

# OBITUARY

## BILL FREUND (1944–2020)

Petr Skalník<sup>a</sup>

Emeritus professor of economic history and development studies in the University of KwaZulu-Natal and one of the most productive historians of Africa in recent years, Bill Freund was American by birth but South African by choice. Never orthodox, his cosmopolitan career was varied and rich. William Mark Freund, who penned his works and was known to all as Bill Freund, was born in Chicago to Jewish refugee parents from Central Europe. His father's pedigree goes back to East Bohemian Jewry. His grandfather went to school at Hradec Králové (Königgrätz).

Bill was a loyal friend to all whom he befriended while working and teaching in the U.S., United Kingdom, Sweden, Nigeria, Tanzania, Madagascar and South Africa. It was Durban and the University of Natal in South Africa where he settled for good in 1985. From the beginning his chosen field was the history of Africa, whether it was during his undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago or his doctoral studies at Yale (1966–1971). The topic of his PhD thesis was “Society and Government in Dutch South Africa: The Cape and the Batavians, 1803-1806.” In order to complete it he spent more than a year in the archives of Amsterdam, The Hague, London, Oxford and Cape Town. His command of languages was astounding: French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian but also Swahili and Afrikaans.

His methodology was “materialist,” informed by Marxist historical thinking. His spiritual ancestors were E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. His politics was leaning to the left, critical of the problematic role of the United States in the post-war period, and very much in favour of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle. But Bill was always independent as a scholar, critical of post-colonial and post-apartheid politics and scholarship. Among his greatest abilities was fast reading combined with deep analysis which resulted in lucid writing.

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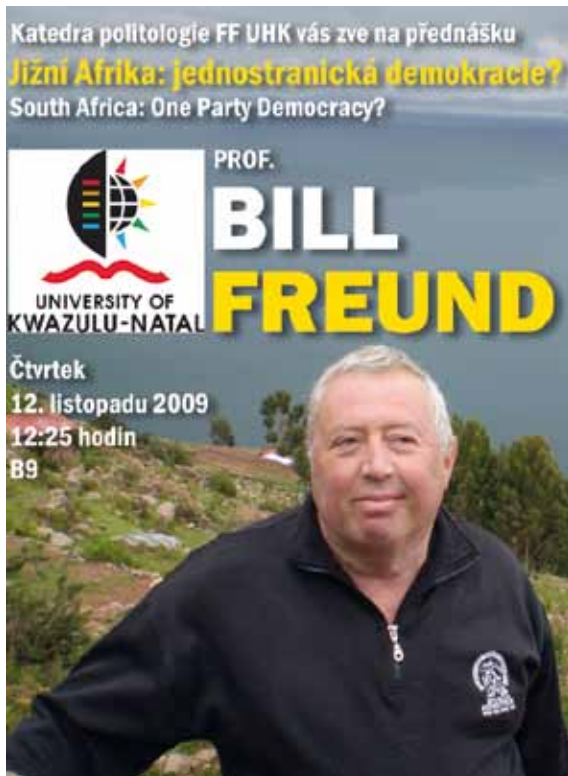
He reviewed many books for leading journals including *Journal of African History*, *African Affairs* and *Review of African Political Economy*, eventually in 2018 on also *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*. He was a peer-review reader for a plethora of publishing houses. And prompt in returning his assessments of manuscripts. His books and an impressive number of journal articles and book chapters found grateful readers in Africa and beyond.

While his PhD thesis remains unpublished (an article based on it was published in *The Journal of African History* in 1972), he is most famous for the synthesis *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (three editions 1984, 1998, 2016) and the concise textbook *The African City: A History* (2007). Freund's four years of lectureship at the Ahmadu Bello University at Zaria, Nigeria enabled him to write a seminal piece of economic history entitled *Capital and Labour in the Nigerian Tin Mines* (1981). The book *The African Worker* (1988) drew its inspiration and data from the Nigerian study but his subsequent monograph, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban in the Twentieth Century* (1995) resulted from his studies on Durban. Freund contributed a chapter on the city of Durban in the edited volume *Africa's Urban Past* (2000). The volume *(D)urban Vortex: South African City in Transition* (2002), co-edited with the eminent economist Vishnu Padayachee, contained Bill's study of the Durban city government as a factor in economic development. During the state of emergency of the late 1980s Bill co-founded the journal *Transformation*, which soon became a flagship of critical anti-apartheid thinking on South Africa.

Bill, after all, turned from 13 years of headship of the Department of Economic History into leadership of the discipline and programme in Economic History/Development Studies that ended when he retired in 2005. He was also engaged in the comparison of governance, urban dynamics and economic development in metropolises such as Durban, Abidjan and Marseille. The monograph *The African City: A History* is remarkable by its wide span, both historical (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial) and pan-African (analyses of northern African cities such as Algiers and Cairo along with the cities of Tropical Africa). Freund proves that he was at home in several disciplines, not only history and economy, but also political science, sociology and anthropology. His writing was always painstakingly researched and his erudition unsurpassed.

Petr Skalník: **BILL FREUND (1944–2020)**

Bill Freund was a passionate traveller and fond of attending international meetings. The present writer regularly saw him at the biennial European Conference of African Studies. In 2009 he visited Hradec Králové with a lecture “South Africa: One Party Democracy?” (see the poster added to this obituary). That visit gave him an opportunity to look up places where his ancestors had come from. No doubt he included his experiences into the memoir “Bill Freund: An Historian’s Passage to Africa” which he finished shortly before passing away. This autobiography is announced by the Witwatersrand University Press to appear in Spring 2021. Africanists all over the world will remember Bill Freund as a brilliant scholar and a multisided personality distinguished by his human kindness and eminent knowledge of Africa’s social and economic history.



Poster from lecture “South Africa: One Party Democracy?”

## Select bibliography of Bill Freund

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