

River Gazette

Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper once notoriously asserted that there is no African history, "only the history of Europeans in Africa." The rest, he said, is darkness, and "darkness is not the subject of history."

We can make such statements only if we isolate ourselves within our own worlds. This month the Gazette pushes against such isolation by focusing on connections between St. Mary's and various countries in Africa. We recount the experiences of history professor Garrey Dennie in South Africa, profile the remarkable work of Nigerian professor Femi Ojo-Ade, highlight the College's study-abroad program in The Gambia, and look at the origins of the African slave trade in colonial Maryland. St. Mary's students are having windows opened into Professor Trevor-Roper's "darkness," and we share some of that light in this issue.

UPCOMING ISSUES

- Finding a Job with a St. Mary's Degree
- Music at St. Mary's
- Summer Travel Issue

St. Mary's and the Africa Connection

Writing for Mandela

by Robin Bates, Professor of English



Photo by Pamela Hicks

As a speechwriter for Nelson Mandela in 1990, Garrey Dennie put his history skills to work, figuring out which words would be appropriate for each occasion while keeping an eye on how to capture headlines. His brush with history-in-the-making now gives him special insights in his history classes.

In September 1989, St. Mary's history professor Garrey Dennie, at that time a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, went to South Africa to gather research for his Ph.D. dissertation on political funerals. By the end of his stay, he was writing speeches for Nelson Mandela. The story is a fascinating instance of someone starting out as a student of history and becoming, over time, a participant in history.

Professor Dennie's interest in political funerals dates back to when, as an undergraduate at the University of the West Indies in Barbados, he saw televised images of these mass events. A native of St. Vincent Island, he writes that "nothing within my Caribbean experience

remotely resembled what seemed then to be an act of such complete profanity, the violation of the right of the dead body to be laid to rest after its time in the world of the living." As he watched the clash of police and mourners, he wondered how "this realm of the sacred, the ceremonial disposal of the dead body, could become so mired in the realm of the profane, the struggles to re-make South Africa's political order."

His questions led him to Johns Hopkins where, working under Professor David William Cohen, he joined a cabal of southern Africanists who saw the pursuit of knowledge and the liberation struggle in South Africa as inseparable endeavors. One of his fellow graduate stu-

dents, white South African Carolyn Hamilton, became the opening for him to visit South Africa. Soon after he arrived, Walter Sisulu, second in stature only to Mandela in the African National Congress (ANC), was released from prison.

Dennie lived with Carolyn and other white roommates in a section of Johannesburg which, while technically for whites only, functioned as a gray area. Carolyn, a member of the ANC whose husband had spent time in jail, was approached and asked to write the speech that Sisulu was to give before the Congress for Democratic South Africa, a front for the ANC. (The ANC, now the

Writing for Mandela continues on page 4



St. Mary's College of Maryland
at Historic St. Mary's City

The Public Honors College
www.smcm.edu



Continued from page 1

ruling party in South Africa, was banned at the time.) From that point on, she and Dennie became speechwriting collaborators.

The speech, Dennie says, had to be compelling enough to get the government to respond. In it, the writers called not only for the freeing of Mandela and all political prisoners but also for the repeal of the apartheid laws. Attempting to be both firm and conciliatory, they addressed Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk by name and challenged him to meet the ANC halfway.

Unbeknownst to them, another speech was being written by Joe Slove, the head of the armed wing of the ANC, who was exiled in neighboring Zambia. Sisulu chose to deliver theirs.

Carolyn and Dennie continued to write speeches for Sisulu. "Because we were history graduate students," he notes, "we were always putting things in historical context." Their speeches were successful enough that, when Mandela was released from prison, the two were asked to write several speeches for him as well.

Although they were given guidelines for the speeches, they were also able to insert their own views. In one instance, they stirred up a hornet's nest.

The situation was as follows. When Mandela was released, white violence increased. Carolyn and Dennie figured that this was because certain powers within the white government wanted to send a message to blacks that Mandela could not protect them, thereby undermining his black support. Following one bloody massacre, the two graduate students had Mandela call for the firing of the Minister of Defense and the suspension of the Minister of Police.

When Mandela looked over the speech, he found these demands too strong for the time and dropped them. However, the speech had already been printed up and sent to the newspapers. The following day, headlines screamed Carolyn's and Dennie's words. Mandela had to point to his televised speech as evidence that he had been misquoted.

"So we were indirectly chastised by Mandela's retraction," Professor Dennie now says, remembering back. But he felt that they were vindicated two months later when Mandela, seeing the moment as right, did in fact call for exactly these actions. Dennie felt further vindicated years later when the former Military of Police came forward and admitted to using violence for the reasons Carolyn and Dennie thought he did. It was a rare instance of historians suddenly receiving

St. Mary's and the Africa Connection Writing for Mandela

by Robin Bates, Professor of English



Photo by Guy Tillim/Afrapix

"They surrounded me entirely so that anyone passing couldn't have seen me. I got new insight into how people disappeared. If I had been killed at that point, no one would have known a thing."

living proof for their theories.

Being a black man in South Africa, even though he was a foreigner, proved to be a special challenge. Dennie remembers once returning from a friend's house at night and being suddenly approached by 12 armed policemen. "They surrounded me entirely so that anyone passing couldn't have seen me," he remembers. "I got new insight into how people disappeared. If I had been killed at that point, no one would have known a thing."

Professor Garrey Dennie traveled to South Africa to study how a sacred event such as a funeral could become a political event in the struggle against apartheid. Funerals were often broken up by police. Here a pall bearer struggles against tear gas in a 1986 funeral for a squatter killed in Crossroads.

As soon as they heard his accent, however, they recognized him as a foreigner and, after questioning him about the U.S., let him go. "My language saved me that day," he says.

Another day he was refused admittance onto a bus. It came about because his white roommates had set him up: "It was 'the education of Garrey.' They wanted me to experience apartheid and so sent me on a route where they knew this would happen." He was once called a "kaffir," the South African equivalent of "nigger," and on his way to a funeral had an AK47 shoved into his chest.

As his 12-month stay neared its end, he began researching frantically. His direct experience with apartheid ultimately gave him powerful insights into his dissertation topic, research of the most immediate kind. He came to understand that the political funerals were, in part, a way of respecting a body that was humiliated in life.

In these funerals, the mourners sometimes numbered in the tens of thousands, and the black, green, and gold colors of the ANC were everywhere. Between

speeches, the mourners often exploded into anti-apartheid singing and "toy-toyi" dancing. The toy-toyi was a dance reportedly brought into South African from the military camps of the ANC, and it became a most visible symbol of militant opposition to apartheid.

When writing about South African funerals, Professor Dennie found it useful to contrast white and black approaches to death rituals. The following explanation is excerpted from his writing on the subject:

"In the 1980s (and still today), most white South African families, exercising absolute control over the disposal of the remains of their loved ones, buried or cremated their dead and comforted the bereaved in very private settings, free from the gaze of unfamiliar eyes. To them, this less visible ceremony allowed them to memorialize and grant sacred status to their dead in a manner consistent with their ideas of a dignified funeral. A white family was likely to view as sacrilegious a funeral ceremony that commanded the attention of the nation and involved thousands of mourners.

"Black South Africans, by contrast, saw the realm of the sacred and the realm of the profane as intersecting zones. Death and the activities surrounding the disposal and disposition of the dead body provided the most powerful moment of these two realms conjoining.

"Put another way, the multiple indignities that white South Africans inflicted on the living bodies of black South Africans meant that black mourners were particularly interested in giving visibility to their commemorations of the dead, and hence restoring a measure of dignity to their lives. In fact, for black mourners, the corpse was desecrated if death and burial were not accompanied by public displays of grief."

Dennie says that he got the seeds of this insight on his first day in South Africa when he saw policemen shoot at a suspect fleeing through a crowd. The lack of concern for innocent black bystanders signaled to him the lack of respect for the black body. The insight was driven home repeatedly in the following months. His experiences helped him write his Ph.D. dissertation, which he titled "Sacred Corpse, Profane World." Even more important, the visit provided him the gratifying opportunity to play a role, however small, in one of the 20th century's most significant liberation movements.



History professor Garrey Dennie, with fellow graduate student Carolyn Hamilton, wrote the following speech (excerpted) that Mandela delivered in Durban, Natal on Feb. 25, 1990, not long after being released from prison. Natal was experiencing severe black-on-black violence between the Zulu-led Inkatha party and the African National Congress. In the speech, Mandela urges his supporters not to respond to Inkatha violence with violence of their own, even while acknowledging their suffering. Professor Dennie drew on his Caribbean island roots for the phrase "take your guns, your knives, and your pangas [machetes] and throw them into the sea." Images of Mandela delivering the line were broadcast by BBC and other news organs around the world and helped establish Mandela as a statesman and man of peace. Note the historical references that these two history graduate students use throughout the speech.

Friends, comrades, and the people of Natal, I greet you all. I do so in the name of peace, the peace that is so desperately and urgently needed in this region.

In Natal, apartheid is a deadly cancer in our midst, setting house against house, and eating away at the precious ties that

Nelson Mandela's Address to a Rally in Durban

bound us together. This strife among ourselves wastes our energy and destroys our unity. My message to those of you involved in this battle of brother against brother is this: take your guns, your knives, and your pangas, and throw them into the sea. Close down the death factories. End this war now!

We also come together today to renew the ties that make us one people, and to reaffirm a single united stand against the oppression of apartheid. We have gathered here to find a way of building even greater unity than we already have. Unity is the pillar and foundation of our struggle to end the misery which is caused by the oppression which is our greatest enemy. This repression and the violence it creates cannot be ended if we fight and attack each other. . . .

The youth have been the shock troops of our struggle. We salute them for the ground which they have gained. Only through commitment have these victories been won; only through discipline can

they be consolidated and made to last. The youth must be like the warriors who fought under Shaka, the son of Senzangakhona, fighting with great bravery and skill. These heroes obeyed the commands of their commanders and their leaders. Today the community says, the world says, and I say: end this violence. Let us not be ruled by anger. Our youth must be ready to demonstrate the same perfect discipline as the armies of King Shaka. If they do not, we will lose the ground which we have gained at such great cost.

The parties to the conflict in Natal have disagreed about a great deal. We have reached a stage where none of the parties can be regarded as right or wrong. Each carries a painful legacy of the past few years. But both sides share a common enemy: the enemy is that of inadequate housing, forced removals, lack of resources as basic as that of water, and rising unemployment. The Freedom Charter asserts that there should be houses, secu-

rity and comfort for all. We demand that the government provides these basic necessities of life. The shortage of housing, water and work opportunities, the forced removal of people and the destruction of their houses: these are our problems. They must not make us enemies. . . .

Women of Natal, in the past and at crucial moments, you have shown greater wisdom than your menfolk. It was you who, in 1929 and again in 1959, identified and struck out at one of the roots of our oppression. You launched powerful campaigns against beer halls. Women such as Dorothy Nyembe, Gladys Manzi and Ruth Shabane showed sharpness of mind by closing down the beer halls when the men were rendered useless by alcohol and families were being broken up. I hope that the women will again stand up and put their shoulders to the wheel together with the community to end the strife and violence. More recently, the women of Chesterville arranged all-night vigils to protect their children. Mothers, sisters and daughters of Natal, it falls to you once again to intervene decisively. . . .