



The 2020 Academy of Science of South Africa Book Award – We build a culture

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In 2011, the ASSAf *Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, Prospects and Strategies*, suggested, as part of a suite of ten recommendations for 'improv(ing) the circumstances faced by the Humanities, not only in South Africa, but also around the world', that we, referring obviously to everybody with a stake in the Humanities, including government,

*(r)evue and refine government funding allocations to the Humanities with substantive earmarked funding in critical areas such as African languages, Philosophy, History and the Creative and Performing Arts. In this context, the advancement of books by the academy and the funding of books by government could significantly enhance the book as a cultural and human asset in both the scholarly and public mind. One possibility would be to link an award for the best Humanities book every year to the annual Alan Paton Award.*¹

ASSAf itself acted on this recommendation and established a Book Award for the Humanities. Five years later, in 2016, the inaugural ASSAf Book Award was made to Professor Keith Breckenridge for his book, *The Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present*.² In 2018, the second book award went to Professor Chabani Manganyi for his book, *Apartheid and the Making of a Black Psychologist*.³ For 2020, the third award, reported on here, went to Professor Charles van Onselen for his book *The Night Trains*.⁴

The decision by ASSAf to establish this award, in a context of persistent concern about the state, place and role of the Humanities, was both necessary and strategic. Characterising the concern were the findings of the *Consensus Study* which drew attention, inter alia, to the post-apartheid government 'systematically benefit(ting) Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics' and to what it described as 'the moribund condition' of the Humanities within institutions of higher learning. In the wake of these findings, ASSAf established a Humanities Standing Committee which was given the responsibility for ensuring that the Humanities disciplines remain an important focus of Academy activities and for overseeing and guiding Academy activities in the Humanities. As one of its tasks, the Humanities Standing Committee has been overseeing the institutionalisation and management of the Book Award since 2016.

How the Book Award, and the other awards and events that have come into being following the *Consensus Study* such as the ASSAf Humanities Lecture, the Human Sciences Research Council's Social Science and Humanities Medal (given in 2020 in conjunction with Universities South Africa) and the Humanities and Social Sciences' Annual Book, Creative Collection and Digital Contribution Awards, actually address the concerns raised in the *Consensus Study* remains to be seen. Their impact is not easily demonstrated. They offer, however, distinct opportunities for institutions and the fields of the Humanities and the Social Sciences to be doing that most difficult of things – establishing cultures and traditions that matter.

Cultures and traditions that matter, in a context of building a nation, are deeply important. The ASSAf Book Award is powerfully constitutive for this project, as are the other awards. It helps us see where we are, what we are doing and what we could be doing. Less obviously, it helps, also, in a South African society still finding its bearings, in *shaping* attitudes and understandings about scholarship. In 2015 in an interesting blog entitled 'Absent Amandla: Is South Africa Anti-Intellectual?', Christopher Wheeler⁵ commented that

'... science simply isn't a big enough part of South Africa's social discourse. We don't value its proven track record and we struggle with its consequences. We see it as something other countries and groups pursue; perhaps even, and this would indeed be terrifying, as a white/European Thing.

Having been directly involved in the processes for making the award, I have been struck by the intellectually wholesome proposition the Book Award represents in the face of what Wheeler is decrying. All the qualities of scholarship which a society would wish for to cherish and protect itself against superficiality, facile solutions, coarse demagoguery and, topping it all, the cultivation of immediatist discourses of material gain – intellectual courage, compassion and clarity – have been in abundant evidence.

The process of adjudicating the 2020 Book Award was, for all of us involved, extremely stimulating. We began by reminding ourselves what the purpose of the exercise was – to identify an example of scholarship that was inspiring, well written and educative. We were looking for a monograph, not an edited collection, which exemplified the importance of the book as a valued social and cultural artefact. The call for nominations went out in October 2020. In response, as has been our experience on the two previous occasions, we received many queries, many suggestions and many nominations. We had to make early judgements about textbooks and edited collections which we could not include and in the end worked with 36 submissions from the breadth of the university and science landscape. There were submissions from a range of genres and disciplines and, notably, a range of young and more experienced scholars. Our assessment, and we celebrate the moment, was that our scholars in the Humanities and the Social Sciences had not abandoned the value and enjoyment of writing books.

Sifting through the submissions was not easy, but we were able to arrive at a shortlist. This shortlist consisted of five wonderful books: Jacklyn Cock's⁶ *Writing the Ancestral River*, a book about the colonial and apartheid history of the Kowie River, Charles van Onselen's⁴ *The Night Trains* about the rail transport that carried Mozambican migrant workers to the Witwatersrand from about the first decade of the 20th century, Alex Broadbent's⁷

Philosophy of Medicine about medicine and the curing of illness, Lazlo Passemiers⁸ *Decolonisation and Regional Geopolitics* which looked at the role and contribution of South Africa in the internal struggles of post-independence Congo, and Bridget Kenny's⁹ *Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa* which tells the story of the politics around workers in the retail sector from about the 1950s to the present. The scholarship on offer provided an important response to questions about the state of the Humanities and science scholarship in South Africa. It was engaged and, importantly, deeply relevant. Standing on its own merits as globally noteworthy, it more pointedly spoke to the politics – past and present – of South Africa itself.

Van Onselen's *The Night Trains* received the unanimous support of the adjudication committee for its lucidity, rigour and sustained significance for understanding the nature of the South Africa we have inherited and currently have. A colleague on the panel said of it that

(h)is chapter on madness and masculinity is van Onselen at his best, and this section places him alongside Thompson and, especially, Genovese. As he tells the story of the miners and their apparent 'madness', he provides a searing indictment not only of the systemic, regional operation of racial capitalism and colonialism, but of a callous and callous white South African citizenry. He raises these points in his Studies of the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, published forty years ago, but returns to them with a precision and passion, even, that was not evident in his earlier work.

Another colleague said, 'This... is an outstanding work, engaged, humane and displaying the qualities of sharpness, insight and balance that exemplifies the work of critical and engaged scholarship at its best.' Writing in the liner notes for the book, James Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science and Anthropology at Yale, said of the work that it was 'an unsurpassable lesson in the commodification and disposal of human life'.

The event at which Charles van Onselen received the award was itself a significant occasion. He not only spoke to the content of the book but raised questions about the nature of South Africa, sharply drawing attention to two important issues in its narrative of itself: first, the need to reclaim the country's forgotten histories, making the point that *The Night Trains* was an experiment in reclamation. His second point was that the use of technology in South Africa, steam engines in this case, had important parallels elsewhere in the world and most notably in the

experience of the Jewish Holocaust in Nazi Germany and the Baghdad Railway which contributed directly to the genocide of the Armenians by the Ottomans. In making these points, he spoke of what he described as 'the shortsighted' ways in which South Africans, both black and white, had appropriated the song 'Shosholoz' – the popular South Africa sports anthem for 'pushing forward' – and in the process were 'reducing complexities to brutal banalities'.

What we now have in this award is an important new opportunity to showcase the best of our scholarship and to assert our point that high-quality Social Science and Humanities research is essential for understanding ourselves, who we are, why we are in the place where we now find ourselves and where we are going. It is the opportunity we forsake at our peril of hearing what the most far-sighted amongst us are telling us what we wish not to hear. It is, as Van Onselen himself said in receiving the award, the riposte to self-serving narrow nationalism.

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