

## MICHAEL CROWDER, 1934–88

Professor Michael Crowder, a distinguished historian, teacher and administrator, who died in London on 14 August 1988 at the age of fifty-four, was Joint Honorary Director of the Institute (with Ioan Lewis) in 1981–82. He was a member of the Executive Council of the Institute from 1982 to 1988; Chairman of the Publications Committee from 1979 to 1982, when he left for Botswana, but he remained an active member of the Committee till the time of his death. Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi, who collaborated closely with him on several projects, writes as follows:

Michael recalls in his first published book, *Pagans and Politicians* (Hutchinson, 1959) that, following fifteen months of military service in Nigeria, he had returned to visit West Africa while a student reading PPE at Oxford, and had been unable to respond immediately to the question why he was in Africa. Two years later, in 1957, at the age of twenty-three, he had himself confronted the same question while steaming down the coast towards Guinea Bissau.

It was a depressing vista and I sympathised with the many Africans who wonder at the European's love of West Africa. After all, it is dull in its scenery, oppressive in its heat, intolerant in its climate; and if today one does not die of its diseases, they can certainly hasten progress to the grave. . . . Yet something must explain why that dauntless explorer of the eighteenth century, Mungo Park, could write ' . . . but though all the Europeans who were with me should die, and though I were myself half dead, I would persevere; and if I could not succeed in the object of my journey, I would at least die on the Niger?.

Something too must explain why the countless Englishmen who have grumbled and groused about West Africa return each year to continue work when they could easily find other posts. I can speak today only for myself and answer a question I found unanswerable two years before. For me, the attraction of West Africa is the attraction of its people, largely unrestricted by the straightjacket of Western religion and social behaviour, with very little past, but with everything in the future; of an exciting life that since the Second World War has been moving at a rate unprecedented in history. It is an excitement of revolution . . . a revolution in the social, economic and cultural patterns of a people. . . .

I realised what really matters for the future of West Africa is not so much the machinations of the elder and first generation of African politicians, but the calibre and quality of the generation that has grown up under them, never really oppressed by colonialism and the white man's rule. . . . I could not help feeling confident in West Africa's future.

It is worth quoting these words at some length for they seem to have set the agenda for Michael's 'life-long love affair' with Africa. (The phrase is Michael's, in the introduction to *Stepping Stones*, 1983, about Sylvia Leith-Ross and Nigeria). It was a reciprocal relationship. He learned much from Africa, and whatever he learned he freely shared. This was the basis of his stupendous contributions to African Studies. In spite of many disappointments and frustrations, he never lost his initial excitement, commitment and sense of mission of the revolutionary. He was in fact a kind of secular missionary preaching the gospel of decolonisation and development, building

institutions and journals especially for the promotion of African Studies and cultural renaissance in different parts of Western and Southern Africa. Evidence of this lies in the number of journals he edited or co-edited (they include *Nigeria Magazine*, Lagos; *African Notes*, Ibadan; *Odu: Journal of African Studies*, Ife; *Sierra Leone Studies*, Freetown; *Tariikh*, Ibadan; *West African Journal of Archaeology*, Ibadan; *History Today*, London; *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, Gaborone; *Journal of African History*, Cambridge) and in the institutes and departments which he set up or headed: the Institute or Centre of African Studies at Ibadan, Fourah Bay, Ife and Amherst (USA); the Centre for Cultural Studies at Zaria and Lagos; the Department of History at Bayero University, Kano, and the University of Botswana.

He quickly learned that the African past was not so irrelevant to his cause and could not be so readily dismissed: not only was there an African past; that past would to a large extent shape the future. As he travelled around in 1956–57 he recognised places like Katsina which, he said, were ‘steeped in history’ and could not be understood or described in the present without reference to the past. He was soon to admit that even those he had called the pagan tribes of Guinea could not have remained static since the time they were first mentioned in fifteenth-century Portuguese accounts. In his preface to the first edition of the *Story of Nigeria* in 1962 he said that his principal aim in undertaking the work was ‘to dispel the assumption of which I was once guilty and which is still often made that before the colonial period Africans had very little history’. That, in effect, marked his transition from a traveller and journalist to a historian.

In the first phase of the transition it was the colonial impact that fascinated him. The writings of Basil Davidson had drawn him to Guinea Bissau. From there he travelled through Senegal to the Gambia, and the impact of three different colonial systems (Portuguese, French and English) on groups of related peoples could not but excite his attention. This led him to a more detailed archival study of assimilation in the Four Communes of Senegal, which Oxford University Press published in 1962 as *Senegal: a study of French assimilation policy*, and an article entitled ‘Indirect rule: French and British style’, published in *Africa* in 1964. By then, he had entered academic life as Executive Secretary of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan. He had also started to teach, first at Columbia Summer School, (1963, 1964) followed by a year at Berkeley (1964–65), before his appointment at Fourah Bay College as Director of African Studies. He was thus moving away from impressionistic views of colonialism. By the time he published his *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, he had modified his approach, stressing less the policies and more the impact on the lives of Africans. Some of the earlier contrasts between British, French and Portuguese colonisations that he had emphasised became less significant. He studied Bai Bureh’s rebellion in detail, edited the collection of essays on *West African Resistance* and co-edited the symposium on *West African Chiefs: their changing status under colonial rule and independence*.

These led him to the second stage, in which his interest began to transcend the colonial impact and to focus more on the lives and the history (including pre-colonial history) of Africans themselves. These were the years that

produced the two-volume *History of West Africa* and the *Historical Atlas of Africa*. He was directing the institutes of African Studies at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and at Kano and Zaria. He worked with artists, organised festivals of art and culture, created museums, and so on, but he was also an Executive Council Member of the Historical Society of Nigeria; he revived *Odu: Journal of African Studies* at Ile-Ife, and was fully involved in teaching in Kano and Zaria. He seemed to have kept his historical writings separate from his day-to-day life of promoting cultural activities. Considering the extent of his involvement and achievements in the cultural field, he wrote little on the subject.

His years as editor of *History Today* (1979–81) marked his transition to a third stage, in which he linked his involvement in history more closely with his involvement in issues of culture and development. This meant seeing history in the broad context of contemporary issues and concerns. It was in fact a return to the wider interests of *Pagans and Politicians* and of his earlier career as journalist. His return to Africa strengthened this. His Southern African writings show a focus not on the colonial impact as such, but on the history and daily lives of peoples. Southern Africa provided opportunities for comparisons and contrasts with West Africa and therefore encouraged the pan-African outlook of the *Historical Atlas*. Above all, he was no longer making a demarcation between history and contemporary culture, between the domain of the historian and those of the sociologist and political scientist. His focus on Tshekedi Khama was precisely because it bridged the gap. The general editors of the *Cambridge History of Africa* recognised this, invited him to join the team of editors of the *Journal of African History* and entrusted him with editing Volume VIII of the *Cambridge History*, covering contemporary Africa since 1945. No one could fail to notice the concern, authority and prophetic vision of the essays and chapters produced in this period: 'Botswana and the survival of liberal democracy in Africa'; 'Us and them'; 'Whose dream was it anyway?'

For one so active and so creative, whose life was cut short so suddenly, Michael seems to have left few loose ends. There are papers in press and unfinished drafts. In particular the biography of Tshekedi Khama is unfinished. But his work as a whole has an air of completeness about it. This is largely because his career consisted of a series of apparently self-contained jobs and assignments at different locations which he completed with the same meticulous planning, efficient execution, identifying and training of able successors, evaluating, tidying up, handing over and moving on to tackle other jobs. The connecting link was Michael's commitment to and faith in the African and his future, as well as his own warm personality and gift for making friends. He used friendship as a creative force for getting the best out of people and uniting them for a common purpose. His death has deprived us of this force, but those of us privileged to have known him and worked with him will always cherish his memory.

On Michael Crowder's early days in Nigeria, Robin Horton writes:

I should like to start by recounting how I first met Michael, way back in 1952.

I had done the last part of my national service in Nigeria, but had ended up under a bit of a cloud. On returning a few months later as a civilian to do some amateur anthropology, I somewhat incautiously visited my former officers' mess at Enugu and tried to strike up a conversation with the members. Dead silence all round. Only one very young man, a new face to me, made any attempt to reply; which he did with some hilarious comments on the trials and tribulations of life in the Nigeria Regiment. As our duologue continued amongst the puce and infuriated faces of the massed colonial military, he suggested we should take a walk. As soon as we were outside he introduced himself as Michael Crowder and explained everything by saying, 'Don't take any notice of those childish people. They are just keeping quiet because the colonel said that if you reappeared you were to be sent to Coventry. I've got no time for that sort of nonsense. And in any case I've been wanting to meet this bad man I've been hearing so much about.'

In that little world of bristling majors and cowed lieutenants, Michael's reaction seemed to me to have taken as much guts as many more obvious military exploits. It was the beginning of thirty-six years of friendship.

At that time I was squatting in the old DO's touring rest house on Nike Lake, just a few miles outside Enugu. Every few days Michael would march his platoon up there. If he found me in, he would send his men round the lake on some reconnaissance exercise and settle down for a chat. He would tell me how hellish life was in the mess; how the other officers came down on him because he painted and took an interest in the place and the people. But although he could not wait for his service to be finished, he also could not wait to go home, get his degree and come back. For him Nigeria offered a marvellous contrast to the drabness of England, and he had already decided that that was where he wanted to live and work.

Not long after I had returned to England Michael came out in a truly Jobian plague of boils, was duly declared unfit for further service in southern Nigeria, and was sent to the supposedly more salubrious Kaduna. As he never developed so much as a pimple through all his subsequent years in the south, he always felt that this must have been a response to the miseries of life in the Enugu battalion.

In Kaduna Michael found himself in slightly more promising conditions. His commanding officer quickly came to appreciate his organisational talents and put him in charge of the motor transport section. Here he had an interesting job and interesting people to work with. But he also had a marvellous lever against the military establishment. If one of the senior officers crossed him, he simply declared the wretched man's vehicle sick until further notice. Since not many Englishmen knew much about the insides of cars in those days, there was nothing the victim could do but lay off Michael, when of course his car would promptly be restored to health.

By this and other ingenious means he created for himself a little breathing space and began to enjoy life, even the military side of it. The culmination of his service was the traditional annual 'bush camp' or field manoeuvres, which took his battalion to the remote Mambila Plateau. The officer in charge of the expedition, it seems, first got the battalion lost somewhere in those hilly fastnesses and then fell ill. It was left to Michael, the small boy among the officers, to find out where they were and get them on the road back to the

barracks again. So, painting and over-friendliness with the locals notwithstanding, he ended up something of a military hero.

I had been at Oxford for a year by the time Michael came up. He was still as determined as ever to return to Nigeria after his degree. As earlier at Nike Lake, so, hunched in front of a gas fire on cold, dank, winter evenings, we talked about ways of getting back and about what we would do when we got back. It was always 'when' and never 'if'. We both landed assignments in Africa for our two long vacations, he with contracts for newspapers and a publisher, I with the Nigerian Antiquities Service. And these, of course, gave us even more to mull over on winter evenings.

For Michael Oxford was not a particularly happy place. Through his work he found himself thrown in with a set of undergraduates whose life style was one of aggressive intellectual display. Being deep down a very diffident person, he found their company depressing. He often complained that they made him feel small and stupid. And there were times when he seemed near to despair. I think it was largely his daydreams of Africa that kept him going, until finally, to his vast and entirely genuine astonishment, he got a First.

His diffidence about his abilities stayed with him despite his degree. Even after his appointment to the secretaryship of the Institute of African Studies at Ibadan, he was still doubtful as to whether he really had what it took to be an academic historian. I sometimes think that, at this stage, had it not been for the reassurance of his friends that he had what it took and much more, he might have backed out of academic life altogether.

Many people were unaware of this side of Michael. They heard the authoritative voice, noted the commanding, sometimes almost military manner, and assumed that that was him. For those who knew him better, however, all this was little more than a front that enabled him to survive and get things done in a rather ruthless world.

Diffidence can be a crippling thing. But in Michael it was combined in a strange way with warmth and exuberance, and was marvellously creative. In his own work it drove him on in a ceaseless struggle to write better history. In his dealings with others it had amazing effects. He was always ready to see in those around him the gifts he so much doubted in himself; and he plunged into their projects with all his reserves of energy and imagination. Even quite ordinary people found themselves and their work lit up and transformed.

#### PUBLICATIONS

##### *Books*

- 1959 *Pagans and Politicians*, Hutchinson.
- 1962 *The Story of Nigeria*, Faber (published in the USA as *A Short History of Nigeria*, Praeger); rev. edn 1966; third edn 1973; fourth edn 1977.  
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- 1964 with Lalage Bown (eds.), *Proceedings of the First International Congress of Africanists*, Longman (published in USA by Northwestern University Press).
- 1967 with David Brokensha (eds.), *Africa in the Wider World: the interrelationship of area and comparative studies*, Pergamon.

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- 1970 with Obaro Ikime (eds.), *West African Chiefs: their changing status under colonial rule and independence*, University of Ife Press.
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- 1971 with J. F. Ade Ajayi (eds.), *History of West Africa*, vol. I, Longman; second edn 1976, third (rev.) edn 1985.
- 1973 *Revolt in Bussa: a study in British 'native administration' in Nigerian Borgu 1902–1935*, Faber.
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- 1978 *Colonial West Africa: collected essays*, Cass.
- 1981 with Roland Oliver (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Africa*, Cambridge University Press.
- 1983 (ed.), *Stepping Stones: memoirs of colonial Nigeria 1907–1960*, Peter Owen (the posthumous memoirs of Sylvia Leith-Ross).
- 1984 (ed.), *Education for Development in Botswana*, Macmillan and the Botswana Society.  
(ed.), *Cambridge History of Africa*, vol VIII, c.1940–c.1975, Cambridge University Press.
- 1985 with J. F. Ade Ajayi (eds.), *Historical Atlas of Africa*, Longman (published in the USA by Cambridge University Press).
- 1988 with Neil Parsons (eds.), *'Monarch of all I survey': Bechuanaland diaries 1929–1937* (diaries of Sir Charles Rey) Botswana Society and James Currey.  
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- 1966 'Tradition and change in Nigerian literature', *Triquarterly*, Evanston, 1966.
- 1968 'West Africa and the 1914–18 war', *Bulletin of IFAN*, 20 (1), series B.
- 1969 Guest Editor of *Tarikh*, 2 (4), 'France in Africa', with article on 'The administration of French West Africa', pp. 59–71.
- 1970 with La Ray Denzer, 'Bai Bureh and the Sierra Leone hut tax war of

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- 'Whose dream was it anyway? Twenty-five years of African independence' *African Affairs*, 86 (342): 7–24.
- 1988 'Botswana and the survival of liberal democracy in Africa', in Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis (eds.), *Decolonization and African Independence 1960–80*, Yale University Press.
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- 1980 *West Africa: 1000 AD to the present day*, Longman.
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- 1986–87 with Elizabeth Paren, *Macmillan Social Studies for Botswana* vols., Macmillan, Botswana.

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- 1976 with Umaru Ladan, *Sani Goes to School*, African Universities Press
- 1978 with Christine Ajayi, *Akin Goes to School*, African Universities Press