

## *The Oxford History of South Africa: Censorship and SA historiography under Apartheid*

In the acknowledgements page to the second volume of *The Oxford History of South Africa*, published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in 1971 with Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson as editors, a 'Note' mentioned that '[l]egal opinion' had been solicited for Leo Kuper's chapter on African Nationalism. The verdict was that the piece 'infringed South African law' through 'references to books and articles dealing with African Nationalism, policy statements of the African National Congress, and statements by African leaders.' The publishers and editors therefore decided to excise the chapter from the South African edition, but make it available internationally.<sup>1</sup>

The South African edition therefore featured 52 blank pages where Kuper's chapter would have been. As the historian Ronald Hyam noted, it was self-imposed, anticipatory censorship. It also extended beyond Kuper. Two other contributors apologised in their footnotes for being unable to cite the writings of three 'banned experts, Professor H. J. Simons, Mr G. Mbeki and Mrs Helen Joseph.'<sup>2</sup>

The editors, publishers and authors received scant credit for their preemptive self-policing. Kuper was based in California, hence there was little risk to him, even if his was an inflammatory piece, which it wasn't. Reviewers found it alternatively 'quiet and dull', with the self-censorship according it a notoriety it hardly deserved. For Hyam, the only discernible risk for OUP was subsidising a book that *might* be banned. It was a *financial* risk.<sup>3</sup>

Therein lay the rub. In 1946 OUP's sales office in Cape Town was upgraded into a publishing branch with the Educational Manager Leo Marquard tasked with bringing out 'special books ... in the educational sphere.' That stipulation was important. In the second half of the twentieth century OUP established an internal globalised ecosystem of knowledge production. It involved subsidising the academic, Oxford based Clarendon Press by profits that the London-based educational publishing wing generated through school textbook sales in Africa and Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The Cape Town branch initially functioned as a microcosm of this larger system. David Philip, who was appointed educational publishing assistant in 1954 noted that under Marquard OUP South Africa published or initiated the publication of oppositional texts by liberal authors such as Alan Paton, Edgar Brookes, Monica Wilson, and David Welsh. These academic works were subsidised by educational publishing, for which a large market was emerging with the introduction of Bantu Education. This overcame a lack of opportunities in the white educational market in South Africa, owing to the apartheid government's established preference for Nasionale Pers, Perskor and HAUM de Jager. Eighteen literary texts were by published by OUP in African languages between 1957 and 1963, mainly poetry, drama and fiction in Xhosa, with two Zulu texts and one of Sotho poetry.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Acknowledgements' and 'Note' in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa*, II South Africa 1870-1977 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hyam, 'Are We Any Nearer an African History of South Africa?', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1973, p. 616.

<sup>3</sup> Hyam, 'Are we...', pp. 616-17; James B. Wolf, review of *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Volume II, in *Africa Today*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1972, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Davis, 'Histories of Publishing under Apartheid: Oxford University Press in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2011, pp. 80, 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-3, 85, 98.

At the time, the apartheid government was creating a framework for systematic censorship as part of its escalating war with African nationalism. The Prisons Act of 1959 made it an offence to publish information about prisoners while the Sabotage Act of 1962 criminalised quoting or publishing prohibited persons.<sup>6</sup>

On Marquard's retirement in 1962 Philip was promoted to Editorial Manager, but in his nine years OUP published few oppositional books as censorship ramped up. The Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 provided a framework for censorship on moral, religious, sociological or political grounds. Philip claimed the OUP never submitted anything to the censorship board, but research by Caroline Davis has revealed that the branch's Trade Manager, Fred Cannon regularly make such submissions. For example, in February 1964 he submitted a proof copy of Lewis Nkosi's *The Rhythm of Violence* to the Publications Control Board. On being informed in March that 'importation and circulation' of the book was prohibited, he dropped the matter. Cannon's aim was to protect the all-important educational sales and he welcomed the new system as being more straightforward than self-censorship.<sup>7</sup>

The OUP continued to publish books by Marquard's authors such as Alan Paton, whose biography of Hofmeyr appeared in 1964, and it also persisted with projects he had initiated, but it increasingly relied on London to publish books threatened with South African proscription. When the branch was barred from publishing Mary Benson's biography of Albert Luthuli, Philip persuaded OUP London to publish it in 1964.<sup>8</sup>

Philip acknowledged that black educational publications subsidised academic texts, but he justified it by the latter's oppositional nature, though this stance was riddled with contradictions. For example in *The Oxford History of South Africa*, which was edited in Cape Town but received the all-important cachet of the Clarendon Press imprint, volume one in 1969 featured a famous prefatory declaration by Wilson and Thompson that 'the central theme of South African history is the interaction of peoples of diverse origins, languages, technologies, and social systems meeting on South African soil.'<sup>9</sup> This broke with most histories of the country which had adopted South Africa's white population as their point of view and centre of interest, most recently in a 1968 publication, the C. F. J. Muller edited *500 Years: A History of South Africa*.<sup>10</sup>

That said there was little interaction by peoples of diverse origins amongst the contributors to the *Oxford History*. Wilson and Thompson explained this by noting that 'few' Africans, Asians, or Coloureds in South Africa had unfettered opportunity for research and writing, and those who did were 'for the most part occupied with other commitments'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the eight contributors to the second volume had all resided or had resided in South Africa, but none were black, coloured or Asian. Hence the financial structure of oppositional publication entailed redistributing profits gained from supplying Bantu Education to support tenured white academics.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 88.

<sup>9</sup> 'Preface' in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa*, I South Africa to 1870 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. v.

<sup>10</sup> C. F. J. Muller ed., *Vyfhonderd Jaar Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis* (Pretoria: Academica, 1968), pp. xiii, 489.

<sup>11</sup> 'Preface' in Wilson and Thompson eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa*, I, p. vi.

By 1970 the Cape Town branch faced pressure to conform to OUP's policy that branches not only become self-supporting but generate income for the press. Philip resigned over this to engage in anti-apartheid publishing through his own imprint David Philip Publishers from 1971 to 2002. He took with him many OUP authors, including Paton.<sup>12</sup> OUP's net profit strategy also saw it vet books imported from Britain to ensure their acceptability to apartheid censors, while the 1970s witnessed a trend among multinational educational publishers including OUP to cease publishing texts critical of apartheid. OUP in London and Oxford accordingly began refusing oppositional titles from Southern Africa, even though they could have published them internationally. Their choice was again guided by a desire to protect their hold over the economically lucrative Bantu Education market.<sup>13</sup>

The result was an effective closure of OUP's general and scholarly list to focus on Bantu Education publishing. In its perfected form the model saw profits garnered in the periphery used to support scholarly endeavours in the metropole, with the intellectual cachet of Clarendon Press publications boosting the attractiveness in the periphery of education textbooks bearing OUP's name.<sup>14</sup>

The system remained in place despite changes to apartheid that reduced the need for such complicity. In a memoir of his student days at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Clive Glaser has noted that by the late 1970s and 1980s government had begun opening white tertiary institutions to black students. He also observed 'one of the curiosities of the apartheid state', namely that it 'allowed a remarkable degree of intellectual freedom in the historically liberal English-speaking universities'. This included standing aside as social science and humanities departments employed leftist and radical scholars. The result was that at Wits Marxist analysis was taught openly and students freely carried copies of books by Marx, Lenin, Althusser, and local radicals. Though banned to the public, the books were freely available in the university, where topics such as the history of political resistance were taught from a Marxist perspective.<sup>15</sup>

OUP could have produced for this market but it stuck doggedly to its focus on serving Bantu Education, a policy that reaped rich commercial dividends. Between 1970 and 1984 the growth of the South African branch outstripped its nearest OUP competitor by more than twice.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, thank you for the invitation to present at this launch. My previous work on historiography has focused on intellectual production in knowledge value chains, but not so much on the economics of knowledge production and how that creates essentially neocolonial structures that in the South African case collaborated willingly with local censors.

Beyond this complicity, the second area where I found complexity I was not expecting was in terms of the apartheid state's disposition. I am doing another paper presently on African historiography. If, as a humanist, you were to have attempted a battle of ideas against such regime ideologies as *ujamaa* from the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s, or *authenticé* from the University of Lubumbashi in the 1980s it would not have ended well for you. The

---

<sup>12</sup> Davis, 'Histories of...', pp. 92, 98.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-9, 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Clive Glaser, 'Thompson on the highveld? Social history and humanist socialism in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s', *Social History*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2020, pp. 428-9.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, 'Histories of...', p. 96.

apartheid regime's willingness to countenance opposition from the ideological sciences - which is the substance of the industry that we humanists are involved in - is a curiosity that raises all sorts of interesting questions about the kind of a state it was.