

## CITATION CHARLES VAN ONSELEN, 31 August 2017

*Thank you Professor van Rooyen, Director of Ceremonies, Esteemed Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen*

The HSRC Medal for the Social Sciences and Humanities is intended to go to the person who produced "the most outstanding contribution in the field of the social sciences and humanities".

Charles van Onselen (researcher, writer, scholar, and thinker) has met this requirement and is, this evening, the second recipient of this prestigious award. The knowledge project remains central to his life's mission and work. Whether it is the social, economic, legal or criminal aspects of people and events focused on Southern African society and histories, his work is shaped by and founded upon an impeccable scientific base that generates important scholarly and public interest in the topics and issues that he writes about.

SA History Online makes the following observation about his work: "*Charles van Onselen has truly impacted the manner in which South African history is perceived, by choosing relatively unknown topics, and therefore revolutionising South African history*".

His work displays an ongoing inquiry into investigating and interpreting the past (in some ways like an archeologist or, colloquially put, a *scholarly James Bond* (I have read somewhere that Professor van Onselen's dad was a police detective) – and like James Bond he digs, he searches, he discovers, he questions and he seeks to understand "truths" of that past (whether through characters, ideas, issues, and events).

In this way his work remains grounded in material culture, signifying a strong alignment with the humanistic turn. And this is also a task that we must not relinquish nor resist in the broader service of science, and more specifically in the service of the social sciences and humanities.

As a historian of southern African and trans-national history, Professor van Onselen stands in a league of his own. He is an internationally renowned historian and is one of only a few A-rated scholars in South Africa in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

He is the recipient of numerous prestigious international awards (including scholarships, fellowships and visiting professorships) for his scholarly contributions. His historical and literary skills are unsurpassed and his work – in terms of articles, chapters and books – remain indispensable reading for scholars of southern African as well as global history.

Professor van Onselen's career has taken him across a wide swathe of social science. His work straddles a number of disciplinary domains, and therefore has bearing upon and impact on thinking in those disciplines, notably Historical studies, Sociology, Criminology and Cultural studies. I have no doubt that there may even be more.

In reading his various contributions, it is patently clear that Van Onselen systematically undermines master narratives and scholarly agendas of ethnic nationalists who foster interpretations on an uncritical acceptance of the primacy of race as the sole foundation of a longed-for nation-state that shows little sign of materialising. He has sought to do this by pointing to the importance of using class as a concept when attempting to understand the complexities of historical processes and structures in the making of modern South Africa.

He has produced a richly textured oeuvre of monumental stature based on years of embedded fieldwork and painstakingly gathered data. These works demonstrate a breadth and depth, are crisply paced narratives that are vividly filled with characterisations, evocative descriptions, settings, mood and feelings – that bring real life from history.

Van Onselen equally brilliantly musters secondary sources and his own speculations with often limited primary documents, represented by his groundbreaking and pioneering works:

These include:

- ***Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1933*** (Pluto Press, 1976);
- ***New Babylon and New Nineveh: Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*** (Jonathan Ball, 1982, reprinted, in Johannesburg in 2001).
- ***Small Matter of a Horse: The Life of 'Nongoloza' Mathebula, 1867–1948*** (Ravan Press, 1984).

- ***The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985*** (James Curry, London, Johannesburg and New York 1996 work that took almost 15 years). The book was described as a 'detailed and compelling history of the effect of South Africa's Land Laws on one man and his family'.

***Surely the opening sentences must be one of the most memorable lines that could easily feature in a novel?***

*The seed is mine. The ploughshares are mine.*

*The span of oxen is mine. Everything is mine.*

*Only the land is theirs.*

- Kas Maine

This lyrical quote opens a remarkable and beautifully written oral history focused on the life of Kas Maine.

- ***The Fox and the Flies; The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath*** (Random House, London, Johannesburg and New York, 2007);
- ***Masked Raiders; Irish Banditry in Southern Africa*** (Zebra Books, Cape Town 2010).
- ***Showdown at the Red Lion; The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1858-1910*** (Jonathan Ball, Cape Town 2015).
- His latest book, released a few weeks ago is titled, ***The Capitalist Cowboy: John Hays Hammond, the American West and the Jameson Raid*** and is published by Jonathan Ball & Co. in Cape Town and the University of Virginia Press in the U.S.A. in August 2017. He is currently researching the historical link between Mozambique and South Africa.

The impact his work has made in the writing of history has been compared to that of Eric Hobsbawn, EP Thompson and Eugene Genovese.

It is difficult to abstract everything about Van Onselen's rich corpus, but perhaps a few salient points could be captured as distilled sound bites to represent his work and method:

- He is a scholar who writes as he breathes. In his work he has breathed life into the dry bones of history.

- His work compels us to read history by discarding preconceived ideas, and to rethink the way we see the world.
- There is life and movement behind the broad or narrow spines of the books he produces; they resist easy categorisation and the imposition of any order.
- His work shows an almost limitless engagement with odd lives. Using reading, questioning and listening, Van Onselen burrows into the events, ideas, feelings and of the extras of history, the disregarded and lesser known. He finds love and death, thirst for power, and unexpected solidarity. We might also be tempted to describe him as a historian of the soul. His studies also disclose something about human mystery.
- Every new book by Van Onselen is surprisingly unlike his others. He intrudes into the uninhabited spaces of his readers. In his biographies, he pitilessly ransacks the micro details of events and emotions of his characters' selves.
- In his depictions of the world of his subjects, in life as in legend, Charles van Onselen has given his characters their histories back, piece by piece, layer by layer. In this perspective, his work is uncommonly consonant. At the same time, it is richly variegated.
- Above all, it is people, individual men and women, that have *captured* him and been *captured* by him. It is their lives, their heaven and hell (if you like), that absorb him. The outer and inner realities are ever present, but it is through his characters and events that the whole historical process is crystallised.
- Every text by Van Onselen takes the reader on a page-turning journey through all the formative characters/events/emotions from our collective and shared histories.
- Van Onselen may not be described as a “novelist” or “literary scholar” – but rest assured, he is an elegant (and mischievous) storyteller.

If impact and reputation is anything to go by in the current context of quantification and impact of research outputs in the Academy, then we can must also testify. Charles van Onselen’s work is of such an order that an international television drama series based on two acclaimed books are at an advanced planning stage. Rights have been secured for ***Showdown at the Red Lion: The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1859-1910*** and ***Masked Raiders: Irish Banditry in Southern Africa, 1880-1899***.

In a recent interview with Peter Vale in *Thesis Eleven* we come across a paragraph on his views on discipline and methodology. What he says is powerful and I think relevant to close this citation with the 'voice' of the author:

*"I'm trying to do several things, and we could talk about what those things are. First, though, I would say the sharp distinction between history and sociology is a largely artificial one. I think it was EH Carr who once noted that: 'The more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both' [...] Sociology, taken on its own, tends to offer one a snapshot at a particular moment in time – it provides you with the space to study process and structure at your leisure, and to explore all the connections that go with it [...] History, on the other hand, offers you a moving picture and allows you to explore beginnings and endings and the crucial ways in which those two polar extremities are linked and connected [...] In biography, what interests me are two questions: to what extent does the subject act on history, and to what extent is history acting on the subject? It's where those questions intersect that you have authentic, deeply cognitive interactions. For me, the really magical moments in history come when you are dealing with the creative tensions that arise from ambiguity, contradiction or irony. Those are the joints of things, and to understand how things move, you have to understand the joints. So if you can isolate something that at first glance looks paradoxical, that's not the weakness of the situation, that's its strength – but you have to pull it apart. When you look at and understand irony, the son of paradox, you are close to insight. Likewise, when you confront something contradictory, you need to identify precisely where the fulcrum of the problem lies that renders it contradictory. At such points, one finds meaning. For me as a historian, such moments – when you are dealing with ambiguity, contradiction, irony or paradox – are hugely exciting."*

**Dear Professor van Onselen**

I have just told the audience that, in your own words, your project rises from delight, curiosity, thinking and insight, not disappointment. Your ongoing work in the Social Sciences and Humanities serves as an inspiration to us and for the generations to come. It is my privilege and pleasure, on behalf of the HSRC, to convey to you our warmest congratulations on the HSRC Medal for Social Sciences and Humanities for 2017, and to invite you to receive the Prize.