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Black Books

by Christian Høgsbjerg

Carol Polsgrove. *Ending British rule in Africa: Writers in a common cause*
Manchester University Press, 2009; xviii + 186 pp.; ISBN 978 0 7190 7767 8.

The points of view which we seek to present in a hostile white world have to be put forward at psychological moments, so when one can get a publisher receptive to the idea of presenting our manuscripts, one has to put all other matters aside and seize the opportunity.¹

So wrote the black radical Trinidadian intellectual George Padmore from his base in London to his fellow Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois, the great black American historian of the American Civil War, in 1946. Padmore was a towering figure of the twentieth-century black Atlantic, a man whose dedication to the cause of Pan-Africanism and training in the Communist International made him a grandmaster in exploiting moments of psychological weakness in the ‘official mind’ of British imperial powerbrokers. Padmore’s life and writing are at the heart of Carol Polsgrove’s welcome new work, *Ending British Rule in Africa*², a study of the literary world of Pan-Africanists in late imperial Britain.

The Pan-Africanist movement that arose in Britain in the 1930s may have been tiny, but it played its part in the birth of the new black nation of Ghana in 1957 and the wider process of decolonisation in Africa.³ Using a wide range of archival sources, including Padmore’s surviving correspondence and various police records, Polsgrove retells the story of this movement with great scholarly verve. Padmore is centre stage: a figure of real importance in the decline and fall of the British Empire, thanks to his mentoring of a younger generation of anti-colonial activists from Africa, above all the future leader of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. Around him is an impressive supporting cast: his boyhood friend and compatriot, the revolutionary Marxist CLR James; the Kenyan nationalist Jomo Kenyatta; the South African novelist Peter Abrahams; the black American novelist Richard Wright. Alongside these, Polsgrove draws miniature portraits of a host of lesser-known figures, including several white Englishwomen such as Padmore’s partner Dorothy Pizer.

Susan Pennybacker, in her recent discussion of Padmore in *From Scottsboro to Munich* (also reviewed in this issue of *HWJ*) suggests that his ‘passion for journalism, which engaged the very largest “white” establishment diplomatic and economic issues of his day, separated him from others who also called themselves Pan-Africanists’.⁴ Polsgrove makes a quite different argument. As the subtitle of her work suggests, for her, the little group of Pan-Africanists in imperial Britain that came together in organisations such as the International African Service Bureau and built the fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945 were first and foremost a community of ‘writers in a common cause’. She tracks in detail the publishing history of many of the books written by these men, above all the many works written (or co-written with various collaborators) over a twenty-year period by Padmore, ranging from *How Britain Rules Africa* (1936) to *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa* (1956). That Padmore had the drive to produce so many often highly original writings on top of his other commitments was remarkable,

and Polsgrove is undoubtedly right to stress how for these activists ‘writing was itself a political act’; ‘politics served their writing as well as the other way round’ (p. 168).

No less remarkable was the fact that such forthright critiques of colonial power, more often than not subject to draconian state censorship in colonial Africa and the Caribbean, managed to find publishers in the ‘dark heart’ of the British Empire itself. Polsgrove writes very illuminatingly about the personal and political relationships between the Pan-Africanists and individual British publishers that made this possible. The latter obviously had to keep one eye on the market for such works in Britain – a market that the Pan-Africanists themselves were convinced did exist. In 1936 C L R James reviewed one book in characteristically optimistic terms:

Africa Answers Back, by Prince Nyabongo (Routledge, 7s. 6d.), himself an African educated at Yale and Oxford, describes the native life of an East African tribe. The book, authoritative and written with disarming simplicity, is a powerful satire on the imperialist claim that it ‘civilises’ Africa. It was an enormous success in America, and will be here also.⁵

In fact the years 1936 to 1938 were something of a golden age for Pan-Africanist radicals aiming to get published in Britain, despite the fact that their anti-Stalinist sympathies put them beyond the publishing phenomenon of the Left Book Club. Critical to their success were their connections with the Independent Labour Party, through whom they had managed to acquire one sympathetic radical publisher, Fredric Warburg, of Secker & Warburg. Over just three years, as Polsgrove notes, Warburg published six Pan-Africanist works: ‘Padmore’s How Britain Rules Africa and Africa and World Peace, James’s World Revolution, The Black Jacobins, and A History of Negro Revolt, and Kenyatta’s Facing Mount Kenya – and James had translated a seventh, Boris Souvarine’s Stalin’ (p. 42). However, as war clouds gathered in late 1938, even Warburg, despite having just proudly published James’s Black Jacobins, his classic Marxist history of the Haitian Revolution, seems to have drawn back from the Pan-Africanists, perhaps sensing a rise in British nationalism. When James’s former student and compatriot Eric Williams presented Warburg with the manuscript of his 1938 Oxford University doctoral thesis on ‘The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery’, he was given short shrift.

‘Mr. Williams, are you trying to tell me that the slave trade and slavery were abolished for economic and not humanitarian reasons? I would never publish such a book, for it would be contrary to the British tradition.’⁶

When Padmore himself offered a manuscript entitled ‘The Black Man’s Burden in Africa’ to the publishers George Allen and Unwin in 1939, one reader’s comments were equally dismissive.

Whether it is wise or even practicable to publish what is in effect anti-British propaganda at the present time seems to me more than doubtful; Mr. Padmore should have spoken earlier – or hereafter; there would have been a time for such a word. But now?⁷

Polsgrove’s account of these tribulations shows very clearly why Padmore and others felt the need to seize on those rare ‘psychological moments’ of opportunity to

raise the case for black self-determination and self-government. However, her concern to portray the Pan-Africanists around Padmore as concerned primarily with 'asserting themselves as writers', albeit 'political writers', is sometimes overstated. '[L]et us at least consider the possibility,' she writes, 'that they spent so much time and energy on writing not only in the hope that it would have its effect but also because they wanted, simply, to write and be published' (pp.168-9). The image of 'writers in a common cause' is certainly evocative, inviting parallels with contemporaneous anti-colonialist writers' communities such as the founders of Negritude among the Francophone Pan-Africanists in 1930's Paris, and the Progressive Writers' Movement in South Asia.⁸ But while it would be fascinating to explore such parallels further, the differences in aim and outlook should not be forgotten. In 1938 James concluded *The Black Jacobins* with a dismissive comment alluding to the Negritude poet Aimé Césaire and other 'dabblers in *surréalisme*', these 'isolated blacks' at the Sorbonne.⁹ Almost two decades later, during the Algerian Revolution, Padmore expressed his frustration at the new grouping in Paris around the journal *Présence africaine*: 'While the Arabs fight these boys spend their time in café talking culture' (p.150).

This is not to say the Pan-Africanists in Britain dismissed the importance of culture. They were keenly aware of the need for black colonial subjects to develop their own 'counter-culture' of resistance in the imperial heartland, one that encompassed the theatre and music as well as print culture. CLR James wrote an anti-imperialist play on the Haitian Revolution, 'Toussaint L'ouverture', which starred Paul Robeson in the title role when it was performed in London in March 1936. His Jamaican friend and comrade in the Pan-Africanist movement, Amy Ashwood Garvey, was also a playwright (and indeed also a theatre producer) who had taken her shows across America and the Caribbean in the 1920s.¹⁰ After moving to London, she and her partner, the Trinidadian musician and actor Sam Manning, together with the Guyanese clarinetist Rudolph Dunbar, opened the Florence Mills Social Parlour in London's Carnaby Street, named in tribute to the black American artiste, and offering food and live music. Delia Jarrett-Macauley has given a vivid sense of the importance of this venue in 1930s London, noting 'a steady stream of black artists was trickling into Britain'. 'They brought jazz, they brought blues ... in the evenings artists, activists, students drank and supped and kept their spirits high at Amy Ashwood Garvey's West End restaurant.' James himself recalled that Amy Ashwood, the first wife of Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, was 'a wonderful cook' and 'if you were lucky, the 78s of Trinidadian calypsonian Sam Manning, Amy's partner, spun late into the night'.¹¹

There were certainly some people close to Padmore for a time, like Peter Abrahams and Richard Wright, who were writers first and foremost. But it is unlikely that many others in Padmore's circle would have seen themselves in this light. Padmore was raised in a West Indian intellectual tradition which venerated literature, but he was an agitator, an organiser and a theoretician. The notion that he was driven principally by literary ambition would have astonished him. His writing, he said, had 'no literary disguise'. In a letter to Richard Wright in 1954, he confided his distaste for Peter Abrahams and the great Barbadian novelist George Lamming, 'I avoid these pretentious upstarts like the plague' (pp. 133, 139).

As for CLR James, he was indeed, as Polsgrove says, 'a man who loved literature', although it is not true, as she claims, that his first success was *Black Jacobins* (p. 168). At the time of its publication he was already well known in colonial Trinidad as a short story writer, and there seems little doubt that he could have made a literary career in Britain with relative ease. Before coming to Britain in

1932, he had been a member of the avant-garde, implicitly anti-colonialist Beacon Group of writers, who denounced the 'bourgeois philistinism' and hypocrisy they saw around them. But on leaving Trinidad for Europe and witnessing there the rise of fascism amidst the mass unemployment caused by the Great Depression, James, like many of his intellectual contemporaries, underwent a profound political radicalisation. He recalled how 'fiction-writing drained out of me and was replaced by politics'. His commitment to revolutionary Marxism and 'class struggle Pan-Africanism', that manifested itself from 1934 onwards, altered his life's course.¹² He later recounted how during the late 1930s, 'my publisher's wife', Pamela De Bayou, 'a wonderful woman... begged me almost with tears to settle down and write'.

I said NO ... a fine sight I would have been with two or three books or a play or two to my credit and hanging around the political world, as all these other writers do, treating as amateurs, what is the most serious business in the world today.¹³

Polsgrove's description of the Pan-Africanists in Britain as primarily a writers' community understates this hostility to the merely literary, as well as side-lining those activists who were not such prolific writers – such as the Barbadian leader of the Colonial Seaman's Association Chris Braithewaite (alias 'Jones'), his compatriot and leader of the Negro Welfare Association, Arnold Ward and, for that matter, Amy Ashwood Garvey herself.¹⁴ She acknowledges the importance for Padmore of his close political relationship with the ILP, and more attention to this aspect of the Pan-Africanists - their integration into a wider leftwing network in Britain - would have helped to illuminate some of the influences shaping their impressive record of publishing and self-publishing. For example, the British anarchist publication *Spain and the World* perhaps inspired the title of the Pan-Africanists' first newsletter, *Africa and the World* (both groups used the same printer, and James personally knew Vernon Richards, the editor of *Spain and the World*). The title at least of Padmore's 400-page *How Britain Rules Africa* may have echoed the title of a 1929 pamphlet written by the British Communist Robin Page Arnot, *How Britain Rules India*. More speculatively, one wonders if *The White Sahibs in India* by the ILP writer and British anti-imperialist Reginald Reynolds (published by Secker & Warburg in 1937) may have influenced James – an acquaintance of Reynolds – as he settled on the title *The Black Jacobins*.

Nonetheless, *Ending British Rule in Africa* is a pathbreaking book. Polsgrove's excavation of one rich seam of the black presence in British print culture, and her exploration of some of the often underground networks of 'black internationalism' in and around the imperial metropole, represents an important advance.¹⁵ As an inspirational account of the remarkable achievements of the Pan-Africanists around Padmore, it serves too as a reminder of the even deeper historical excavations required to bring to light a host of lesser-known black anti-colonialist thinkers and activists, of which at present we have only tantalising glimpses.

Christian Høgsbjerg has recently completed a doctoral thesis, 'C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain, 1932-38', in the Department of History at the University of York (UK).

¹ Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British rule in Africa: Writers in a common cause*, Manchester, 2009, p. 80.

² For more on Padmore, see James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary; George Padmore's path from Communism to Pan-Africanism*, London, 1967, Bill Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, Manchester, 2003, and Fitzroy Baptiste and Rupert Lewis (eds), *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary*, Kingston, 2009. The latter includes a chapter by Polsgrove, 'George Padmore's Use of Periodicals to Build a Movement'.

³ The pioneering account here was Imanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement*, London, 1974, and for one notable recent work to detail at least some of this narrative, see Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939*, London, 2008.

⁴ Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain*, Oxford, 2009, p. 102.

⁵ *New Leader*, 29 May 1936.

⁶ Eric Williams, *Inward Hunger; The Education of a Prime Minister*, London, 1969, pp. 52-53. A revised version of the thesis would be published in the USA in 1944 as *Capitalism and Slavery*, but this classic work would not find a British publisher until 1964, twenty years later.

⁷ Polsgrove, *Ending British rule in Africa*, p. 47. Padmore's 'The Black Man's Burden in Africa' was never to be published.

⁸ On the radical Pan-Africanists in Paris, see Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State; Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, London, 2005. On the All-India Progressive Writers' Movement, see Talat Ahmed, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism: The Progressive Episode in South Asia, 1932-56*, London, 2009.

⁹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, London, 2001, p. 304.

¹⁰ For more on James's 'Toussaint Louverture', see Colin Chambers, "'Ours Will Be a Dynamic Contribution": The Struggle by Diasporic Artists for a Voice in British Theatre in the 1930s and 1940s', *Key Words*, 7, 2009.

¹¹ Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-1965*, Manchester, 1998, p. 84, Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators'*, p. 407. On Amy Ashwood Garvey, see Tony Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey*, Dover, 2007.

¹² C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, London, 1969, p. 149.

¹³ Anna Grimshaw (ed.), *Special Delivery: The letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948*, Oxford, 1990, pp. 104-105.

¹⁴ On Braithwaite, see Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance; Africa and Britain, 1919-1945*, London, 1999, p. 222. On Ward, see the extensive references in Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*.

¹⁵ For more on print culture and 'black internationalism' in this period, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora; Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, London, 2003.