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Caribbean Publishing in Britain. A Tribute to Arif Ali

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Author:

Asher Hoyles
Martin Hoyles

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Hansib Publications

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London

Reviewer:

Marika Sherwood

I was worried when I saw the title of this book. Was it a history of publishing? Or a history of Arif Ali? And does 'tribute' mean when it was published by the object of the accolade? An autobiography? The authors thank the 28 people for their 'help and encouragement'; then Arif extends his thanks to 'the many people (about 525) who have helped him with his publishing and campaigning activities over the last 40 years?'. So is this a book by the Hoyles or by Ali?

This large format book is profusely illustrated with photographs, portraits and magazine and newspaper cover pages and stories. There are usually interesting quotations at the beginning of each chapter either about or by the chapter's subject. The first 50 pages tell the history of publishing by Caribbean authors/publishers in the UK. (I have expanded on some of this history below, when the Hoyles' accounts are insufficient.)

Chapter one, 'Introduction: black publishing in Britain?', deals with the earliest Black authors published. The most important publication, as it was read by many in a number of languages and is still in print, was Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), an anti-slavery tract, published by Equiano himself with financial support from a wide range of subscribers. This was probably the fourth book published by Black authors in the UK: the first was probably *A Narrative of the Most remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As related by himself* published with aid from the Calvinist/Methodist Church (1772); *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley, an African-American woman freed

from slavery on publication of her book, was published in 1773; and Ignatius Sancho's *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African. In Two Volumes. To Which Are Prefixed, Memoirs of His Life* appeared in 1782.

Then comes Jamaica-born Robert Wedderburn, free-born son of an enslaved woman raped by her owner, who arrived in England 1778 as a seaman. He became a tailor, joined the Methodist Church, then the Unitarian and also the radical Spenceans campaigning for equality. Wedderburn published a number of his own pamphlets and his autobiography. Dominican Celestine Edwards also arrived in Britain as a seaman; he settled in Edinburgh then moved to East London, where he spoke on the Primitive Methodist platform mainly on temperance issues. His book *From Slavery To a Bishopric, or, The Life of Bishop Walter Hawkins of the British Methodist Episcopal Church Canada* was published in London in 1891. The following year he was appointed to the editorship of the journals *Lux* and *Fraternity*. (We are told nothing about these two journals, or given any explanation for Edwards' appointment.)

The account of the 20th century begins with Henry Sylvester Williams, the organiser of the Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900 and the resulting publication *Pan-Africa* whose first issue appeared in 1901. (Sadly only copies of the first issue have been preserved.) We then jump to the 1930s and Dr. Harold Moody, founder of the League of Coloured Peoples. Its publication, *The Keys*, a monthly journal of news of activism by and events in the Black communities in Britain, began to appear in 1933. The information here is sufficient, but again, there are no references, nor are we told where the copies of this ? or any of the other books/pamphlets/journals mentioned can be located.) Chapter six is on Marcus Garvey, with far too little account of his importance or his publications, and little mention of the content of his London journal, the *Black Man* (1936?40). There is no mention at all of Garvey's *The Tragedy of White Injustice* published in London in 1935.

Ras T. Makonnen, chronicled next, is confusingly sometimes listed as the publisher of the two monthly journals, *Africa and the World* (July ? September 1937) and *International African Opinion* (July 1938 ? Feb/March 1939) which were in fact published by the International African Service Bureau (IASB) ? that he was a member of the IASB does not make him the publisher. However, he *was* the publisher of the post-war monthly *Pan-Africa* and had set up a bookshop (and a factory and a restaurant) in Manchester. There is no mention of *The African Sentinel* (Oct.1937 ? April 1938), which was most likely also an IASB publication as it emanated from the same address; it was edited by I. T. A. Wallace Johnson who was General Secretary of the IASB, while the other two had been edited by George Padmore. There is no mention at all of the IASB pamphlets.

The *Caribbean News* was published by the London branch of the Caribbean Labour Congress between 1952 and 1956. We are not told who edited it. Claudia Jones' *West Indian Gazette*, with a broader perspective, replaced the *News* in 1958; with Claudia's death in 1964 it ceased publication. The coverage of Claudia's work and of the paper is adequate.

Chapter ten deals with the magazines, *Topic* (June 1960 ? August 1961) and *Flamingo* (which replaced *Topic*), both edited by Scobie. (The first was financed by two Jamaica businessmen ? but who financed *Flamingo* ?) Both contained short stories, biographies, book reviews, reports of exhibitions, music, fashions, sport, etc. and articles on Africa and politics. Despite a fairly wide circulation the magazine only lasted from September 1961 till June 1963. *Daylight International*, ?The Negro News Magazine? lasted barely a few months in 1963 and Jan Carew's *Magnet*, ?The Voice of Afro-Asian Caribbean Peoples? also only survived a few months in 1965.

While some of these chapters are almost adequate, most are not. Most importantly, there are no references even for quotations and we are not told where the copies of the books/pamphlets/journals mentioned can be located. Nor is there any attempt to explore publications in Liverpool and Cardiff, for example. And, sadly, I suppose because he was not from the Caribbean but directly from Africa, Dusé Mohamed Ali and his *African Times and Orient Review* are not included.

Chapters 11-13 are page-and-a-half histories of the major post-war publishing firms, Bogle L'Overture, New Beacon and Hansib Publications.

Curiously, as there are no chapters on the other British colonies in the Caribbean (or on the history of peoples of African origins/descent in the United Kingdom), we now get some 26 pages of the history of what used to be called British Guiana, dealing with the native population, the importation of African and then Indian labour, the colonial period and the attainment of independence. Of course, this is to situate Arif Ali in his birthplace. The format remains the same: quotations at the beginning of each chapter and profuse illustrations.

70 or so pages recount the history of Arif Ali: the descendant of an indentured labourer imported from India, by the time of his birth in 1935 his family had become wealthy landowners. In 1957, after graduating from high school in Georgetown, he came to Britain and worked as a porter in a hospital, then on the buses, and in shops (bought one in 1966), and also managed pop groups. He joined the Labour Party and worked for the Transport Workers' Union.

With the money he obtained from selling his shop, Ali started a weekly paper, the *Westindian Digest* in 1971, with the aim of 'improving community relations' (p. 113). The magazine made a loss, but when Ali told his printing firm's manager that he wanted to 'produce something positive about our achievements in this country?', he received considerable credit and by October 1972 the circulation reached 10,000. In 1973 he acquired the *West Indian World* from its founder St. Vincentian Aubrey Baynes; this took up political issues, and campaigned eg on education issues in the UK. This was followed by the *Asian Digest* in 1980. For somewhat complicated reasons, Ali 'passed on' the *West Indian World* to his staff in 1977 and started the weekly *Caribbean Times* in 1981; this supported Maurice Bishop in Grenada, campaigned against apartheid in South Africa and reported on the many racist 'incidents' and police brutality in the UK. The *Asian Digest* was replaced by the weekly *Asian Times* in 1983 and the *African Times* was begun in 1984. 'In all the publications Arif was reaching a readership of about half a million people' (p.134).

In 1973 Ali, as Hansib Publications (founded in 1970 and named after his parents), published *Westindians in Great Britain*, a book which he had edited. In 1997 Ali sold his newspapers in order to concentrate on book publishing. Hansib now has about 125 publications!

There are chapters which deal with Ali's political involvements with local Black organisations and some of the struggles he undertook: for example, to persuade local authorities to publish job advertisements in his papers, thereby indicating that the positions were open to Black applicants. He also supported 'Radio Black Londoners' (p.123; presumably the Radio London program), but we are not told what form this support took. Ali gave talks around the UK and was 'in the forefront of the campaign against a racist society'. His work brought Caribbean people together, in the tradition of Claudia Jones', recalled Alex Pascall (p. 123). By 1953 Hansib employed 140 staff (p. 134) and also provided training and work experience to many young Blacks. Hansib also supported community activities with awards, but what form these took is not reported.

Ali was involved in black political organisations such as the Indian Workers Association and the West Indian Standing Conference and served on the Government's Caribbean Advisory Group from 1997 to 2002. He has travelled frequently to the Caribbean and at least once to Libya and has in the past few years become more involved with Guyana, launching, selling and donating books to local libraries and as prizes for competitions.

The book concludes with: 'Despite all his success, Arif has remained with his feet on the ground. It is not surprising that he would not accept a knighthood or a peerage'.

There is a useful list of Hansib publications and also a bibliography, but no index. And the section on Arif Ali is very much a 'tribute' as there is no exploration of some issues: for example, what was going on between Ali and the *West Indian World* staff that led to the 'handover'? Why did he go to Libya? And

perhaps more importantly, was there a change in the market for such publications? Ali's papers/magazines survived for years whereas their predecessors died young. Were more copies sold? Was there more advertising to keep Ali's papers float? Is there still a market for Black newspapers and if not, why not?

So: a useful introduction to some Black British publishers, though some of the more recent ones are not even mentioned; and very useful illustrations. And, as befits a 'tribute?', an unquestioning account of a man who is certainly a very important historical figure, not only in the publishing world but also the world of political struggle.

The authors decline to comment.

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