

John Paul Clow Laband, 1947–2025

by Graham Dominy

Emeritus Professor John Laband died suddenly at his home in Greyton in the Western Cape on 5 August 2025 aged 78. John was one of the pre-eminent historians of the war and society school with a particular focus on the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. His numerous works gained him an international scholarly and popular audience. His work on colonial land dispossession in South Africa still resonates powerfully in the acrimonious land debates of today.



John Laband

John was a popular teacher and with his profound intellect, wide-ranging knowledge and insights his lectures were always interesting, insightful and amusing. He was generous, tolerant and considerate towards his students (indolent, errant and otherwise, I write from personal experience). His research into nineteenth-century Zulu and Natal history began with his MA. One of his earliest publications, based on this thesis, appeared in *Natalia*.¹ Rereading it after many years I am struck by how well

Johannesburg born, his secondary education was at St John's College in Houghton with its English public-school ethos and imposing buildings designed by Herbert Baker. It was a privileged start to life. The reality of being a white male in apartheid South Africa hit home after he matriculated when he was conscripted into the South African Defence Force and had to spend many uncomfortable months guarding the sandy and remote South African coastal enclave of Walvis Bay in what is now Namibia. How much of this gritty and tedious military experience subliminally influenced his later writing and research interests can only be conjectured.

Returning to civilisation, John studied at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) for a BA degree. He took to student life with enthusiasm and sailed through his undergraduate studies in English and History while enjoying campus life to the full. He was a stalwart of the student Dramatic Society and met Fenella, whom he later married, as she too supported the thespian efforts on campus. John then read for the History Tripos at the University of Cambridge and took to life at Sidney Sussex College with the apparent ease of a swan on the river Cam. Returning to South Africa he began lecturing in the Department of History and Political Science at his alma mater. At this time his academic interest was the Indian Mutiny or Rebellion of 1857.

written, meticulously researched and thoroughly referenced it is, all distinctive hallmarks of John's lifelong scholarship.

In 1979, a centennial conference on the Anglo-Zulu War was held at the University of Natal, Durban. I remember John, his eyes shining with excitement, declaring that he had heard nothing significant said about the Zulu side of the war and that he was going to write his PhD on the Anglo-Zulu War from the Zulu side. Thus began an illustrious career. John was fortunate in his choice of subject because the Anglo-Zulu War was, and still is, one of the most popular topics in nineteenth-century South African history both here and abroad. With his Cambridge background and his easy lecturing and writing style, John was well positioned to make the most of the connections.

But first there is the long collaboration with his American colleague in the Pietermaritzburg history department, Paul Thompson, to consider. The first fruits of this appeared in 1979 as *A Field Guide to the War in Zululand 1879*.² The two of them investigated every battlefield of the conflict, exploring, measuring, comparing, mapping and inflicting unforgivable mechanical abuse on John's smart Italian sports car that was never designed for bundu bashing. The *Field Guide* was an immediate success and a second edition that included

the fortifications in the old colony of Natal followed four years later. Visitors to the battlefields almost invariably carried a copy of one or other edition with them as they ventured out to what were becoming increasingly popular tourist attractions. A major revision appeared in hardcover in 2000.³ The University of Natal Press was well pleased with the success of these works.

Meanwhile John was awarded his PhD by the University of Natal, which was published in 1992.⁴ John was never a theoretical fetishist and preferred to write narratives that explored the past in a manner that attracted modern readers and students to develop their understanding of the complexities of the past without ideological straitjackets.

A veritable flood of books, monographs and articles appeared, many solely authored, many in collaboration with other writers. His CV lists 22 books published between 1980 and 2023. These do not include articles or edited books of which *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988*, jointly edited with Rob Haswell, appeared to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the city of Pietermaritzburg in 1838.⁵ John felt that it was a difficult book, perhaps inappropriate, given the rising tide of violence around the city as apartheid entered its death throes. Nevertheless, it has stood the test of time and still provides a mine of useful information for readers and researchers alike.

John played a major role in the publications series on Zulu history funded and produced by the KwaZulu Monuments Council. Some criticised the series as being Inkatha propaganda by another name. However, in John's hands, among others, the series was meticulously and professionally produced and academically well-grounded and it was not his intention to serve a political agenda in any way. John's writings and research on Zulu history did earn him the respect of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the KwaZulu homeland leader, and official recognition from that government.

John was also active in the cultural and heritage sectors. He was a member of various academic and professional associations and of the Pietermaritzburg Society, a powerful local heritage advocacy group. He was part of a triumvirate headed by the architect Gordon Small that included Paul Thompson. Together they led the society in providing well-argued and well-researched opposition to property developers and local politicians intent on wrecking Pietermaritzburg's Victorian heritage for greed and profit.

Shortly after the advent of democracy in 1994, John was appointed chairperson of the council of the Voor-

trekker Museum. This was once a bastion of Afrikaner nationalism, so the appointment of an English-speaker with John's background certainly marked a moment of transformation. The new democratic government also used John's services on various committees and boards whereas the previous National Party government had ignored his talents.

In 1995 John published *The Rope of Sand*.⁶ This was at the time when South African democracy was in its infancy and the newly named province of KwaZulu-Natal was still wracked with political and social conflict. John's account of the drama, grandeur and trauma of Zulu history a century or more earlier was timeless and very well received.

In 2002 John received an appointment in the history department at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. This move to Canada was a tribute to his distinguished international reputation and his writings were already reflecting broader war and society interests. While he was in Canada, his publications included several on topics far broader than the Anglo-Zulu War and Natal and Zulu history.⁷

He excelled in all his academic posts. In Pietermaritzburg he rose to full professor and head of the history department and on leaving the university he was elected a fellow of the University of Natal. In Canada, at Wilfrid Laurier he also headed the department and received accolades from the institution and from his students. One of them in an online assessment of academic staff wrote, 'He is too good for this place'.

He returned to South Africa in 2015 with the accolade of emeritus professor at Wilfrid Laurier University; and, on settling in the Western Cape, he was made an honorary research fellow at the University of Stellenbosch. He was also elected a fellow of Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge, a considerable compliment. Retired he was not as the publications kept coming. One of his later works aroused considerable press and public comment: *The Land Wars* published in 2020 was as well researched and elegantly written as all his other works and it attracted much discussion.⁸ John dissected the brutal and often deceitful processes by which Dutch and British colonisers deprived the indigenous inhabitants of their land in well-written, easily readable prose. There was considerable interest in the media as well as in academic circles because of the resonance of *The Land Wars* with current vocal and acrimonious political debates on the land question.

The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom 1837–1840 aroused particular interest in the Afrikaans press in

2023.⁹ The Great Trek has lost its central place in South African historical mythology and Afrikaners sometimes feel obliged to bury their understanding of the past while some modern post-1994 historians excoriate it. And here was an *Engelsman* discussing the events of the 1830s without accusations and rancour, but outlining the events lucidly and in a manner that allowed each side to gain an inkling into the position of the other. I watched several Afrikaners with military backgrounds at a launch for the book outside Pretoria exclaim with surprise when John explained the arrival of the trekkers from King Dingane's perspective. The tactical difficulties facing the Zulu commanders at the battle of Blood (Ncome) River had also never been considered by them.

John received numerous awards and gave prestigious public lectures at various institutions. He achieved the status of go-to historical pundit with foreign and South African media. His last major work, *The Shadow of Isandlwana*, was praised and acknowledged in 2024 when the Society for Army Historical Research (SAHR) shortlisted it for their prestigious Templer medal.¹⁰ John and Fen went to London in 2025 where he was inducted as a fellow of SAHR in a lavish function at the Moorgate. It was a fitting highlight to a most distinguished career.

He leaves his wife, Fenella, son, Felix, and daughter Zoe. He also leaves a huge gap in South African academia and in the lives of his friends, colleagues and former students. I would like to leave the last word to John:

I have been called a voyeur for delving needlessly into the past and uncovering offences best forgotten, and an escapist for looking over my shoulder instead of straight ahead. I suppose that, as an historian who has been publishing books and articles over the past 40 years, I am not innocent of these transgressions. Yet, as I see it, we cannot appreciate why the world with all its intractable problems is the way it is unless we understand how the current situation came about. And in that understanding can lie the remedy of past wrongs.¹¹

- I acknowledge with grateful thanks the helpful comments and advice of the Laband family and many of John's former colleagues, friends and students.

NOTES

- 1 'The battle of Ivuna (or Ndunu Hill)' *Natalia* 10 (1980): 16–22.
- 2 John Laband and Paul Thompson, *A Field Guide to the War in Zululand 1879*; with cartography by Bruno Martin (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1979).
- 3 John Laband and Paul Thompson, *The Illustrated Guide to the Anglo-Zulu War* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000).
- 4 *Kingdom in Crisis: The Zulu Response to the British Invasion of 1879* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1992).
- 5 John Laband and Rob Haswell (eds), *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988: A New Portrait of an African City* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, 1988).
- 6 *The Rope of Sand: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1995).
- 7 One of them was *Bringers of War: The Portuguese in Africa during the Age of Gunpowder and Sail from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2013).
- 8 *The Land Wars: The Dispossession of the Khoisan and AmaXhosa in the Cape Colony* (Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2020).
- 9 *The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom 1837–1840* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2023).
- 10 *The Shadow of Isandlwana: The Life and Times of General Lord Chelmsford and his Disaster in Zululand* (Barnsley: Greenhill, 2023).
- 11 *Sunday Times*, 25 October 2020.