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# Bill Freund (1944–2020): Economic historian

Bill (William Mark) Freund died suddenly in Durban in the early hours of Monday, 17 August 2020. The virtual memorial event held the following Saturday and attended by over 170 people testified to his scholarship, his intellectual influence, and to the vast network of friends and admirers that he had built up in a career that began with the completion of a Yale PhD in 1971.

Bill was a major figure in the study of South African history. He published six single-authored books, the first in 1981, *Capital and Labour in the Nigerian Tin Mines* (Longman), and the latest in 2018, *Twentieth Century South Africa: A Developmental History* (Cambridge University Press). In between these he wrote numerous articles, many chapters in books and reviews, co-edited two books and graduated 12 PhD students.

Bill was born on 6 July 1944 in Chicago (Illinois, USA), the only child of Austrian émigrés Carlo Freund (1902–1989) and Elisabeth Gross (1912–1995). His parents (not yet married) managed to escape the Holocaust, leaving from Trieste by ship bound for the USA in the second half of 1939. Most of their relatives who remained behind in Europe perished before the war ended in 1945.

Bill's Yale PhD was his entrée into the study of Africa. In his work on the Batavian period at the Cape (1803–1806) he displayed aspects of his work that were to become his signature over the coming decades. These were a facility and willingness to work in languages other than English, his ability to absorb enormous amounts of information and rapidly to make sense of it, his confidence in merging detail with 'the big picture', and his passion for writing about and understanding Africa.

Before arriving in 1985 as Professor of Economic History at the (then) University of Natal in Durban, Bill had already met with institutional adversity. Despite spells of employment at Yale, Harvard, and Kirkland College, New York, he was never able to secure a tenured job. On the other hand, he had happy work experiences at the University of Dar-es-Salaam and Ahmadu Bello (Zaria, Nigeria) as well as a period at the African Studies Institute at Wits University with Charles van Onselen.

He got his big break with the job in Durban. It was here that he discovered security, affirmation, and happiness. He found pleasure in becoming a regular part of a weekly touch rugby game, gaining an acceptance that had often eluded him in the country of his birth.<sup>1</sup> In Durban, his prodigious gifts of scholarship were expressed to the full. Bill arrived in Durban on the back of the publication of his second book, *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (Indiana University Press; 1984). As John Lonsdale noted in his review in the *Journal of African History*, this was 'a landmark in African historiography'<sup>2(p.122)</sup>. The influence of this book can be gauged by its having been revised twice, the third edition coming out in 2016.

Some of the strongest academic ties that Bill created were with colleagues in Development Studies. In 1986, Bill, Mike Morris and Gerhard Maré began the journal *Transformation*, which recently published its 100th issue. The journal was characterised by political engagement, critique and independence. The editorial team was joined shortly after the start by Vishnu Padayachee, at that time working at the University of Durban-Westville. Bill continued to work closely with Vishnu, being drawn into studies of Durban's Indian population with *Insiders and Outsider: The Indian Working Class of Durban in the Twentieth Century* (Pearson Education; 1995), as well as into a close socio-political and economic analysis of Durban, the city. He and Vishnu co-edited *The D(urban) Vortex: A South African City in Transition* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press; 2002).

Bill was primarily an academic and activism did not come naturally to him. Nevertheless, as the end of apartheid loomed, his expertise in political economy was recognised and he became part of the Economic Trends Group, in turn part of the Macro-Economic Research Group set up by the ANC in 1991 to develop economic policy. Economic Trends was a COSATU-inspired sub-group in which fellow Durbanites Alec Erwin and Stephen Gelb were important figures.<sup>3</sup>

But Bill will be remembered primarily as an economic historian and a materialist. He was concerned with capital accumulation and labour relations, and his particular interest in, and sympathy with, workers is evident in the vast corpus of his work. Perhaps the best example is the magisterial condensation of worker history in Africa simply titled *The African Worker* (Cambridge University Press; 1988). Although not always easy to discern in his work, he was moved by the exploitation of workers and often outraged by the injustices of the workplace.

Bill's work illuminated realities at the local, national, regional and global levels. He connected people to one another, built ideas about Africa, and, through his writings, broadcast these to the world. His autobiography, *Bill Freund: An Historian's Passage to Africa*, will appear in 2021.

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