

Words Words Words

CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVEL *A Man of the People* (Heinemann) was turned out in time for the coup which ended Nigeria's First Republic, but not for *The New African's* March book pages. Nevertheless, ISIDORE OKPEWHO had time to read it and give his view:

"We find vividly recounted in Achebe's latest novel those sad socio-political phenomena which anyone acquainted with the facts can easily recognise: it is so topical and so prophetic that reading the last few pages I could hardly help intoning, 'Well, what do you know.' Perhaps that is just what denies the novel much of the satirical merit with which the blurb credits it: insert just the name of the State, which Achebe omits, and what you get is the hardly-noticeable effect of an electric-light bulb being switched on in a daylight room. Odili Samalu's account of crooks, corruption and conflict in this unnamed African independent state has plenty of wit and vitriol to scatter on everything and anyone that has anything to do with his hated adversary — the villain Chief Nanga — on whom he seeks revenge. Rather in the manner of Horace's satirical bull with hay on its horns, everything and everybody gets it — from a rape of contracts and a traffic in political allegiance to unabashed thuggery and ubiquitous Americans with ever-ready wares of propaganda and sex."

"TO ACHEBE'S COMPATRIOTS all this isn't new. [Okpewho continues] What bothers me most is our continuing experiment in the use of language. Mphahlele, Modisane and Maimane would doubtless have had much less to say about what Nkosi (in *Home and Exile*) calls the 'idyllic and pastoral' character of Nigerian literature — particularly fiction — if the wealth of material had been matched by an equally effective and pertinent use of the English language. Rather we are given an unwholesome exercise in a literal rendering of local idiom that only succeeds in producing a flat and uninspiring style. But I am happy to note that Achebe, more than many an African novelist is already demonstrating a genuinely deep feeling for words — individual words — and is gradually leaving behind the notion that imagery can only be achieved by deliberately working towards and around a parable or by making even the smallest child speak like a sage at curious moments — a notion as old as the day the first moustache showed itself in our land. I am confident that Achebe is pretty well on the way to becoming a literary giant by any standards."

WITH RARE PROPRIETY, Ian Smith chose *Punch*,

England's perennial humorous weekly, for the first "literary expression of his views" since his illegal seizure of power in Southern Rhodesia. He raises as many laughs as the *South African Digest* but never reaches the level of farce achieved by Portugal's colonial propagandists, except perhaps in his characterisation of the leaders of former British colonies in Africa who have led their people to independence as "men whose crimes against humanity are far worse than anything conceived by the beasts of Belsen." Perhaps the pathetic sham of Smith's "loyal rebellion" is best shown, as *Punch* points out, by the fact that Smith's letter reached *Punch* safely under pre-UDI stamps, the GPO having threatened to charge double postage on all letters delivered in England with Smith's "independence" stamps on them. "Makes all that Prime Ministerial writing paper seem a little less impressive," *Punch* commented.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (268 new titles July to December 1965) and Longmans Green (170) (the big three is completed by the fast-growing Pergamon (216)) are also the biggest publishers of books about Africa. Longmans have three major African books due in their 1966 non-fiction list: *Uhuru and Hero-Worship* by Professor Ali Mazrui of Makerere, which sets out to provide an introduction to political theory for Africa; John Mbiti, theologian, also of

Makerere, on *Concepts of God in Africa*; and Kenneth Kaunda's letters to the Rev. Colin Morris, *A Humanist in Africa*. OUP's major works in this period seem more preoccupied with the colonial period and its after-effects: David C. Gordon's *The Passing of French Algeria*, Dennis Austin's *Britain in South Africa*, and Margery Perham's *African Outline*, "a progress report on Africa . . . now that the move out of Africa is almost complete in the countries north of the Zambezi" (which could have been better put).

IT IS RARE to read anything new about race, nationality, and culture in this era of conflict in a shrinking world. There has been a surfeit of discussion on the question of "immigrants," that is, Africans and Asians living in England. Arguments freshly presented, if not new, are in an essay called "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" which puts the case for nationalism as a necessary hindrance against "the degrading of the moral status of society by a too rapid defacement of national traditions and customs" brought about by the fusion of races, which, the writer points out, can take place either quickly or slowly, but can never be stopped. Not surprisingly, the essay is mostly about Jewish rather than West Indian or Pakistani immigrants, since it was written by George Eliot (yes, under that wildly improbable title) in 1879.

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