In the study of African Writing

James Gibbs

Bernth Lindfors (ed) CONVERSATIONS WITH CHINUA ACHEBE, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1997, 199pp.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, CHINUA ACHEBE: A BIOGRAPHY, James Currey, Oxford & Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997, 326pp.

THE coincidental publication of a collection of interviews and a major biographical study - happily a 'pre-mortem' - marks a new stage in the recognition of Chinua Acbebe's achievements, and, more generally, provides a new dimension to the African Literature 'Industry.' Both books are concerned with a life and with words. Lindfors offers a brisk, helpful four-page chronology, sketching Acbebe's life from 1930 to 1996, and follows this with some twenty-one transcribed interviews. Ezenwa-Ohaeto takes the reader from Chapter 1 'The Catechist's Son' to Chapter 18 'The Legacy of an Eagle on Iroko,' (1930-1993) in a volume of narrative and criticism, observation and analysis which, with academic apparatus, runs to over three-hundred pages set in 9/11 Melior.

In the course of his account, Ezenwa-Ohaeto draws on most - but not all, of the interviews in the Lindfors collection. He also incorporates extracts from Achebe's novels, and shows that he has carried out extensive research, talked to and corresponded with relevant individuals, and drawn on his own experience as a Nigerian writer, scholar, teacher and critic.

Chinua Achebe is living a most extraordinary life. How could it be otherwise, given his talent, his sense of responsibility and the times he has lived through in Nigeria? In the handsome James Currey/Indiana publication, some ten years of painstaking enquiry are presented with sustained energy as Ezenwa-Ohaeto follows the writer from Ogidi to school, thence to college, to the broadcasting service, into print and then into the widest of worlds. Achebe has passed through many more than the usual 'ages of man' - and is still short of 'the lean and slippered pantaloon.' He has, for example, been a publisher, a roving ambassador for Biafra, a peripatetic teacher, an influential critic, a literary lion. The horrifying road accident of 22 March 1990 has limited his mobility, but has not dimmed the qualities that had impressed so many around the world.

Juggling the different 'balls' representing the discrete elements in Achebe's life is an extraordinarily difficult task. Aware that many of his readers will be unfamiliar with Nigerian history, Ezenwa-Ohaeto incorporates accounts of political developments in his biographical narrative. These are frequently models of helpful summary, however some

will take issue with the statement that the 'fracas in the Western House of Assembly empowered Tafawa Balewa to declare a state of emergency in the region.' And others will be surprised that the role played by French oil interests in the seccession of Biafra is not indicated. It is impossible to write succinct account of recent historical episodes that all will accept!

Another of the 'balls' concerns Achebe's family life. In this connection we learn, for

>>

example, that only one of his siblings was present when his father died, and that his wife suffered a miscarriage when returning to the East as the battle-lines of the Civil War / Biafran War were being drawn up. This 'serious' biography, rightly, does not intrude in private grief and the reader is left to imagine the impact of these events on the novelist. We are, however, clearly shown the concerned father telling his daughter stories and prompted to write because of the attitudes one of his children was picking up at school, and readers might have expected to hear more about the choices Achebe made, with his wife, for their children's education. A pioneer in so many ways, Achebe has been, for some of his life, part of the New Diaspora, the brain drain of African intellectuals to Universities in the United States. Those who have followed him, or are thinking of doing so, might legitimately have expected to have been told what educational decisions the Achebes made. (We know what happens to those who bring termite-infested logs into their homes. What about those who go and live among the termites?)

The central concern of the study is, naturally, the growth and development of Achebe as a man of letters. Ezenwa-Ohaeto has completed a remarkable feat in covering this with abundant insight. He might, I suggest, have broadened his Chapter (3) on Government College, Umuahia, by following up Bernth Lindfors' work on the literary and dramatic life at the institution. The next chapter, on University College, Ibadan, benefits from the pertinent material provided by Ulli Beier, but this could have been supplemented by, for example, use of the reminiscences collected by Bunmi Salako in *My U. I.* (The perspective is rather too obviously that from Bayreuth, where Ezenwa-Ohaeto was based for a time. Masquerades are not finally judged until they have been seen from all angles.) For a subsequent section, the account of Achebe's training with the BBC in the UK, I hope the researcher will be able to visit the BBC's Written Archives at Caversham where material will be found that fills in gaps in Achebe's writing for the microphone - an essential part of his apprenticeship as a writer.

Minor points aside, the story is told in considerable detail, and includes many episodes that deserve to be singled out. For example, Ezenwa-Ohaeto quotes from Achebe's account of his first international exposure as a poet. It seems a retired British ambassador on a poetry-reading tour of Africa in the early Fifties came across a limerick the erstwhile medical student had contributed to the University Herald, and not only incorporated it in a lecture given on campus ('a compliment that would not have occurred to our English teachers.' 47) but also used it in a talk broadcast from Radio Brazzaville.

The low expectations of teachers at Ibadan surfaced again after the publication of *Things Fall Apart*. Alan Hill of Heinemann reported that he was not taken seriously when telling members of staff 'that one of their alumni had written a great novel. "What Chinua Achebe wrote a novel! How ridiculous" They exclaimed.' But, if some were astonished, the publishers were supportive and were soon aware that they had made a wise investment. In 1986, 'Achebe's novels were selling as much as 33 per cent of the combined turnover of the 270 titles in African and Caribbean writer series.' (266) And by 1992 the first book had sold more than 8,000,000 copies (283). Just what this means in terms of income for Achebe is not made clear - the study is generally silent on financial matters, but I hope he averaged a royalty of more than 12% on the sale price of each copy. In addition to providing the 'motor' for the African Writers Series by his sales, Achebe also put a vast amount back into African literature by shouldering editorial responsibilities. For this, for the arduous, often tedious work of toiling through mountains of manuscripts sent to Heinemann - and providing helpful comments, Achebe was, astonishingly, not paid.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto indicates some of the other editorial responsibilities Achebe took on. He refers, for example, to *Okike*, *Nsukka scope* and *African Commentary* - and the first of these is tremendously important in the development of African writing. However, we are given few glimpses of editorial decision making and there is no mention of Conch, even though Achebe's name was on the masthead. I suspect there are many editorial files that would be well worth investigating as part of a fuller study of Achebe as Editor.

Achebe's career as a writer has been marked by the winning of various prizes. Ezenwa-Ohaeto draws attention to a large number and addresses, from time to time, what he clearly regards as a vexed question: Why wasn't the Nobel Prize for Literature given to Achebe? For many the fact that *A Man of the People* was not followed by another novel until 1987 provides answer enough. But there is a subtext to the biography which suggests that a remark made to an academic in stockholm (185), and the rejection of an invitation to the same city (242) might have affected the decision. Additional props will have to be produced before this case will stand up in a court of critics and literary historians.

More than twenty universities have honoured Achebe by awarding him honorary degrees. Lindfors lists a number of these in his brisk chronology where they stand as indications of growing international acclaim. Ezenwa-Ohaeto gets somewhat embroiled with them since he often quotes the citations that accompanied them - and these are usually verbose, tortured, rhetorical exercises that rarely shed new light.

The list of awarding institutions is fascinating in the 'Novelist - critic has honour save in his own country stakes.' Dartmouth award Achebe an honorary doctorate, his first, in 1972 (167-8). The University of Ife followed suit six years later (205) becoming the sixth overall and the first Nigerian university in the list. (Lindfors has 1979). The University of Lagos invited Achebe to attend their 1987 Convocation intending to present him with a degree but at the last minute the function had to be called off. Ezenwa-Ohaeto comments: 'The decision to cancel was ... linked to the reaction in some of the Western states to the criticism Achebe had made concerning the funeral of ... Obafemi Awolowo.' (256-7) This extraordinary concession to misdirected student power and ethnic resentment received scant attention in the press. Achebe's alma mater, the University of Ibadan, the tertiary institution that had nurtured him, and which might have been expected to be the first to be aware of his significance, did not award him an honorary degree until 1989. Scandalously slow, it was the fourteenth institution to do so! One of the interviews Lindfors includes but Ezenwa-Ohaeto seems unaware of is particularly important since it reflects early international recognition , and shows how undergraduate experiences galvanised the young author into action. Recorded for an American TV series entitled 'African Writers Talking' it was hosted by Lewis Nkosi and Wole Soyinka joined in the questioning. The two Nigerian writers so similar in some ways, so different in others, sized one another up like champion wrestlers from rival towns.

Lindfors has provided a new transcription of the programme that includes Acbebe's resonant, slightly tongue-in-cheek, confession: 'I think I am basically an ancestor worshipper...,' and a mischievously probing question from Soyinka:

> *(Do) you accept the evaluation which has been placed*
>
> on your style by some critics, that there is a kind of
>
> almost precise workmanship about it, almost an
>
> unrelieved competence as opposed to genuine artistic
>
> *inspiration? How do you react to this?*

Needled - the cliched description of the style of *Things Fall Apart* was 'sedate', Achebe shot back 'you don't expect me to accept that!' And went on to point out that '*Things Fall Apart* was written straight, without any kind of draft.'

A little later in the exchange, Achebe mentioned his anger at Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* which he had read 'in his second year' at university and which had prompted him to say to himself 'this is absurd.' (Lindfors, ed. 13) There followed a revealing exchange between the two young critics on the nature of caricature, and about whether Odili is a caricature. - or just has exaggerated respect for Mr. Green. (Oddly, Ezenwa-Ohaeto thinks, p. 44, that Carry lacked first-hand experience of Africa).

Achebe is sometimes slow to enter a quarrel, but being in he is a tenacious fighter, a tough adversary. Joyce Cary is one of those he has taken to task; Joseph Conrad, famously, another. The impact of the controversy over Awolowo has already been mentioned, and there are various indications in the text where the roots of that particular quarrel are to be found. With most African writers - as prickly as authors anywhere else, Achebe seems to have excellent relations - though he did quarrel for a time with J P Clark (Bekederemo) and there is an apparently unresolved disagreement with Ayi Kwei Armah.

With Soyinka he recognises a certain element of competition, but stresses the particular nature of literary rivalry. Clearly the two men have worked together on a number of projects - including the protest over the fate of Mamman Vasta, the soldier poet who was executed in March 1986. And Soyinka read the citation when Ife awarded Achebe his honorary doctorate. However, the relationship is far from being one of blind mutual admiration, and the conclusion to Achebe's speech of congratulation to Soyinka after he had been awarded the Nobel Prize has an edge to it. On that occasion, Achebe recorded delight that the white man had been beaten 'at his own game', and then added '... we must now turn away and play our game.' (250)

Finally, one interview that Lindfors reproduces and Ezenwa-Ohaeto refers to - that with Jane Wilkinson - could I suspect be mined for greater insights. In it, Achebe is asked about the extent to which 'Okigbo (is) present in Anthills?' His fascinating answer illuminates the interaction of life and creative writing, and silently draws attention to the need for an

>>

in-depth biography of Okigbo. Another task for Ezenwa-Ohaeto perhaps!.

Other material in the same interview prompts enquiry into the most remarkable development in Achebe's 'later novel' - the presence of powerful women. Achebe told Wilkinson: 'I have been worried about the woman's role for some time, although I didn't have scope for it in A *Man of the People*.' (Lindfors, ed. 149) During the years when he was silent as a novelist, there was not only abundant opportunity for Achebe to appreciate the abilities of his wife and daughters, but also extensive discussion of gender issues.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto is not an 'official biographer' but he did approach his sometime teacher who, after indicating that he knew ' a sense of seriousness' would be brought to the project, gave his 'general approval.' A sense of seriousness is one of Achebe's own characteristic qualities. It is seriousness without solemnity, and a most attractive part of a very impressive individual. The Igbo novelist is such decent, generous, principled, reliable person, what he has to say is so tough and cogent, so deeply infused with gritty integrity, that time spent in his company is time well spent. In different ways, both Lindfors' collection and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's biography provide opportunities to spend time in the edifying, witty, intelligent company of a man who has important things to say and remarkable gifts of expression.

Gibbs, a professor of English, is of the University of the West of England, Bristol.

In Search of Character

Odia Ofeimun

Nadine Gordimer, WRITING AND BEING, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, 145pp.

Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo, OLUSEGUN OBASANJO: IN THE EYES OF TIME, Africana Legacy Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1997, 207pp.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, CHINUA ACHEBE: A BIOGRAPHY, James Currey, Oxford & Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997, 326pp.

IT does not require special pleading to put *Writing and Being*, Nadine Gordimer's first collection of essays since winning the Nobel Prize for literature, in the same bracket as the two biographies under review. The three books are connected by a thread which may be accessed from the not-as-trivial notation that Nadine Gordimer is one of the authoritative voices - the other being Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa, Helmut Schmidt, former German Chancellor and Lord Callaghan of Cardiff - whose insights are deployed on the blurb of the Obasanjo biography. Gordimer's description of the former Nigerian leader, one of Africa's most revered statesmen as an 'honourable and courageous fighter for justice wherever it has been endangered' was scored while General Olusegun Obasanjo was in jail for alleged involvement in the 'phantom coup' uncovered by late General Sani Abacha in 1995. Hers is a testimony by one denizen of the frontline albeit, a writer, about another, a soldier, who, incidentally, joined the race for the presidency on being released from jail in June 1998. Thus the blurb easily connects with preoccupations that have become, so recognisably, natives of Gordimer's person, concerning individual involvement in the construction and sustenance of truth and justice in society. How such involvements add up in the moral sphere of collective action, that is, within the common backcloth of needs that define our common humanity, is the core issue across the six-chapters of *Writing and Being*. It so happens that one chapter, the fourth, is devoted to Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe's last of five novels to date, in which one of the not-so-central characters, the Oldman of Abazon, provides a 'vigorously lyrical disquisition on the place of '...the poet, and writer in the struggle for social justice'.

More importantly, across the collection, Gordimer concentrates on the relationship between reality, 'real life', the very fishpond of biography, and the fictions of the writer's

>>