

Inside African Anthropology: Monica Wilson and her interpreters

(London: African International Institute; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2014, xv, 356 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-107-02938-5 (Hardback); 978 -1-107-64382-6 (African edition paperback))

Andrew Bank and Leslie J Bank (eds.)

Randolph Vigne
Independent Scholar
randolphvigne@gmail.com

By line three of Andrew Bank's wide-ranging 34-page introduction I realized I was indeed "within African anthropology", where I don't belong.

South African-born ethnographers played a leading, perhaps "the" leading, role in what has nostalgically been called "the Golden Age of South African Ethnography" within the British functionalist tradition.

Functionalist? A "Golden Age"? This must be a book about social anthropologists for social anthropologists, presenting Monica Wilson as a "prominent figure in that pioneering generation". But be of good cheer, non-anthropologist readers, this is more than yet another book for one faction in a discipline to savage another. Old unhappy far off things are brought to light in the great shift from the male-dominated, "tribal" anthropology of the 1920s and '30s to the world of Monica Wilson's interdisciplinary studies which recognize the importance of the work of their interpreters, the "ethnographers within an ethnography". It is partly the product of the Monica Wilson Centenary Conference held in 2008 at the Wilsons' country home in the Amatolas, Hunterstoun, Hogsback, now the Creative Writing Centre of the University of Fort Hare, but has been broadened in its long gestation, not least in presenting a portrait of the remarkable woman whose life and work inspired it.

Born in 1908 to Scottish missionary parents at Lovedale, her earliest perhaps happiest days were spent there. She had the African children of the mission as her friends, spoke their language and knew their parents as family friends. Despite a year at school in Edinburgh and matriculating with the daughters of Port Elizabeth merchants and prosperous sheep farmers at the local Collegiate

School, she trailed clouds of Lovedale glory with her for the rest of her life. A deep interest in eastern frontier history, a love of Xhosa and Mpondo customs, language and culture, a hatred of colonial overlordship, and worse still, apartheid, moved her to close friendships with such as the Rubusanas and the ZK Matthews in the eastern Cape, Mary Dreyer (daughter of AK Soga) in Pondoland and Archie Mafeje, co-author of her *Langa: a Study of Social Groups in an African Township* in Cape Town (1963).

She seems to have had few close friends from within the white community beyond her days at Cambridge and her happy, but ultimately tragic marriage to the brilliant and attractive fellow anthropologist Godfrey Wilson, which ended in her thirties. Girton, where she took her first degree in 1930 and her D.Phil., back from South Africa, in 1933, made her a radical liberal, with friends like the young Egyptian nationalist Munir Sadek, also of Girton, and the then-Communist Eddie Roux, later a committed liberal like herself.

The field work in Pondoland that led to *Reaction to Conquest. The Effect of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa* (Oxford, 1936) brought her fame beyond the realms of academia. The very title makes clear her stand in social anthropology: it is a study of development in society, not simply analysis of a static way of life. This was defined in *The Analysis of Social Change. Based on Observations in Central Africa* (Cambridge, 1945), written with Godfrey at the end of their two years with the Nyakyusa in what is now Tanzania. Published after clinical depression led to Godfrey's suicide in May 1944, it was slow to win support for Monica's belief in her subject but has done so over time. It has taken Andrew Bank and his collaborators Sekibikakiba Peter Lekgoathi and Timothy Mwakaseke to give full credit to the Wilsons' interpreter, in the widest sense, Leonard Mwaisumo, an outstanding example of "an African research assistant who played such a pivotal role at field-sites in translating local cultures and histories".

Her years at Fort Hare University College, as it then was, were fruitful, not least in her work with three major "research assistants", who were so much more: Livingstone Mqotsi, Godfrey Pitje and Nimrod Mkele. Frustrated by colour bar exclusion, by custom and not law – this was before the catastrophic 1948 election and the enforcement of apartheid – none of them achieved the careers in anthropology at which they would have shone.

Mqotsi's case was different. A major block to his academic future was his active membership of the Non-European Movement, a product of the All

African Convention. This had grown out of mass opposition, side-lining the ANC, to Hertzog's "native bills" which lost the Africans their common roll vote in the Cape Province in 1936. It fell among Trotskyites, which paralysed a part of the African elite, committed only to boycotting every move towards liberation. Professor AC Jordan, IB Tabata, Nathaniel Honono, WM Tsotsi and others of real calibre were lost to the main stream of the struggle.

The second half of Monica's career was highlighted by her friendship and collaboration with another, younger member of the Unity Movement (as it had renamed itself). It could not have been only Mafeje's political allegiance that barred him from the lectureship at the University of Cape Town which Monica urged and he richly deserved, but, of course, his skin colour.

It is a minor weakness of the book that the editors' offer so little of the political background of those years of struggle. The 1952 Defiance Campaign is called a "rebellion", though Leslie J Bank treats it more seriously in his account of Mqotsi's involvement. If the Treason Trial or Sharpeville are mentioned they are not indexed.

Monica's membership of the Liberal Party was a source of pride to fellow members. Your reviewer recalls a visit to her house with a group of young Liberals to meet her house guest, Professor ZK Matthews, and meeting her socially with Patrick Duncan, the radical Liberal "par excellence". On both occasions she was more as Pamela Reynolds describes her with her students, than in the relaxed friendly relationship she enjoyed with such as Mqotsi and Mafeje, late life recurrences of her Lovedale childhood. The latter became almost a member of the family, a brother to the Wilsons' two boys, Francis and Tim, who was born a few months before his father's death.

Pamela Reynolds recalls her as "a formidable figure".

On the dot of eight in the morning she would glide into the lecture hall... with her black gown flapping ominously. Her stern demeanour silenced us all, even the newspaper readers at the back of the hall. ... I was fascinated by the clarity and confidence of her exposition. There was no obvious attempt to entertain and little interaction with us.

Eleven years later and well into her career, Dr Reynolds stayed at Hunteranstown, where "we overcame our mutual shyness to enjoy long walks and hours of talk".

Her Rhodes years as the university's first woman professor are scarcely sketched in, with little beyond the sad experience of her friend and protégé Mqotsi. Her successor was Philip Mayer, whose *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Oxford, 1961), written with his wife Iona, was one of those rare essays in anthropology that, like *Reaction to Conquest*, caught the imagination of readers outside, not only inside, African anthropology. Mayer was much impressed with Mqotsi as applicant for a vacant post at Rhodes, and, to Mqotsi's and Monica's delight, offered him a higher one.

To his dismay he was suddenly informed... that Rhodes University had now decided to rescind its job offer. The vice-chancellor, Alty, had vetoed his appointment because ... Rhodes had been threatened by the government.

Leslie Bank suggests a comparison "with the later and much more widely known case of Archie Mafeje's rejection by the University of Cape Town in 1968". Andrew Bank, in a later chapter on Monica Wilson's and Mafeje's 'co-production of *Langa: a Study of Social Groups in an African Township*, records "the infamous rescinding of his appointment as senior lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology by the UCT senate in 1968, in what has become known as 'the Mafeje affair'". There follows a tiring 27-page narration of Mafeje's work with Monica and much about his career with no further mention of the "affair". The curious will find four pages about it in the admirably succinct *1968 Survey of Race Relations* (Johannesburg, 1969), mass student protests, the resignation of the Dean of Humanities, Professor Maurice Pope, and Prime Minister Vorster's threats. We are told nothing of Monica's role in this.

The lengthy treatment of both Mqotsi and Mafeje has its relevance 'inside African anthropology' but is sleep inducing outside it. The editors cannot be blamed for excluding so much biographical material and we must await the forthcoming life of Monica Wilson by a contributor, Sean Morrow, to learn of such key matters as her profound and enduring Christian faith, her family life with her two remarkable sons, her friends and shared intellectual and political interests with them. Instead *Inside African Anthropology* rehearses, somewhat repetitiously, the "unofficial history" of the subject in central and South Africa, the move away from functionalism, "the tribe", "anthropology's hidden colonialism", all of them male-dominated, to the promotion of the "native clerks" of old to enablers of the "co-production of scientific knowledge", the interdisciplinary character of the research exemplified by Monica Wilson's work, and the emphasis on "social change" in it.

The penultimate chapter views Monica Wilson as historian. The authors, Sean Morrow, adjunct professor of history at Fort Hare, and Christopher Saunders, professor emeritus of historical studies at Cape Town, show how Monica came from history, with her strong sense of the Eastern Cape past from childhood, and her first months at Cambridge, until she grasped that “the anthropological approach was the only possible way of attempting to write the history of African societies”. It was this that cut her adrift from Malinowski’s static functionalism. Her association with Leonard Thompson led them jointly to “decolonize” South African history.

To Monica, as to Thompson, showing that African societies were as worthy of study as white-ruled ones, and writing the country’s history with the black majority always in mind, was a project strongly opposed to apartheid.

We are shown that it was she and not Thompson, the historian, who took the lead in the production of the two-volume *Oxford History of South Africa* (1969, 1971) which they jointly edited. Morrow and Saunders (the latter having been a research assistant on two of Wilson’s four chapters in vol. 1) are particularly able to tell its story. They make the case for the *Oxford History*’s value in South African historical studies, with its constant projection of the black majority from the pre-colonial to the early industrial past. Wilson had already made an important contribution in destroying the apartheid myth that Europeans and Bantu-speaking Africans had reached South Africa simultaneously, in the west and east respectively. Her paper, “The early history of the Transkei and Ciskei” (*African Studies* 18.5, 1959) presented the unanswerable case, based on the 16th and 17th century accounts of Portuguese castaways, that African Bantu-speaking African settlement predated the Dutch by several centuries.

It is ironic that the *Oxford History*, having been mercilessly attacked by the new Marxist and neo-Marxist wave of South African historians on publication, has had to wait for the virtual disappearance of their ideas from the scene to get past the obstacles their concentration on capital and racism put in its way. The publication of the in-part regrettable *Cambridge History of South Africa* (2008, 2011) may have been the swan song of some of them.

This study of “Monica Wilson and her interpreters” shows her to have been both a dominant force in African anthropology and a major contributor to a history of South Africa of which she was the chief editor. What better case could be made for the interdisciplinary characters of anthropology and history which she asserted throughout her career?