

A historian's view

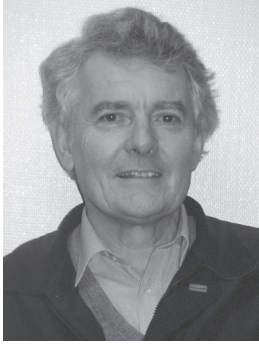


Photo by Nina Frödin

Christopher Saunders is Professor in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town. He has written widely on topics related to South African history and has a special interest in the history of South Africa's rule over Namibia and the way in which Namibia moved towards independence from the mid-1970s to 1990.

The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI): Please tell us about the new history project, 'The Road to Democracy in South Africa' (South African Democracy Education Trust, SADET: The Road to Democracy in South Africa, vol. 1, 1960–1970, launched by President Thabo Mbeki in Pretoria in June 2004).

Christopher Saunders (CS): I am the co-author of one of the chapters, and was a member of the editorial committee, so I am hardly an objective observer. Nevertheless, I think it is true that this is the most significant single volume to have been published on the South African liberation struggle to date. It draws upon a large number of new oral interviews, and makes use of such sources as trial records and the liberation archives at Fort Hare, the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape and other places that have been little exploited. While this volume is not the last word on the liberation struggle in the 1960s, it does take the historiography forward by examining, through case studies, what was happening in the regions and at the local level. Some of the gaps will be filled in the next volume, in particular, the history of the Pan-Africanist Congress in exile, and the origins of the Black Consciousness Movement. It may be that the decision to adopt the armed struggle is given too

much attention in this volume, and that the argument that resistance continued in the late 1960s is pushed too hard. There certainly was resistance, but the question is how significant it was, other than providing inspiration for later resistance. But the range of views expressed, and the coverage – from the ANC and Umkhonto weSizwe to the African Resistance Movement, Apdusa and aboveground activity – belies the charge that this volume is in some sense 'official history' and had a strong political agenda behind it.

NAI: How accessible are archives in South Africa?

CS: Some are readily available, at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape and at the University of Fort Hare, but others are not. The authors of the Road to Democracy volume were unfortunately not granted access to all the records of the apartheid state that survive – and a large number do survive, despite the wholesale destruction of records in the early 1990s. The archive of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is now in the National Archives, but is not accessible. Nor are some important archives abroad, including those of the Organisation of African Unity's Liberation Committee in Dar es Salaam. On the other hand, detailed catalogues of, for example, the British Anti-Apartheid

Movement and the Ruth First papers at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London are now available online.

NAI: Is there a risk of groups writing their own histories, at the cost of a unifying vision of the past?

CS: There is room for many different histories, but it is of course important that there be projects like the SADET one that bring together a range of historians – the majority of them in this case young black historians – to write history that goes beyond the parochial and a group-centred approach.

NAI: Could you please give an overview of the various digital archive projects going on in South Africa today?

CS: I am most familiar with the Digital Imaging Project of South Africa (DISA), on the Governing Council of which I serve. This is based at the Campbell Collections of the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal in Durban. Phase one of the project, to digitise forty anti-apartheid periodicals from the period 1960–94, was completed recently. DISA has obtained a new grant from the Mellon Foundation to proceed with phase two, in which primary archival and visual material relating to the liberation struggle in the same period will be digitised. The architecture for phase two has been devised and now the task is to find specialists who can select suitable material and write appropriate contextual essays.

We in DISA are keen to find out what other digital projects related to the South African liberation struggle are underway, and to try to promote national standards in digitisation. We do not want to duplicate what others are already doing, so it is important for us to know what is happening, for example with regard to digitising the archives of the ANC. We know of digital projects at the South African History Archive at Wits, South African History Online, the Centre for Popular Memory at the University of Cape Town, and elsewhere. There are also various overseas initiatives, like the one at the Nordic Africa Institute.

NAI: Is there a danger of duplication?

CS: There is a danger of different projects working in isolation from each other and not knowing what others are doing. That is why co-ordination is so important. Bringing information about the various initiatives together will in itself be most useful for future researchers of the history of the liberation struggle.

NAI: What of regional initiatives?

CS: DISA itself planned to become a regional project, but the Mellon Foundation decided to launch Aluka (which means 'weave' in Zulu) and now DISA is part of a much broader project, which has seen separate committees established to undertake digitisation projects relating to the anti-colonial struggles in Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia. To co-ordinate activities a regional committee has been established.

NAI: Are South African archives going to be moved to the United States?

CS: Some have the idea that the Americans wish to take over what belongs to the heritage of South Africa, and speak of 'American imperialism'. But the us-based institutions that have taken an interest in digital projects in South Africa, and provided the funding, and expertise, for them will at most have access to copies of documents or a copy of digitised material. So this is not the same as South African authors selling their original papers to overseas institutions, as has often happened in the past, something which is disgraceful in my view. I think that we in South Africa should be grateful for the resources that have been made available to implement these digitisation projects. They are helping us preserve and gain access to our heritage, and will provide future scholars with the means to write more substantial histories. What the universities now need to do is to train those future scholars and persuade them to work on the recent history of our country. ■