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COMMONWEALTH ARTS FESTIVAL 1965
SUPPLEMENT OF AFRICAN WRITING



*Twins Seven Seven (Nigeria) Etching (at National Museum of Wales, Cardiff)
See article by Dennis Duerden on pages 161-3.*

Commonwealth Arts Festival

COMMONWEALTH TO MOST PEOPLE means a photograph of black and white politicians in evening dress surrounding a tiara'd Queen. Nothing to do with life. In South Africa at least, nothing to do with the aspirations of the people. What could it have to do with literature?

In his discussion with Lewis Nkosi, Dan Jacobson suggests that Commonwealth writers have "the sense of being involved in some way in a common effort". Something about their writing is not only English, Australian or Zambian. Something about it is not American. They are addressing a shared audience. They are able to draw on a tradition or walk away from it — but it is there.

This tradition is not only for the electors of those prime ministers who annually get photographed with the Queen. It has little to do with that political "club" from which Dr. Verwoerd was asked to resign. As inheritors of the tradition, in this supplement of African writing and the arts are South Africans like Gordimer, Jacobson, Nkosi, La Guma, Mphahlele, Breytenbach. The place of South African writing in a contribution to a Commonwealth Arts Festival is admitted even by the official Festival programme, which presents poets "from Thomas Pringle to F. T. Prince" or "Roy Campbell to N. H. Brettel", discreetly omitting to mention that they are South Africans or, in Brettel's case, Rhodesian. They are part of the literature of the Commonwealth and we are glad to have extended South Africa's contribution, even though the country itself is rightly excluded.

THE WRITERS IN OUR SUPPLEMENT stretch from the South Africans to Barry Reckord (from the Caribbean) Gerald Moore (Britain and Uganda) and Dennis Duerden. Together they show something of Africa and its arts, written from the point of view of that "common effort".

Let us accept that there is no particular axis from Peggy Harper on the dance to La Guma's story of Cape bar-flies. Anyway, most performers in the Festival belong together only in the vaguest political way. Yet some of our writing does have a common note, the inevitable one of resentment at things present and past. It is in Nadine Gordimer's story, Gerald Moore's review, Ezekiel Mphahlele on the Americans, Arthur Maimane on film. Peggy Harper, Dennis Duerden, Alex la Guma and Lewis Nkosi touch on it too. It does not mar the work but there are more positive themes. Perhaps when there are Commonwealth writers to whom independence means as little as Commonwealth does to the present generation, this note will fade, or at any rate lose its political echoes. It will, of course, stay on in their writings in many other forms until this century of the colour-line is well past.

The writers of Commonwealth or Anglophonic Africa will still have something in common, and it will be strengthened by the withering of the imperial memory they share today. Their "English expression" is part of it, as is their right to draw on or walk away from a tradition that is nevertheless there.

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