

## Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in a Common Cause

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**Reviewer:**

Marika Sherwood

This excellent book is about some of the writers – mainly those living in Europe from the 1930s till the 1960s – whose writings were either wholly or partly about the ‘ending of British rule in Africa’. The main writer dealt with is George Padmore; the others are Jomo Kenyatta (while he lived in the UK), C. L. R. James, Peter Abrahams, Ras T. Makonnen, Richard Wright, and then Kwame Nkrumah’s autobiography.

Padmore devoted his life to political activism and writing in the cause of freedom for colonised peoples. At first via the Comintern, then when he resigned from the Communist Party in 1934, in the UK, working with other activists. Those of his colleagues discussed are the other writers: his fellow Trinidadian James (then beginning to work on his book on the Haitian revolution); Jomo Kenyatta (then in Britain to campaign for land rights in Kenya); Peter Abrahams of South Africa, who hoped to find ‘freedom in Britain as a writer’; and I. T. A. Wallace Johnson from Sierra Leone, in Britain to fight a court case as he had been accused of sedition for some of his writings as a journalist in the Gold Coast. These men set up the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA) to campaign against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia/Ethiopia. They failed. IAFA was turned into the International African Service Bureau (IASB), which lasted till c.1945 and published a number of pamphlets and monthly newspapers, beginning with the *International African Opinion*. Polsgrove argues that publication of each newspaper had to cease temporarily not only because of lack of funds, but that the name had to be changed in order to avoid – at least for a while – the banning of IASB publications by the colonial authorities. Padmore’s books had also, of course, been banned.

Polsgrove raises another question here: given the probably relatively low sales figures, did these writers speak mainly to each other? The production of pamphlets, newspapers and the planning public meetings provided them with a forum to build solidarity among themselves, she suggests. Did it help them overcome

some of their political differences: eg Padmore could probably best be described as a Marxist socialist; James had become a Trotskyist, while Kenyatta was focused on nationalism without the socialism espoused by the others. But there was another perhaps crucial difference between them, which was to resurface in the struggles for independence: 'James and Padmore envisioned an Africa becoming more rather than less Western and leaving its tribal ways behind. Kenyatta had no such future in mind: he did not want to see Africa detribalised' (p. 41). But work together they did.

However, to my mind, this proposition by Polsgrove perhaps stems from the little context that she provides for her analysis. There were Black organisations in many British cities by the 1930s and Black residents in all the major towns and cities. They would certainly have been interested in the publications by these London-based activists. As would the Black students' organisations at some of the major universities. And, as Padmore had become adept at getting the *Negro Worker* past the customs in the British colonies while he was editing it in the early 1930s in Hamburg, had he tried to use the same tactics from London? While the literacy rate in English would have been pretty low in West and East Africa except in the major coastal towns, some the educated élite would certainly have been interested. And was there any attempt to reach the Black working class, perhaps especially in the major British ports, where ex-seamen were often the core group of such communities?

James left for the USA prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, which curtailed the public activities of the IASB, but did not halt the publication of articles by Padmore in the Black press in the USA and in the surviving left-wing news-sheets in the UK. When they could foresee the ending of the war, the IASB became part of the new organisation, the Pan-African Federation, which organised the 6th (not the 5th) Pan-African Congress in Manchester, attended by many who were to become the leaders in their newly independent African countries, the first of which was the Gold Coast. Among those who helped with organising the Congress were Kenyatta, Abrahams, Makonnen and Kwame Nkrumah, the newly arrived Gold Coast student from the USA.

While Amy Ashwood Garvey chaired one of the Congress sessions, the others were chaired by W. E. B. Du Bois of the USA. Some of the Du Bois/Padmore correspondence is included here, but sadly Polsgrove does not delve into a question I have often asked: why was Padmore so very self-negating and almost subservient in his relationship with Du Bois as evidenced by these letters? The African-American academic/activist was certainly not at this time a socialist, as he had had advocated the supremacy of the Talented Tenth. Though Du Bois had organised a number of Pan-African Congresses, these were all partly White and were not, in my estimation, particularly forceful.

Makonnen's restaurant in Manchester fed most of those attending the Congress and he was to feed them with the ideas expressed in *Pan-Africa*, a journal whose first issue appeared in 1947. He also set up a bookshop and a mail-order service, the Pan-African Bookshop. The journal died in 1948, as bookshops, according to Makonnen, refused to stock it as they felt they should not 'encourage a publication of this kind'. (p. 89) *Pan-Africa* was also banned in East Africa (Makonnen was from British Guiana; he had changed his Guyanese name of Peter Griffiths to 'Ras T. Makonnen' many years previously).

Polsgrove explains why the mid-late 1940s were just about the end of Abrahams' involvement with this group of activists. She describes the growing political relationship between Padmore and Nkrumah, who returned to the Gold Coast in 1947 to work for the new political party formed there, the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). He soon left the UGCC, finding it too elitist an organisation and formed his own, the Convention People's Party. He was twice imprisoned by the colonial government, but had to be finally released in 1951 when his Party won the elections and he had to be given the title of Leader of Government Business.

In 1946 Padmore, undoubtedly angered by the lack of colonials at the meetings establishing the United Nations, attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1946 and visited Richard Wright then living there. Another ex-communist, Wright, a well-recognised novelist, had known James in the USA before he decided that he would have greater freedom as a writer in Paris than he could have in the USA. A long relationship

developed between the two men, and also between their wives. (Dorothy Pizer was always seen as Padmore's wife.) When Wright told Padmore he wanted to visit the Gold Coast, Padmore arranged introductions for him. However, Nkrumah only spared a week of his time for Wright and the CPP apparently ignored him to such an extent that the infuriated Wright complained to the US Consul. From then Wright became an informant, passing on all the political information that Padmore and Dorothy shared with him. Padmore never discovered this.

Invited by Nkrumah, Padmore visited the Gold Coast in 1951 and stopped in Nigeria to visit Nnamdi Azikiwe, who would become the president of independent Nigeria. By now Padmore was forcefully advocating at least a union of West Africa, if not the unity of the whole of Africa. Padmore 'used his time in the Gold Coast for a good deal more than glorifying Nkrumah and educating CPP members. Familiarizing himself with the conditions under which Nkrumah was working and the economic and political challenges Nkrumah faced, he had strengthened his ability to advise Nkrumah from London' (p. 109). That is precisely what Padmore then did: publishing his findings and advising Nkrumah on the vast variety of issues that the struggle for independence and nation-building involved, until he accepted Nkrumah's invitation to work with him openly in Accra. The book on his Ghana experiences, *The Gold Coast Revolution*, was published in 1953. It provides a brief history of resistance to colonialism, details of recent developments in the Gold Coast and then an analysis of the 'Problems of Economic Development'.

Peter Abrahams was also interested in the events on the Gold Coast. His visit coincided with that of Richard Wright: the two men had breakfast together and Abrahams later wrote that he thought Wright had found Africa 'bewildering'. Undoubtedly speaking also of himself, he wrote: 'the tribal African was no Pan-African dreaming of a greater African glory when the white man is driven into the sea. The acute race consciousness of the American Negro, or of the black South African at the receiving end of Apartheid, is alien to him' (p. 123).

C. L. R. James, whom Padmore helped rescue from imprisonment in Ellis Island in New York, now returned to the UK, (Not to write cricket, as Polsgrove recounts). He embarked on new writings and political activism, but not with Padmore. As this book focuses on writings, we do not learn what Padmore was *doing* in these years, as opposed to what he was writing; his journalism continued, in British (left-wing), Gold Coast and African-American publications and then in *Socialist Asia*.

James, was, of course, also interested in the events in the Gold Coast, so he (and the Padmores) accepted the invitation to attend the Independence Day celebrations in 1957. He was there for two weeks and reported that Prime Minister Nkrumah of now Ghana, whom he had known while he was a student in the USA, had asked him to write about the 'building of the Convention People's Party (CPP) ... as nobody had yet "philosophised it"' (p. 155). So he set about doing this, but for reasons outlined by Polsgrove, the book, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, was not published till 1977. James in letters to his friends expressed the belief that 'Padmore failed to understand the Gold Coast revolution ... and had shown no evidence of understanding the mass movement that the CPP would soon unleash'. However, as Polsgrove points out, given the many years he had spent focusing his attention on the USA, his ignorance of the development of the CPP and his very brief stay in Ghana, James in fact knew very little of the new country of Ghana. He was also ignorant, it would appear, of Padmore's work as Nkrumah's 'private policy advisor and propagandist' as well as the 'London correspondent' for Nkrumah/CPP's newspaper, the *Accra Evening News* (p. 111). (The Padmores had even advised Nkrumah about the writing of his autobiography – suggestions which were partly followed.)

Probably in about 1953 Padmore embarked on the writing of what became *Pan-Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa*, published in 1956. This attacked the imposition of foreign political and economic concepts, whether Stalinist-communist or capitalist, onto Africa. Padmore, *inter alia*, advocated regional federations prior to the union of all independent African states. Reviewers from the Left criticised it for its anti-communist tone while those on the right (including those surreptitiously funded by the CIA) criticised it for its pro-communist tone. The book was fairly widely reviewed; it was published in French and an edition for Africa was published by Azikiwe's Zik Press in Nigeria.

However, Padmore's writing was soon almost curtailed by his acceptance of the post of Advisor on African Affairs offered by Ghana's new Prime Minister. He and Dorothy moved to Accra and both worked for Nkrumah, much to the dissatisfaction if not hostility of many Ghanaians, who resented the elevation of West Indians (and African-Americans) by their leader. To attempt to circumvent this, Padmore's office was not part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Padmore reported directly to Nkrumah. Though Polsgrove does not explore this (probably as little 'writing' was involved), I believe Padmore was crucial to the organising of the two conferences held in Accra in 1958: that of the Independent African States and then the All-African People's Congress, both intended to foreground the need for African unity.

Polsgrove has uncovered letters indicating that Padmore wanted to move from Ghana. His death in 1959 left Dorothy living alone in Accra. She continued to write for the CPP's newspapers and to work for Nkrumah.

There is much more in this book than could possibly be summarised, for example on the novels and other writings by Peter Abrahams, Richard Wright and Padmore, on the criticisms of Padmore, and the correspondence between these men as well as with their publishers. Perhaps more importantly I have not dealt with the autobiography of Ras Makonnen, Padmore's collaborator in the UK, and then in Ghana, from which we can learn some of the 'inside stories'. The result of taped interviews by Kenneth King then at the University of Nairobi, *Pan-Africanism from Within* was published in 1973. (Makonnen had been imprisoned by those who led the coup against Nkrumah in 1966. Intervention not only by Julian Mayfield as Polsgrove states, but also I think by Jomo Kenyatta, now president of independent Kenya (1963), led to his release. Kenyatta offered him accommodation and work in Kenya.)

My major criticism of this invaluable book is that while Polsgrove unearthed much information new even to me (and I am supposed to be familiar with at least the Padmores and the situation in the UK in the 1930s – 40s), there is far too little context in either the sections on Europe or those on Ghana, and nothing much on events in West Africa or the influence of the Cold War. Writing, as Polsgrove points out, was for the men she chronicles, a 'political act'. And yes, they did write 'in a common cause' – more or less, and not in all their writings. And yes, they contributed to the 'ending of British rule in Africa'. But so did those workers and market women who went on strike, those who demonstrated, those who sang songs of freedom, who called and addressed meetings around their colonies/countries, often risking arrest. And how influential were these writings?

There are, of course, unanswered questions: for example, I have asked myself many times, had Padmore lived longer, had he stayed in Ghana, would he have been able to prevent the government of Kwame Nkrumah becoming what some have described as a 'benevolent dictatorship'? And a question the author does not even hint at: both Padmore and Nkrumah attacked chieftaincy, sometimes in quite uncompromising terms. Undoubtedly they wanted to negate the power of chiefs and to create a new nation. But the 3- 400 years of the devastation caused by the Atlantic Slave Trade did not negate indigenous nationhoods – it might even have emphasised them, as some people became accomplices of the Europeans while others became the 'hunted'. Colonialists used chiefs to entrench their rule by 'indirect' means. But you cannot from one day to the next move to become a 'Ghanaian' when for centuries you were a Ga or a Grunsi or an Ewe. (There are 200 languages spoken in today's Ghana.) And these traditional, historic systems were complicated by the often dual-heritage progeny of Europeans, many of whom became the educated, merchant élite, vying for power and influence. Padmore did not recognise this. Neither did Nkrumah, sufficiently or efficiently.

Finally, in order to emphasise this: women were an important part of these writers' work: Amy Ashwood Garvey's restaurant in London in the mid-1930s provided a meeting place for these writers at a time when Black faces were certainly not welcome in many cafés or restaurants in London. Dinah Stock worked with Kenyatta on his *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) and with Makonnen's publishing enterprises in Manchester post-war. Without Dorothy Pizer's research and typing skills and contributions to their income Padmore would have been much much less productive. In the Gold Coast, it was Erica Powell who helped Nkrumah produce his autobiography. (Polsgrove does not tackle outright the question of how much of it Powell actually wrote, which has been asked by others.)

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