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GWYNETH HENDERSON: In this week's 'University Report' news of research that might lead to cheap and easy sources of electricity and two new publications of very particular interest. First a new book - it's being published this week actually - that could be invaluable to all students of African literature or come to that anyone who reads! It's called 'A Readers Guide to African Literature' and it's written by Hans Zell and Helene Silver. I asked Edward Blishen, writer, critic, teacher and educationalist to have a good look at it for us.

EDWARD BLISHEN: 'A Reader's Guide to African Literature' it's called and let me say right at the beginning that the aim has clearly been to produce an attractive reference book - not an easy aim to achieve. Bibliographies that wet the appetite by their mere appearance are very thin on the ground. I think Heinemann, and the editors Hans Zell and Helene Silver, have succeeded very notably in this respect: they've used, for the main bibliographical sections, double columns with an employment of bold type and italics (for authors' names and titles) that makes for easy travel of the eye across the page. The second half of the book consists of biographies of about fifty of the most distinguished African writers, this section's in larger type, isn't in columns, and is illustrated with photographs of most of the writers. So taken together with the breakdown of the material into a whole variety of sections, and with the use of very agreeable type faces, this does become, to my eye, an attractive reference book: and it would - at least, I think it would - be a piece of grumpy pedantry to complain about such a search for liveliness and attractiveness. Anything likely to enlarge the company of those who read African literature is to be welcomed: and there's never any reason why a book shouldn't be physically pleasant. And as what fundamentally it is, and claims to be - as a list of books, a list that sets out to be comprehensive within its own definitives - '820 works by black African authors south of the Sahara writing in English and in French' -

EDWARD BLISHEN:
(CONT'D.)

as such a list, I find it indeed comprehensive: I've been testing over the past few days for accuracy, checking dates of publication and so forth, and I've not yet discovered an error. It's modest - it doesn't claim to replace existing bibliographies, but to supplement and update them: it confesses that, in the interest of pure manageability, it's had to turn its back on writings in Portuguese and Arabic, literature by North African and while South African writers, most of the popular literature, all the vernacular literature ... folklore is covered only in a selective fashion. It's very well indexed, by the way: every title is given a number, and I find the book easy and quick to work with. A very useful feature is that writings, and their authors, are noted even where they've only appeared, not separately but in anthologies. There's a list of critical works, and then the writings of individuals are dealt with country by country. There's a very valuable - if, as yet, rather frail - section on children's books, lists of major periodicals and magazines: lists of essential addresses - that's of publishers, booksellers, dealers - and a Stop Press section. In general, then, I do think this is a useful book, especially for the newcomer. But some price is paid, I think, for its very liveliness. Each title is annotated, and I know myself, from drawing up book lists for our National Book League here, how difficult it can be to say something sensible and useful about a book in two or three dozen words. I'm puzzled, though, that out of print books should on the whole be deprived of these annotations: Bloke Modisane's 'Blame Me on History' for example may for the moment be out of print - but it might be reprinted at any moment, and what about the reader who borrows his books from libraries? Why deny such a book any annotation at all. Then the editors have had the idea, the bright idea, of giving in most cases an extract from a review of the work in question. But of course even some of the best reviews in full are not good or remotely complete indications of the quality and character of a book: and on the whole, I don't think this device works. I'm a little doubtful, again, simply because it perhaps cuts too gaily across the essential purpose of a good reference book, I'm doubtful about a section of books chosen to represent politically committed literature; to begin with, they're drawn only from Anglophone writing, and the list raises, I think, an obvious doubt purely in terms of literary fact: the fact being that the most influential forms of political commitment in literature may be found, not in overtly political writing, and that's what is listed here, but in novels poetry, drama. But I see perfectly well that there has been a tug-of-war between the desire to be lively and stimulating, and the desire to be scholarly and precise. Perhaps at the end there hasn't been

EDWARD BLISHEN:
(CONT'D.)

the complete balance between these two forces that one might have hoped for: liveliness has dragged scholarship, a bit puffed and red of face, across the central line. But - well, I must say again that there's a lot to be said, I feel there's a great deal to be said, for attempting to be informative and lively at once in respect of a literature that, as the editors say, is expanding, new and exciting. And those biographies, by the way - most of them give the essential facts that one would be looking for, and sensibly leave the writers, through quotations to speak for themselves as to their ends and aims and outlooks. And finally - well, photographs do add something.

GWYNETH HENDERSON:

Thank you very much indeed Edward - and just to recap 'A Readers Guide to African Literature' by Hans Zell and Helene Silver is published by Heinemann Educational Books at £3 in hardback and £1.50 in paperback in the United Kingdom.

Now electricity - well I really don't have to underline the importance of cheap sources of electricity for industry and domestic use - or that at present nearly everywhere supply cannot keep up with demand, and that it is again the rural areas that have to go without. And, of course, it isn't only the various types of generators - diesel, turbine or hydro-electric schemes and so on that are themselves costly - maintenance of supply lines and all the trappings are expensive too and of course often difficult to maintain because of the lack of skilled labour. So what to do? Well in Sierra Leone, the Department of Engineering at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone has been working on the problem - in Freetown Roland Buck spoke to one of the lecturers concerned - Mr. P. Wilson and first he asked Mr. Wilson what they're doing.

MR. P. WILSON:

Well briefly, we've taken an interest in the domestic consumption of electricity in Africa in rural areas, and our first research indicated that there is a large, vast potential for power for lighting purposes basically in the first instance. There are many D.C sources available being developed, particularly fuel cells which could be usefully used perhaps to power these fluorescent lighting circuits and provide a cheap means of lighting rural areas without the use of more expensive diesel generators.

ROLAND BUCK:

I was wondering why you undertook this particular research project?

MR. P. WILSON: It's mainly because it's relevant to development in Africa. As you know one of the basic modern needs of man is a source of electric power - it provides us with most of our luxuries. In Africa the state of electrification at the moment is rather poor, the metropolitan centres are more or less provided for, but the rural areas appear to be neglected, and in fact it seems that a period of fifty years will pass before any supply is brought there from transmission lines, from hydro-electric power, diesel generators, gas turbines or what have you.

ROLAND BUCK: Mr. Wilson, how long have you been engaged in this particular project, and how far have you got?

MR. P. WILSON: Well, we've taken an interest in electrification in Sierra Leone for some time now. As you perhaps know the U.N.D.P.I.D.A. are doing a research project, 'Power Plan' they call it, which is a plan for electrification using hydro-electric power in Sierra Leone and this is really of quite great importance to the country, and the Department of Engineering has taken upon itself to look at this and see what we can do to contribute to this plan. In the first instance we were requested to look at the wind power regime in the vicinity of the peninsula, and we found this to be inadequate for the purposes of generation of power, so now we're turning our attention to more novel means of generating power, such as fuel cells, C.C. power in the first instance, that we could use to run our fluorescent lights by means of solid state inverters, and in fact it's the inverters that we're concentrating on, the design of inverters, the comparison with various designs produced by other people, organisations in America and the U.S.A, and we have all the time in our mind that a large amount of research by organisations like General Motors, General Electric Corporation is going on into D.C. power supplies for motor cars, and we expect that quite soon, say in the next ten years, a power source will be developed which is commercially viable, a D.C. power source which we should like some experience with using in rural areas of Africa.

ROLAND BUCK: Mr. Wilson, what are the advantages of this system over conventional systems?

MR. P. WILSON: Well at the present time, at the present stage of development, there's no direct advantage because of the high cost of fuel cells in particular. They've been used in space missions, the Americans have used them a lot, where of course cost was no object, but there's a great deal of research going on into a bio-chemical fuel cell which uses plant life to generate electricity, in other words any sort of leaves

MR. P. WILSON:
(CONT'D.)

or bio-chemical material, refuse even, could be used to generate electricity. It is obviously a very attractive prospect. The other thing is that there are no moving parts, no moving parts whatsoever, so that the maintenance problem is reduced considerably and obviously for rural districts this is fairly important, since a trained technician may not be available.

ROLAND BUCK:

Mr. Wilson, I'm wondering what the successful results of this project might be, how are they going to be utilised?

MR. P. WILSON:

Well, for a start we'll have experience with using these D.C. systems, basically we'll start off a pilot project using ordinary lead acid cells, we hope to set up a small lighting system, on a remote island off the peninsula, Banana Island and with this experience we shall in future be able to estimate and judge developments in fuel cells, and other techniques for producing D.C. power in terms of the African need as it stands in rural areas.

ROLAND BUCK:

Are the conditions now that this project is being carried out limited to Sierra Leone or to other developing countries, say for example, Asia, Latin America?

MR. P. WILSON:

Well, let's stick to Africa, I mean the rest of Africa. Sierra Leone is lucky from the electrification point of view because it's fairly small. The expense in setting up transmission lines, distribution centres and so forth is far less than somewhere like Tanzania, where they have vast areas of remote space, open spaces. They have to spend a lot of money, a lot of capital expenditure in getting their electricity from the power station to the consumers, whether they be industrial or domestic. So I would say that this project is even more relevant to other parts of Africa, and indeed Asia and Latin America.

ROLAND BUCK:

What is the future of this present project?

MR. P. WILSON:

Well, that depends. That depends largely on the technical development in the fuel cell field. If, as I hope, in the next ten years, the cost of producing electricity by fuel cells means comes down to something like £100 per kilowatt, then there may well be an enormous blossoming in this field, and the utility of the technique of using D.C. sources, invertors, lighting units and so forth, may indeed be very important. It's a gamble.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well it may be a gamble but think of the dividends if it comes off! Mr. P. Wilson lecturer in Engineering at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone, was talking to Roland Buck in Freetown.

Now just before I go a brief word about that second publication I mentioned. Just published by the Commonwealth Secretariat, Education Division, is the third volume of one of their most valuable documents "Education in the Developing Countries of the Commonwealth. Research Register 1970-1971". The volume is divided into eighteen sections devoted to, for example, educational planning, curriculum, careers, teaching and learning situations and so-on. It includes information on on-going research under these headings from fifty-five organisations in twenty-one countries - but I'm afraid there are some hefty African gaps - the Universities of Dar-es-Salaam, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, all three Ghanaian ones, Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, were some I noticed were missing straight off. Even so it is a very useful book to have - if you would like to see it please write to us and we'll pass on your request - our address of course 'University Report' BBC, London. And don't forget I always look forward to hearing from you with any queries, comments or suggestions on any edition of the programme!

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