

Interviewing a master human biologist

Tobias in Conversation: Genes, fossils and anthropology. By Phillip Tobias, Goran Štrkalj and Jane Dugard. Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg; 2008, 330 pp. ISBN 978-1-86814-477-8. R190.00.

Phillip Tobias is very much a South African anthropological icon. It is not simply his contribution to the academic study of human origins that has placed him in this position, but also the force of his personality and the sheer size of his contribution to knowledge. I haven't had a chance to peruse his *curriculum vitae* recently, but at my last count he had produced over 1 300 publications—a total very few academics anywhere in the world could match. And his pen continues to write at an age when

most of us would have accepted the tranquility of retirement.

Goran Štrkalj and Jane Dugard have now given us another perspective on his career in their transcription of a series of taped interviews with Tobias. With the exception of a very brief introduction, the words belong to Tobias and all the editors have done is to put his musings into thematic order. In his introductory chapter, Štrkalj reminds us that taped interviews are not the same as an autobiography. The

text is truly a conversation, less structured than thoughts written down, more spontaneous and often meandering. One would think this was a recipe for disaster, but it works exceptionally well. The interviewers simply triggered Tobias off on a given topic, and the result is this book with almost no editing. I could almost hear Tobias' voice as I read through the passages.

A small bugbear for me was the lack of dates on the interview transcriptions. Since they were recorded over a period of six years, it would have been useful to know in what year a particular interview took place.

Very early in the interviews, Tobias tells us that he finds it 'hard to write about myself'. Perhaps this was Phillip being modest, as there is no shortage of Tobias' thoughts on paper elsewhere. Not only are there several published interviews out there,^{1,2} but there are also transcriptions of public lectures³ and even films with his sonorous voice talking about himself.⁴ Not only that, but he has been sending out long Christmas letters to his friends and colleagues for years. Some of these run to 10 pages or more—all about where he had been in the previous year and whom he had met. There is no shortage of biographical information on Phillip.

So why is this particular version worth reading? Tobias is busy writing up the second volume of his autobiography, so by necessity there is a significant overlap between what he has published⁵ and the contents of this book. The interviews and

the autobiography were completely separate, but the interviews did help Tobias refresh his memory for the autobiographical writing. Yet there are significant differences that make this version valuable. Tobias's first clash with the irascible Solly Zuckerman happened at a conference in 1955 and is covered both here and in his autobiography. The two versions cover the same ground, but the taped version gives us much more of the feeling of what it was like for a youngster to publically challenge one of the most difficult and sharp-tongued individuals in the history of physical anthropology. The conversation format also allows Tobias to go into anecdotal mode. He gives us his impression of his own students (me included). Tobias does not like to speak badly of people, but the gentle chiding of his students gives us some idea of the relationship between student and supervisor.

Tobias' love of words and their origins comes through frequently. Some years ago he was a guest for dinner at our house in Cape Town and the conversation got around to Latin. He went on about how useful and important his high school Latin had turned out to have been for him. I told him (perhaps a bit injudiciously) that when I was offered the choice between Latin and typing in high school, I chose typing. I don't think he was impressed when I suggested that typing might be more useful than Latin in this age of computers, but I think he eventually forgave me.

I may be ignorant of Latin verbs, but

I can still type faster than I can write.

This book, along with Tobias' rich body of writing, forms an archive of personal views that will be fodder for future historians of science in South Africa. History is not an easy subject to write. The facts of the past are only one part of the material that is needed to paint a picture of what happened 'way back when'. The context is critical and we need time to fully appreciate the roots that give rise to the present. Tobias has left us with a legacy of his writings and his thoughts that will help us to place his work in context. But despite my emphasis on this book's historical importance, I do recommend that you read it simply for the joy of discovering this life in science. Tobias's enquiring mind and extraordinary memory comes through marvellously in these conversations and they are a pleasure to experience.

1. Wood B. (1989). An interview with Phillip Tobias. *Curr. Anthropol.* 36, 215–224.
2. Kramer B. (1991). On the retirement of Professor Phillip Valentine Tobias. *Newsletter of the Anatomical Society of Southern Africa* 23, 1–5.
3. Tobias P.V. (1991). Memories, images and visions: a valedictory. 1st Annual 4. Investec-Leech Lecture. University of the Witwatersrand, 26 March 1991.
4. Asch S. (1990). Time, Transcience and Tobias. SABC Television.
5. Tobias P.V. (2005). *Into the Past: A memoir*. Picador Africa, Johannesburg.

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