form: he began to work with geographers, urban planners and historians at a moment of efflorescence in the study of South African urbanization. Half a dozen papers on the history of Durban were followed by overviews of the state of the country's cities and the state of the discipline; and then the depth of field was extended to the continent. Freund's work on African cities sought to move beyond urban ethnographies focused on the poor, and to use the lens of political economy to discuss their development – politically, economically, socially, spatially and aesthetically. The urban historian Vivian Bickford-Smith judged *The African City* 'a path-breaking, skilful work of synthesis and comparative history'.

Between the publication of *Worker* and *City*, Freund (in his words) 'began to tinker with industrial and economic themes', which formed another major scholarly focus. From the early 2000s, he began writing about the nature of development and the state's role in it; the notion of a South African 'developmental state' in the 1940s and in the post-apartheid era; the mineral–energy complex,

and so on. These approaches were summarized in Freund's fine chapter in *The Cambridge History of South Africa: Volume 2*, but found full expression in his *Twentieth-century South Africa: a developmental history*, published as recently as 2018. Reviews by two leading economists were admiring of this work by – in every sense – a mature scholar. In the *American Historical Review*, Haroon Bhorat wrote that Freund 'has once again produced a piece of breathtaking analytical insight and focus ... crafted around the historical origins of [South African] industrialization broadly, and the manufacturing industry in particular.' Ben Fine agreed: 'Painstakingly researched, across detail and sweep of change ... this volume is of profound significance not only for understanding the economic history of South Africa but also for the light shed on the contemporary unravelling in which the post-apartheid state finds itself.'

Bill Freund was a scholars' scholar. After a precarious and frustrating start to his academic career, he persevered – and with a breakthrough publication in *Making* established himself as an economic historian with a range of interests and expertise rare in the field. He had a singular ability to distil his prodigiously wide reading into accessible and uncluttered prose in which empirical detail and theoretical nuance cohabited seamlessly. His scholarly critiques of nationalism were matched by a genuine cosmopolitanism; his early intellectual interest in Africa deepened into a sense of belonging. His last book – a posthumous autobiography being published by Wits University Press in 2021 – is aptly titled *An Historian's Passage to Africa*. He may not have suffered fools (and university administrators) gladly, yet he treated other scholars, even when he disagreed with them, with respect. Few Africanists have written as many book reviews as Bill did, and they were consistently thoughtful, fair-minded and well-crafted; his forays into historiography were outstanding.

When Eric Hobsbawm died, Bill wrote 'an appreciation' of the great historian in *Transformation*. In its course was this passage: 'He defined his audience as a general public, cultured and interested in ideas. And he was above all the man who made the connections and put things together: the great synthesiser.' David Moore made the connection:¹ Bill Freund was 'the Hobsbawm of Africa's historians'.

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¹See <<https://witspress.co.za/news/bill-freund-a-tribute/>>.