

## OBITUARY

### Charles Granston Richards, OBE (1908–2001)

Charles Richards, founding Director of the East African Literature Bureau, died on 21 January 2001 at the age of 92. Many of the book supply issues he confronted in Africa between 1935 and 1965 are still pertinent today.

Coming from a strong Christian background, Charles Richards was working in antiquarian bookselling in 1935 when he responded to a chance suggestion from a clergyman that he should go to Nairobi to run the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Bookshop. He went to Kenya, and expanded the stock and worked out how to publish with such success that by 1946/47 the CMS Bookshop was selling 250,000 of its own publications a year: books by missionaries and government officials, translations, and books by Africans writing for the public for the first time. Following Elspeth Huxley's *Literature for Africans: report* (1946), Richards was first invited to take up the honorary post of Adviser on Literature for Africans and then to establish the East African Literature Bureau as a department of the East Africa High Commission,

As he wrote in his memoirs, the Literature Bureau was to give him the resources to do what interested him most: 'Providing the means for African writing to grow'. In an interview towards the end of his career, Richards said that one of the things the Bureau hoped for was 'not to become great publishers ourselves but to try and develop publishing as part of the life of East Africa'. He regarded it as more important to get an African author taken up by a publisher who could market his or her work internationally than to publish it himself. The Rockefeller Foundation had provided a prize for the Bureau to award for a new work by an East African. After a Makerere University College student won the prize, Richards put him in touch with Heinemann. This was James Ngugi – later Ngugi wa Thiong'o. One of the Bureau's early publications was a Kiswahili translation of *Julius Caesar* by Julius Nyerere.

The Bureau described itself as 'a single integrated organisation attacking problems of production and distribution' of general literature, magazines, textbooks and books for adults on agriculture and technical subjects. As part of the distribution, the initial plan was to establish a central library in each territory. These libraries would establish branches, which in time would become regional libraries. But Richards was told that such a scheme would be too expensive. A book box distribution scheme and a postal service were set up. The financial constraints imposed on the service by the less than sympathetic Kenya government are obvious in the Bureau's annual reports from the mid-1950s onwards. When Sidney Hockey was appointed Libraries Development Organiser in 1960, Richards told him that he had 'no illusions

about the professional quality of our existing service. It is just the best we could do with what we could get in the way of staff and funds... I have only been a prophet; you are the one to lead us to the Promised Land!' Forty years later that destination is still some way off, and the best route to take remains controversial.

On his retirement from government service in 1963 at the age of fifty-five, Charles Richards went to work for Oxford University Press. His task was to develop OUP Eastern Africa from an office with a representative to a full branch. But before long the World Council of Churches asked him to move to Switzerland to become Director of the Christian Literature Fund. He was happy in Kenya and enjoyed his work with OUP. The invitation was not welcomed by him, nor by the company – 'It was difficult for [his manager in London] to understand how a senior post in the Press could be given up for a post such as this.' But his conscience obliged him to accept. The Fund later became the Agency for Christian Literature Development and the office moved to London in 1971. Richards retired from the service in 1975.

Some of the staff who worked with Charles Richards were later to go on to very senior positions. These include John Ndegwa (later Librarian of the University of Nairobi), Ralph Opondo (later Librarian of the McMillan Memorial Library, Nairobi) and Jonathan Kariara (later a senior editor with the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation and then head of the Department of Publishing, Moi University, the first such department in Kenya). Ironically, although Richards held senior posts, wrote a number of books, and was a good linguist, he himself had no formal qualifications. This was due to health problems he experienced as a child and as a young man. He would note with pleasure that he had applied for none of the jobs he held – they all came to him by invitation.

Richards enjoyed years of active retirement, although after more than fifty years of marriage, the death of his wife Elizabeth in 1994 was a major blow. His own summing-up of his career was as follows: 'my profession for forty years was helping to make opportunities for people in the Third World to speak through the printed word'.

The Richards papers are on deposit at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Sample copies of some East African Literature Bureau publications are included. Published sources include: 'No carpet on the floor' extracts from the memoirs of Charles Granston Richards, founding director, East African Literature Bureau, *ARD*, 71, 1996, 1–32.

Anthony Olden  
Thames Valley University