

JOHN DONNELLY FAGE
1921—2002

John Fage's vision, and the scholarship, will-power, and administrative and diplomatic skills he deployed in the implementation of that vision, are central to the consolidation of African Studies as a well established academic field in the 1960s. Both working on his own and in remarkably fruitful collaboration with Roland Oliver (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London), Fage played a determinant role in building much of the institutional frame that continues to support African Studies in the United Kingdom.¹ And his influence extended beyond British shores.

He was the first Professor of African History at the University of Birmingham (1963-1984), and the founding director of the university's Centre of West African Studies.² CWAS had been the brainchild of another man of vision, Professor Roy Pascal, who taught German in Birmingham. Though Pascal was not an Africanist, his left-wing internationalism and institutional savvy led him (from June 1960) to coax his university into planning for African studies—in advance of the publication (June 1961) of the *Report* of the University Grants Committee's sub-committee headed by Sir William Hayter, which would recommend the

- 1 On the Fage-Oliver close partnership, see R. Oliver, *In the Realms of Gold: Pioneering in African History*, London: Frank Cass 1997, *passim*, and J.D. Fage, *To Africa and Back*, Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, Birmingham University African Studies Series No. 6, 2002, *passim*.
- 2 In that auspicious year 1963, the University of London had also recognised the importance of teaching African history by creating its first chair of the subject, to which Oliver was appointed, see his inaugural lecture 'African History for the Outside World', London: SOAS 1964.

establishment of area-studies centres.³ It was also Pascal who went to London in September 1960 to recruit Fage (then a Lecturer in African History at SOAS) to Birmingham.⁴ But it was John's directorship (1963-1982) that moved CWAS from project to reality and, gathering in Birmingham scholars from both genders and varied backgrounds, added a concrete significant element to British resources for research and teaching on Africa.

With characteristic breadth of mind, John always saw his work in Birmingham as inseparable from the wider task of reinforcing the Africanist community throughout the United Kingdom (and abroad), by helping to equip that community with sufficient shared tools—publication outlets, professional associations, careful editions and translations of primary texts, historical atlases, guides to sources, other reference works, teaching handbooks, and large-scale syntheses. He contributed to this through his own work and by his perceptive encouragement of the work of many others.

This collectively-spirited championing of the study of Africa was given good expression in his Birmingham inaugural lecture (March 1965).⁵ If 1963 had seen the creation of the London and Birmingham chairs of African History, it had also witnessed an implicit challenge to the legitimacy of those chairs coming from a prestigious voice well diffused by the media. In October of that year, Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper (later Lord Dacre of Glanton), the Regius Professor of

3 The Hayter *Report* was an enlightened and influential document. Another successful Hayter-induced creation at the University of Birmingham is the Centre for Russian and East European Studies.

4 On Pascal's crucial part in the creation of CWAS, see Fage, *To Africa and Back*, 130-8. Pascal had moved from a Cambridge fellowship to Birmingham (his native town) in 1939. He was for many years a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

5 J.D. Fage, *On the Nature of African History*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1965; see also his 'Continuity and Change in the Writing of West African History', *African Affairs*, lxx/280, July 1971, 236-51.

Modern History at Oxford, had delivered an inspiring series of lectures on ‘The Rise of Christian Europe’ at the University of Sussex, which were broadcast by BBC Television, and printed in *The Listener* in November and December. But he had introduced these lectures with the complaint that undergraduates were now demanding to be taught African history when actually there was as yet no such thing to teach, ‘only the history of the Europeans in Africa’.⁶ In Hegelian vein, he averred that ‘history’ properly means ‘purposive movement [...] out of barbarism’, and that the ‘unrewarding gyrations’ of pre-Columbian American populations and pre-colonial African peoples were a subject for anthropologists and sociologists, not for historians. In tune with Africanist mood at the time, Fage’s inaugural lecture chose not to challenge Trevor-Roper’s Hegelian parameters.⁷ Rather, it argued for the existence of purposive movement in the history of sub-Saharan Africa. Oliver’s inaugural lecture, too, had focused on Trevor-Roper’s remarks.⁸

These counter-attacks on behalf of African history became a weapon wielded not only in British cultural politics, but also in Africa itself. I am a witness to the fact that many academics and students in West African universities, both Anglophone and Francophone, used Fage’s lecture in the 1960s and 1970s as a kind of political tract to be often

6 The lectures were later republished in book format in revised form: H. Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe*, London: Thames and Hudson 1965, 7-12; see also his ‘The Past and Present: History and Sociology’, *Past and Present*, xlii, 1969, 3-17. Trevor-Roper was not alone in his challenge. From a variety of philosophical standpoints and geopolitical locations, other authors expressed comparable views in the 1960s and 1970s; see for instance Peter Munz, ‘The Purity of Historical Method: Some Sceptical Reflections on the Current Enthusiasm for the History of Non-European Societies’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, v, 1971, 1-17.

7 On this see Finn Fuglestad, ‘The Trevor-Roper Trap or the Imperialism of History. An Essay’, *History in Africa*, 19, 1992, 309-26.

8 See also Oliver, *In the Realms of Gold*, 284 & 291-2.

referred to, and quoted. I insist on the point to drive attention to the wider context in which African Studies in Britain were operating: the early postcolonial era in Africa and Europe, and the Civil Rights movement in the United States. This international context generated a very diverse gamut of receptions for the activities of those (both leftists like Pascal and liberals of various shades of opinion like Hayter, Fage, and Oliver) who were striving to change the attitudes towards Africa of the British academic establishment. Though their activities implied a very significant degree of critique of establishmentarian mores, Africanists following this line were sometimes misperceived as mere upholders of outdated views. If, in 1967, Oliver & Fage's *A Short History of Africa* was objected to, and copies of it seized, by the Education Ministry of white-ruled Rhodesia, a similar fate had befallen Fage's *Introduction to the History of West Africa* in Ghana in 1960, under the Nkrumah government. And, in 1969, students at Howard University, Washington DC, protested against the presence of the Oliver & Fage book on their reading lists.⁹ Yet the cultural importance for Britain of that work done from within universities must be granted full recognition, as we must also fully acknowledge the importance of a different strand of British Africanists, who largely worked outside British university institutions, and whose most emblematic figures are Basil Davidson and Thomas Hodgkin. With hindsight, it is possible to realise that the two strands operated as a pincer movement for the empowerment of African Studies in the United Kingdom and beyond.

In fact, John Fage's public spirit did not manifest itself only in the defence of the professional interests of the Africanist community in Britain. It was clear to him that opportunities for university education needed to be extended beyond the middle classes, and he acted on this conviction. When interviewing prospective students with him, one could not fail to notice that he bent over backwards to facilitate the

9 See Fage, *To Africa and Back*, 155.

admission of students (of whatever colour) of disadvantaged social background. It is also appropriate to remember here his role in a 1972 episode involving Professor Abdoulaye Bathily, now a minister in the Senegalese government, then a political dissident and talented young student, who had been forcibly removed from the University of Dakar and ordered into military service without being allowed to complete his first degree. John Fage efficiently took the leadership of an international effort to bring Bathily to England, with the help of other members of CWAS and the French scholars Vincent Monteil and Claude Meillassoux. Thanks to a grant from the University of Birmingham's Faculty of Arts, and the flexibility of the entrance requirements of the Diploma degree the university offered at the time, Bathily eventually became a postgraduate student at CWAS, where he brilliantly completed an MA and a PhD.¹⁰

On the home front, John's career reads at one level as a series of innovative landmarks along the institutionalisation of African Studies (and African History in particular), though he also devoted energies to older institutions such as the London-based International African Institute (he served in the IAI's Executive Council from 1965, and remained very active in the IAI until 1980), and to new international projects (he helped to plan and edit the *UNESCO General History of Africa* published 1981-1993). He was the first Honorary Secretary of the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom (1963-1966), and made sure the new association remained operational by providing it with an office address and secretarial support in Birmingham at CWAS (he was the ASAUK's President in 1968-1969). With Oliver, he took the two incalculably seminal steps of founding the *Journal of African History* (1960) and co-editing it until 1973, and co-editing the *Cambridge History of Africa* (published 1975-1986).

10 On these events see A. Bathily, *Les Portes de l'Or*, Paris: L'Harmattan 1989, 31.

He and Oliver had rejected the idea of beginning work on this *Cambridge History* in 1957, and only committed themselves to the task a decade later (1965-6), when they felt enough new evidence about the continent, and a sufficient number of potential contributors, had become available. In the timing and contents of his own books and numerous papers—as in the book Oliver co-authored with him—John deliberately struck the same prudent balance between using his scholarship (and enviable clarity as a writer) to generate and diffuse new knowledge about Africa as urgently as possible, and refusing to publish too early on the basis of insufficient data and unsupported generalisations. Also, from his teaching days (1949-1959) in the University College of the Gold Coast (now the University of Ghana), the mission he assigned himself was ‘to engage in building up wider pictures from the interrelationships of the various historical traditions [of the Gold Coast, later of the African continent]’, rather than specialising in the study of one particular tradition.¹¹

The many times his pioneer writings have been reprinted and re-edited reflect his success in that mission, and show he was correct in assuming his chosen intellectual enterprise fulfilled a very strong public need. His *Introduction to the History of West Africa* (Cambridge University Press 1955), the first book of its kind, went through two other (revised and updated) editions, and four reprints, until it was rewritten and enlarged into *A History of West Africa: an introductory survey* (C.U.P. 1969). By 1991 it had sold more than 300,000 copies. His *An Atlas of African History* (London: Edward Arnold 1958) had been reprinted seven times by 1975, and a second edition of it appeared in 1978. Equally successful was his *Ghana: a Historical Interpretation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1959, reprinted three times). Oliver & Fage’s *A Short History of Africa* (Penguin 1962) reached its sixth revised and enlarged edition in 1997, and by then had sold nearly 400,000 copies and been translated into twelve

11 Fage, *To Africa and Back*, 97.

languages including Finnish, Japanese, and Arabic.

John's *magnum opus* is the 600-page *A History of Africa* (London: Hutchinson 1978), which took him ten years of research and composition, and which deals with the whole continent from the Neolithic to the late twentieth century. Revised and updated editions of it were published in London by Unwin Hyman (1988) and Routledge (1995), and this third edition has been translated into Portuguese (Lisbon: Edições 70 1997). But the last of the contributions that earned him the gratitude and admiration of historians and students of Africa is the invaluable *A Guide to Original Sources for Precolonial Western Africa published in European Languages* (Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin-Madison 1987), together with its *Supplement* published in *History in Africa*, 19 (1992, 201-36).

Those who had the privilege of working with John will also fondly remember his elegance of manners, natural amiability, and occasionally astonishing candour, to which an engaging modesty was attached. Given that modesty, it is only by going beyond John's autobiographic accounts that one can grasp the full significance of his role in the building of the African Studies field. And having to go beyond his own reports is precisely the first compliment one pays his memory. He was a community builder, never a builder of empires of personal power and vanity.

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