Thucydides’ famous quote, that he believed it was impossible “because of its remoteness in time, to acquire a really precise knowledge of the distant past or even of the history preceding our own period”, was the spark for my essay on Mugabe. Part of the history of Mugabe was still being constructed nightly on the news. This gave me a particular perspective on him that was heavily influenced by the Eurocentric views of our media. The recentness of the Mugabe story would mean the cross over between journalism and history would be somewhat inevitable, as would the influence of the authors’ subjective views of Mugabe. The three historians in my essay have all been journalists in Zimbabwe and their histories certainly reflect their journalistic experiences.

From a purely historiographical point of view, the book which most captured my interest was *Dinner with Mugabe* by Heidi Holland. Holland makes the rather grand claim that her book is ‘unique’ in its analysis of the Mugabe mind because she has undertaken a psychological analysis of the Mugabe mind and personality. This excited my interest because it provides an up to date (2008) example of an Annalist multidisciplinary approach to the writing of history as well as an opportunity to look at the extent to which psychological analysis is an accepted tool for the historian. While Holland’s book does contain various comments about Mugabe’s childhood and the effect this has had upon his personality and actions Holland does not expressly state how she has arrived at her psychoanalytic conclusions nor the assistance she has had from others in carrying out her analysis, other than acknowledging in the introduction the fact that she used those who had some training and background in psychoanalysis.

As I read the other two works by Meredith and Hill the question of ‘history and narrative’ came to mind leading inevitably to the work of Hayden White. Meredith’s work is a chronological narrative of the deterioration of both Zimbabwe and of Mugabe himself. What better ‘form’ of narrative to ‘choose’ that of tragedy for writing the history of Mugabe, particularly one written from a Western perspective. Hill places himself within his narrative as his publishers were keen to add the credibility of a history written from within the country itself. I was interested in this approach because it so obviously makes a virtue, rather than a vice, of personal involvement with the subject. The historian becomes a part of the narrative. While this might seem to be more journalism than history I was intrigued by the possibilities of seeing Hill as writing in the tradition of Thucydides who himself was part of the events about which he was writing.

The three works confirmed that there are many forms which can be adopted in the writing of history, each of which can bring different, and sometimes new, insights. The question which these histories of the recent past all raise, however, is the extent to which each work can be considered ‘objective’. Ultimately, despite their different approaches, each work was influenced by the views and experiences of the author and the contemporary context in which they were written.

The history of Robert Mugabe illustrates the wider difficulties that historians have faced in writing about post-colonial Africa, namely, that there is no universal truth regarding the construction of history. The Rankean notion of ‘objective history’ emerging out of a close analysis of contemporary documents has been swept away in the polemic of biographical histories produced by former journalists. The temptations to which historians succumb are exemplified by an analysis, and a comparison, of the works of three the historians, Heidi Holland, Martin Meredith and Geoff Hill. All three were at one time journalists who reported on Africa, a fact
which immediately raises questions about the extent to which their own personal pre-conceptions and experiences in Zimbabwe have influenced their work. Heidi Holland’s book *Dinner with Mugabe* is in essence a psychohistory in which she attempts to present Mugabe as a three-dimensional figure, and to provide new psychological insight into Mugabe’s “internal responses” to the circumstances that shaped his career. Holland claims that her history of Mugabe is “wholly unique in the analysis it brings to [Mugabe’s] state of mind”. Martin Meredith conversely, has been writing about Mugabe since 1979 and, as a prolific writer on Africa, has significantly influenced the Western interpretation of Mugabe. His latest work, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* relies heavily on his 2002 text *Our Votes, Our Guns* which was published following the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth and world condemnation of the 2002 elections. Geoff Hill’s history, *The Battle for Zimbabwe: The Final Countdown* was written to provide a more Afro-centric perspective, whereby he conveys the country’s point of view through stories from Zimbabweans. All these texts are written by white authors who have all lived and worked in Zimbabwe and as such essentially represent Eurocentric views.

Holland’s use of psychoanalysis to aid our understanding of a historical personality enters into controversial area of twentieth century historiography. While psychoanalytic theory was developed by Sigmund Freud during the early part of the twentieth century, historians were slow to see the possibilities of psychological analysis as a tool in historical research. It was not until the early 1960s with the publication of *Young Man Luther* by Erik Erikson and the presidential address to the American Historical Association by William Langer, that historians began to view psychology and psychoanalysis with less suspicion. Yet such a multidisciplinary approach to history was not new, indeed it could be considered an extension of the Annalists School which advocated the use by historians of other disciplines to create a “total history”.

Heidi Holland, in 2008, separates her own history from any form of apologist history for Mugabe’s actions by stating “in trying to understand a career like Mugabe’s we were careful not to explain away the behaviour of a murderer”. Holland explains “Mugabe’s political education came from the autocrat Ian Smith, who had learnt his formative lessons from imperious British colonisers.” There is no doubt that Holland has attempted to use a range of sources in order to achieve this degree of separation, however her digressions that follow certain sources make apparent her strong opinions of interviewees, somewhat thwarting her aim for an objective psychohistory of Robert Mugabe. Holland loathes the white former Rhodesian leader Ian Smith and openly admits it in her digressions throughout her interview with Smith.

*I smile at Smith, the dictator who put his country through an unnecessary war rather than surrender power. I have always loathed his sanctimony and crooked, bullying ways. I remember how much the pregnant mother of my godchild suffered after Smith ordered the arrest and solitary confinement of her husband.*

Holland’s attitude towards Smith reflects the historiography of empire in the post-colonial period. The immediate problem for Holland is that she is not a trained psychologist. Holland overcomes this problem by relying on others. In order to analyse Mugabe’s state of mind Holland enlisted the help of a psychologist with fifteen years clinical experience who was “familiar with Southern African perspectives”, a London based Zimbabwean psychologist and an Irish trained “emotional intelligence consultant” living in Dubai. The resulting history was described by Holland as a ‘psycho-biography’. The problem with Holland’s psycho-biography, however, is that nowhere in her book, after an initial statement in the preface, does she mention these individuals again. Nor does she give any information as to what school of psychoanalysis they belonged. It is not possible, therefore, to determine what state of psychological analysis has been carried out and whether it justifies the conclusions reached by Holland.

This is the very antithesis of the Rankean approach whereby his aim of scientific objectivity was to be the result of meticulous examinations of primary sources. Ultimately, this challenge to Ranke is reflexive of Holland’s annalist methodology.
Erik Erikson, along with William Langer, gave impetus to psychohistories, proposed a model of normal development in terms of 'the eight ages of man'. As part of his theory Erikson suggested that psychological development continued beyond childhood. He used the notion of adult development in studies of Luther and Gandhi where material from early childhood was scarce.\textsuperscript{16} If one is to follow this model of Erikson's, the very construction of Holland's history of Mugabe is questionable. Without expressly stating that she is carrying out a Freudian analysis of Mugabe, Holland appears to rely heavily on an interpretation of the effect that Mugabe's early life as a fatherless child has had upon his relationships and reactions to events\textsuperscript{17}. She concludes, "if he was as easily influenced by others as Tekere suggests, it was because a frail sense of self made him so vulnerable that he listened to anybody who acted like a parent and seemed to offer valuable guidance." Ultimately, Holland constructs a portrait of Mugabe's mind through explaining his decisions in terms of his childhood, largely ignoring any other possible explanation for his ruthlessness.

Heidi Holland collects the evidence upon which to base her psychoanalysis through extensive oral testimonies which she uses to assemble Mugabe's image. As Michael Bentley states,

\begin{quote}
the link between memory and orality, on the one hand, and styles of written preservation, on the other, has found a fresh boost amid the historiography of identity.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

While modern historians have "developed a number of interpretative theories about memory and subjectivity, [as well as] narrative structures which provide the framework for oral stories about the past"\textsuperscript{20}, Eric Hobsbawm in a 1985 essay termed oral history as, "a remarkably slippery medium for preserving fact." Inherently a highly problematic source, oral histories have come under scrutiny on numerous occasions where the consequent debate has "emphasized both the centrality of the medium and the degree to which it has entwined itself in identity as its crucial problematic."\textsuperscript{21} Although Holland claims her oral interviews have been recorded expansively on tapes, and hence gain reliability in one respect, she is still unable to escape the subjective nature of verbal accounts. She acknowledges "Tekere's account of what must have been a terrifying journey is impossibly idealised and magical."\textsuperscript{22} Holland's history, so heavily dependent on oral sources is reminiscent of the reliance by Herodotus on oral communication and eye-witness reports however, unlike Herodotus, Holland embedded her oral sources in documented fact. Holland describes the June 2000 legislative election integrating details such as "the MDC took 57 seats against the Zanu-PF's 62."\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, Holland has utilized the use of oral sources in 'turning its perceived weakness, the subjectivity of memory, into strength. Roper described this as 'oral history in the interpretative mode'\textsuperscript{24}.

Nonetheless, as Langer called for in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, "the urgently needed deepening of our historical understanding through exploitation of the concepts and findings of modern psychology"\textsuperscript{25}, psychohistory has much to offer and Heidi Holland's book provides an interesting historical interpretation of Robert Mugabe. Whether she has achieved an objective stance is not so clear.

In his recent book, \textit{The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence} (2006), Martin Meredith's interpretation of Mugabe aims to demonstrate that power corrupts and "absolute power corrupts absolutely"\textsuperscript{26}, and moreover that the state of Zimbabwe has ominous prospects for the future. Meredith constructs a persuasive case and builds his analysis of the reasons in a chronological manner, with a style akin to a narrative. In structuring his history under the framework of a narrative, questions of 'is history fiction?' prompt considerable discussion. Hayden White argues that 'in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they manifestly are, verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in sciences.'\textsuperscript{27} The situation in Zimbabwe is explored under the title \textit{A Degree in Violence} from an aphorism which Mugabe is claimed to have made in 2000.

Meredith's analysis is heavily based on the influence of the early years of Mugabe's rule and the impact of Ian
Smith's Rhodesian rule when he was imprisoned for eleven years: "During the war against white rule he became fixated by power that came from the gun." This thesis is developed in greater detail in the book by Meredith Our Votes, Our Guns. This continuation of the 'gun' imagery throughout Meredith's construction of his history on Mugabe strikes a chord with Hayden White's argument that 'once the historian has commenced research... he or she must choose specific theoretical concepts and narrative structures to make sense of the evidence.' White typifies Leopold von Ranke's use of comic 'emplotment' to demonstrate his theory in practice. This cohesive imagery by Meredith to confirm his point about the violence of Mugabe parallels Heidi Holland's regular analysis of Mugabe in terms of his childhood. Meredith's latest book however, develops a picture of the demise of any affluence that Zimbabwe had previously possessed, as well as the end of any support that it may have had from the west. Thus, in Hayden White's terms, Meredith has 'chosen' the tragic form of narrative in order to organise the past. Hill used sources, mostly interviews of people who have fallen foul of the Mugabe regime therefore names have sometimes been changed. Referring to his own many experiences in Zimbabwe as a journalist for the ZBC and using a chronological style he develops his first person analysis with the interviews so that he is part of the commentary. Not unlike Thucydides who was himself part of the Athenian war against Sparta "either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible." Hill's methodology is, therefore, as a narrator within his own contemporary text. Windschuttle uses Thucydides to claim that the origins of journalism lie in exactly the same place as the origins of history and Hill's book is as much about journalism as it is history. While such an approach would have been anathema to Von Ranke, Peter Burke makes the point that historians are now coming to realise that their work does not necessarily reproduce what happened but rather represents it from a particular point of view. He states:

_to communicate this to readers of history, traditional forms of narrative are inadequate. Historical narrators need to find a way of making themselves visible in their narrative, not out of self-indulgence but as a warning to the reader that they are not omniscient or impartial and that other interpretations besides theirs are possible._

While Hill does make some use of contrasting opinions to develop his narrative, as shown by his inclusion of possible scenarios from interviews with both Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Tsvangirai's MDC supporters over the death of one man, he is essentially pursuing journalism/history and pursuing it from a particular viewpoint.

Holland, Meredith and Hill, all illustrate Elton's assertion that "even at its best biography is a poor way of writing history. The biographer's task is to tell the story, demonstrate the personality," and in doing this, they often emphasise the chronological approach at the expense of analysis. This is demonstrated in these three authors and their texts, by a lack of appropriate referencing and footnoting, so that "...most people tend to think of it as a simple a form of history... [and,] it tends to underline the potential weakness of a narrative." Furthermore, the authors face the problem noted by post-structuralists who call attention to the impossibility of a complete interpretation, "for an historian, this lack of closure implies that there can be no meta-narratives, no overarching explanation of the passage of human history from past to future." Ultimately, the question of whether an objective analysis of Robert Mugabe is truly possible by Hill, Holland and Meredith can be examined in the light of E.H. Carr. "The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take... a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts." In essence, all three reflect not only the context in which they are writing but also the experiences and opinions of the authors.

Holland's psychohistory reflects an Annalist approach by using the tools of another discipline. Meredith has written, or at least has attempted to write, a tragic narrative. Hill takes an almost post-modern delight in putting himself at the centre of the history he has written. None of the three histories are conventional 'objective histories' in the von Rankean sense but all show the liberating effects of the realisation that history does not have to be of one particular type. The personal experiences of all three historians in relation to Mugabe...
and his tyranny in Zimbabwe have shaped the way their histories have been constructed. Therefore their analysis is not truly objective, but rather one that is subjective and influenced by their own context.

Annotated Bibliography


This book initially captivated my interest for this project, to examine writers on Robert Mugabe. Mugabe was being mentioned in the news on a regular basis and this was a new book on him. I also heard a radio interview with the author, Heidi Holland and then listened online to parts of her actual interviews with Mugabe. She claimed to be offering fresh insights about him and she was also attempting to let readers understand why Mugabe had become such a “monster”. Holland’s sources for her observations were varied. They ranged from interviews with Mugabe’s family, his brother, to the former Rhodesian leader, Ian Smith as well as other “white” leaders from pre-independence times, to Edmund Tekere, who co-founded Mugabe’s political party. There were also interviews with Mugabe’s many critics. Large sections of the interviews were presented in the text along with an historical examination of what was happening at the time. However the driving force, and perhaps the main appeal of the book, is her so called “originality” of research and her subsequent analysis of this research. Unfortunately this is also the overriding weakness as well. Her journalist training and angle for the story about Mugabe limits her objectivity. Her psychological insights are too general and lack theory based credibility. However they do provide an insight into the personality and do make an attempt to describe a personality who has “lost his moral compass”. (p. xv)


Geoff Hill’s book is very much the author’s personal analysis of his own time in Zimbabwe as well as an examination of Mugabe and his government. As such it is able to draw the reader into the text so that you can experience what it is like to be in Zimbabwe. This very readable account of life in Zimbabwe does however rely totally on interviews with people who have fallen foul of Mugabe and on the many negative experiences—the killings and human rights abuses. The appendix contains testimonies from torture victims. These stories, like the atrocity stories in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, add depth to the suffering and also develop the theme of the resilience of the opposition to Mugabe. Hill’s own account of being detained by a group of Mugabe supporters, war veterans, and his subsequent refusal to press charges when given the opportunity, reinforces the accounts heard on the nightly news of the powerlessness of Morgan Tsvangirai’s party, the Movement for Democratic Change. The constant use of first person however and the constant use of oral stories as sources does raise issues of historical objectivity as often the interviews could not be acknowledged for fear of reprisals.


The chapter “A Degree in Violence” proved to be a very useful chronology of events in Mugabe’s and Zimbabwe’s history from 1980 till now. Heavily based on his seminal text of 2002, *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the tragedy of Zimbabwe*, Meredith again develops the metaphor of Mugabe’s fixation with violence as a means of maintaining power. The main sources for this chapter and particularly his descriptions of the Matabeleland massacres and the land invasions of the 1990s were also cited by Hill in his text but whereas Hill’s narrative relied heavily on the personal context, Meredith’s book gives the narrative a more general and western Eurocentric context.

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Endnotes:
3. ibid., p.xv
7. Peter Novick asserts in his work: 1988 *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 577 “Recent criticisms of received views of truth and objectivity in psychoanalysis were of particular interest to historians, because in many ways they recapitulated the interwar critique of historical objectivity by Beard and Becker, in both their less and their more cogent moments. And, more than in any other field, recent epistemological debates in psychoanalysis have explicitly referred back to earlier discussions of the objectivity question in historiography.”
8. Annalist historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in his work *Montaillou* (1975), shows a systematic and analytical use of primary sources to deduce conclusions and transform such into a collective and ‘total’ history of the village of Montaillou in the 14th century.
9. Holland, op.cit., p.xvi
10. Holland, op.cit., p.xv
11. Ibid., p.89
12. Post-colonial perspectives are seen to be “largely critical or condemnatory, denouncing imperialists as brutal exploiters of subject peoples, who justified themselves by crude racist depictions of the conquered as inferior beings.” Webster A: 2006 *The Debate on the Rise of
the British Empire, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p.3
13. Holland, op.cit., p.xv
14. ibid., p.xvi
15. This contentious nature of psychohistory is epitomised in the work of John Demos, Entertaining Satan, Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England, Oxford, 1982, who used an analysis of group psychology to explain the outbreak of witchcraft at Salem in the 17th century. Demos controversially used a variety of psychoanalytic schools in his explanations, but at least, unlike Holland, he set out the psychoanalytic tools he used to reach his conclusions.
17. Davis, D. A.: “Oedipus Redivivus Freud, Jung and Psychoanalysis” 23 June 2007, http://www.haverford.edu/psych/ddavis/jungfreu.html: Davis states that “Freud developed the theory of transference — the position that we all carry with us as templates for future interpersonal relationships the residues of the most significant emotional attachments of our childhood”
18. Holland, op.cit., p.51
21. Bentley M: op.cit., p.157, “the arrival of a series of publications devoted to this aspect of historical work such as Paul Thompson’s International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, complemented by the German periodical Bios on the European continent” sparked such a debate about the nature of oral histories.
22. Holland, op.cit., p.472. ibid., p.139
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25. Green A and Troup K: op.cit., p.59/60
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