



Africans at Oxford

By Justin Pearce

Africans may be a small minority among the Oxford student body, but the university has over the past century nurtured some of Africa's most prominent people. This article traces the history of Africans at Oxford by looking at the famous men – and one woman – who have studied here.

In 1959, a young Ghanaian called John Kufuor was studying for his bar examinations in London, living in the house established in Muswell Hill by his well-off family. There was some excitement in the house over the impending visit of Professor Kofi Abrefa Busia, exiled from Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, and now working in the Netherlands. When Busia arrived, he spent some time talking to the young Kufuor, and asked him what he wanted to do once his bar exams were completed. When Kufuor said he wanted to go to Oxford, Busia asked which college he wished to enrol at. Kufuor, knowing little of the Oxford collegiate system, answered: "If your tutor is still alive and teaching at Oxford then he would be the one I would want to study under."¹

So it was that Kufuor ended up being invited for an interview with Professor KC Wheare, who two decades earlier had been Busia's tutor at University College – Busia was the first African student to have enrolled there. Wheare by this time was rector of Exeter, and it was there that Kufuor enrolled in 1961 – despite the unconventional step of having taken his bar exams first – to read philosophy, politics and economics.

Neither the professor nor the young bar candidate could have known at the time that they would both go on to head the Ghanaian government. Busia, whose early political activity had been in the Ghana Congress Party, returned home after the coup against Nkrumah in 1966, and became prime minister once civilian rule was

¹ Ivor Agyeman-Duah, *Between Faith and History: A Biography of J.A. Kufuor*. Africa World Press, 2003.

restored in 1969. The president at the time – a largely ceremonial role under the constitution of the Second Republic – was another Oxford graduate. Edward Afuko Addo had read law at St Peter’s in the 1930s, and on his return to Ghana became a founding member of the United Gold Coast Convention

After independence he served as chief justice in the 1960s before becoming president.

Busia spent only a few years in the prime minister’s office before being deposed in a further coup. Kufuor’s arrival in the president’s office in Accra in 2000 represented a landmark in Ghanaian political history: it was the first time in the country’s 43-year history that power had changed hands by peaceful means.

Nigeria’s most famous Oxford graduate, by contrast, is associated with a particularly violent period in that country’s history. Emeka Ojukwa, the Nigerian general who led the short-lived secession of Biafra from Nigeria in the late 1960s, had studied at Lincoln College from 1952 to 1955. His wealthy father had already put Ojukwa through an elite English school, and “more than any other African student, he at least should have become an Englishman with a black skin,” Ojukwa’s friend, the novelist Frederick Forsyth notes in a biography.²

Yet Oxford had the opposite effect: “As he learnt more in those years about the Empire what it had been, what it had done and how it had done it on the face of Africa, he became increasingly aware of his own African-ness.”

That same era of burgeoning African nationalism also brought a Kenyan trade unionist, Tom Mboya, to Ruskin College in Oxford, on a scholarship provided by Britains’ Trade Unions Council. Mboya spent a year at Ruskin studying industrial relations – he was later to become minister of economic planning and development in Jomo Kenyatta’s first post-independence government, a role that Mboya fulfilled until his death in 1969.

In South Africa, prominent Oxonians of the past century have included Pixley ka Isaka Seme, who founded the ANC in the early 20th century; Bram Fischer, the anti-apartheid activist and lawyer who defended Nelson Mandela at his treason trial; Piet Koornhof, who was a cabinet minister during apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s; and Frene Ginwala, speaker of the first post-apartheid parliament.

Seme, originally from the rural areas of what is now KwaZulu-Natal, had already completed a BA at Columbia before entering Jesus College to read law. A South African newspaper article of the time spoke of Seme’s intention to become “an attorney general for his people”. After graduating from Oxford he practised at the bar in London for a year before returning to South Africa in 1910. While in London he made contact with others, black and white, who were campaigning against the

² Frederick Forsyth, *Emeka*. Spectrum Books, Ibandan 1982.

racially discriminatory provisions in the Act of Union that consolidated South Africa within its present borders.

"Seme had left as a quiet but ambitious herdboy twelve years before and now returned as a sophisticated, highly qualified professional and man of the world," Richard Rive and Tim Couzens's biography notes.³

Some two decades later, Bram Fischer's first impression of Oxford was a place that "was bleak and cold, and I felt just as if I were going to prison". Oxford nevertheless broadened the young man's horizons. "It was a time of ideological ferment, of mass unemployment, hunger marches and financial crises, of fierce dissention over the merits of capitalism and communism," Martin Meredith writes in his biography of Fischer.⁴

"Oxford offered a choice between the October Club which celebrated the Russian revolution, Oswald Mosley's Fascist Club, or the Labour Club, brimful of socialists."

The atmosphere of turmoil and boundless political possibility that prevailed in 1930s Europe helped to shape Fischer into one of the most prominent Afrikaner dissidents of the century.

Piet Koornhof, on the other hand, left Oxford and took up a position in the heart of the Afrikaner nationalist political establishment. His DPhil thesis at Hertford was on migrant labour among black South Africans. As minister for Bantu affairs in the 1970s and 1980s – a role which remained largely unchanged despite various euphemistic changes of title – Koornhof was in a sense the enforcer of "grand apartheid", the strategy aimed at securing the total racial partitioning of South African territory, while still allowing white capital access to black labour. As President PW Botha battled to shore up a system in deep crisis during the 1980s, Koornhof once famously declared that "apartheid is dead".

Once apartheid was really dead, it was another Oxford graduate who became speaker of the parliament that was elected in the first all-race elections of 1994. Frene Ginwala had studied law at Oxford in the 1950s and returned to South Africa before being sent by the ANC to help establish a presence in exile, in anticipation of the organisation being banned. She returned after the ANC was once again made legal in 1990. Ginwala, incidentally, is one of the few well-known African women to have been educated at Oxford – a state of affairs which probably says as much about Oxford traditions as about power and politics in Africa. Ginwala was not only South Africa's first female speaker of parliament – she also took up the post at the moment when the apartheid-era assembly, whose members never included more than a handful of women, gave way to a new parliament which was not only racially representative, but also 25% female.

³ Richard Rive and Tim Couzens, *Seme, the Founder of the ANC*. Skotaville, Johannesburg 1991.

⁴ Martin Meredith, *Fischer's Choice: A Life of Bram Fischer*. Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg 2002.

Botswana, its 40-year history less troubled than that of Ghana or South Africa, has been served by three presidents, two of whom studied at Oxford. Seretse Khama, after graduating from Fort Hare university in South Africa, spent a year at Balliol in 1945, but left Oxford after being told he lacked sufficient qualifications in Latin to enable him to include law in his degree. Instead, he moved to London and studied for his bar examinations, and went on to practise as a barrister there. In 1961 he founded the Bechuanaland Democratic Party, the nationalist movement that came to power upon the country's independence in 1966. When Khama was succeeded on his death in 1980 by Ketumile Masire, the new vice-president was Festus Mogae, who had graduated in economics from University College. Mogae went on to succeed Masire as president, and remains Botswana's head of state.

But enough of politics. It is hardly surprising that African Oxonians are among the continent's leading thinkers and academics. Students enrolling on the MSc in African Studies at Oxford today are going to have at least a passing encounter with the work of Ali Mazrui, one of Africa's most noted – and most controversial – writers on African politics and the world order. Mazrui, who read for his DPhil at Nuffield, is currently chancellor of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology in Kenya.

Loyiso Nongxa, currently vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, was South Africa's first black Rhodes Scholar when he arrived at Oxford in 1978 after studying mathematics at Fort Hare. After receiving his DPhil at Oxford in 1982, he held positions at Harvard and other American universities. On returning to South Africa in the early 1990s he lectured at the University of the Western Cape, before taking up the vice chancellorship at Wits.

After a few years in this role, Nongxa was joined in the higher echelons of Wits by another former Rhodes Scholar, Edwin Cameron, who was invited in 1997 to chair the university's governing council. Cameron has written appreciatively of "a close working relationship" with Nongxa, "a brilliant and engaging mathematician".⁵ Edwin Cameron himself is best known for his work first as a human rights lawyer who championed the rights of people living with HIV and Aids; and latterly as a Supreme Court judge, and as South Africa's first holder of public office to declare publicly that he himself was living with Aids, in the face of social stigma and government denial about the gravity of the epidemic. In his introduction to Cameron's book, *Witness to Aids*, Nelson Mandela hails the author as "an important South African who has made lasting contributions in many fields, not least the law".

Aaron Sloman, born in what is now Zimbabwe, studied mathematics and physics in South Africa before coming to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. Studying at Balliol and later St Antony's, he completed a DPhil in philosophy in 1962. Armed with this

⁵ Edwin Cameron, *Witness to Aids*. Tauris, London 2005.

dual scientific and philosophical education, he went on to become a pioneering thinker in the area of artificial intelligence.

From a later generation of scholars, another Oxford-trained scientist who has gone on to prominence is Zimbabwean Arthur Mutambara. He studied engineering in Harare, before a 1991 Rhodes scholarship brought him to Merton College. There he completed an MSc in engineering, followed by a doctorate in robotics and mechanatronics. Moving to the United States he went on to hold several professorships in this field, as well as positions in business consulting and management. Outside the world of robotics, however, Mutambara has become widely known in the past two years as a politician. His activist role began while he was at the University of Zimbabwe in the late 1980s. When Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, was riven by a disagreement over whether to participate in the 2005 senate elections, Mutambara stepped forward as a faction leader within the party.

Cecil Rhodes, an English Oxford graduate who made his career in Africa, once remarked that “wherever you turn your eye, an Oxford man is at the top of the tree”. John Kufuor quoted this remark when he visited Oxford in October 2007, hosted by the Black Association of Rhodes Scholars – before reflecting on the irony of a racial supremacist like Rhodes having founded a scholarship which, starting with Loyiso Nongxa, has begun over the last three decades to fund black as well as white African students at Oxford.

“Thankfully, decades after the demise of Rhodes, in acknowledgement of changed times, the trustees changed the criteria of eligibility,” President Kufuor noted.

The Rhodes scholarships bring a handful of Africans to Oxford each year, but access is limited by the fact that several of the awards remain linked to specific boys' schools in South Africa. Commonwealth and private scholarships help to edge up the African population at Oxford – and a tiny number may share the good fortune of Kufuor or Ojukwa in having families who can pay the fees. Nevertheless, a century after Pixley Seme, finance is still the greatest barrier to other Africans following him to Oxford.

Today, the University of Oxford is one of the world's leading centres for the study of Africa. The African Studies Centre acts as a focal point for graduate level work and faculty research on Africa, organizing conferences and seminars on topical issues. Alongside vibrant doctoral programmes, the Centre runs an MSc in African Studies, inaugurated in 2006, which is already recognised as Europe's most prestigious and successful training programme in its field. Applications from students from Africa are welcomed, and the Centre is proud of the diversity of students accepted to the MSc course. Several scholarships exist which are open to overseas applicants, and the African Studies Centre is currently working hard to secure funding to enable more African scholars to study in Oxford and to continue the rich and important relationship between Africa and Oxford.