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## **TRIBUTE**

### **Basil Davidson 1914 – 2010**

On July 9 the world lost one of the great pioneers in writing African History. Basil Davidson was born in Bristol, U.K. He left school at the age of 16. His big break came when he was appointed correspondent for the *Economist* in the late 1930s. He travelled Europe and picked up several languages. When WWII broke out he was recruited by the British Secret Service; he was posted to Hungary and to the Balkans, earning medals for bravery and much respect along the way. However officialdom was not kind to perceived *partizan* leanings post-war and he once more resorted to journalism.

As a journalist Davidson described – accurately – the rise of apartheid in South Africa, and he was promptly classified as a ‘prohibited immigrant.’ He turned his attentions to upholders of racial supremacy elsewhere in late-colonial Africa. In particular he came to focus on countries under the Portuguese yoke, yet nowhere was immune from his scathing anti-colonial critiques. Davidson considered it a feather in his cap that in few of the continent’s corridors of power was he popular.

Basil Davidson’s early works, including *Black Mother* and *Old Africa Rediscovered*, were to prove inspirational to the generation of independence leaders in the 50s and 60s. He went on to write more than 30 books on Africa. And in 1992 he published *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa & the Curse of the Nation-State* which described much of the contemporary plight for different parts of the continent. The title was borrowed from one of his hero’s, the activist E.D. Morel, who used it for his book on the Congo atrocities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1984 he crowned his achievements with the award-winning television series *AFRICA*, shown on Channel 4 in Britain. He held honorary degrees from a dozen or more universities. Among other awards was his Honorary Fellowship of the London *School of Oriental & African Studies*.

My first experience of Basil was in a second-hand bookstore in Sydney and a battered copy of *The African Past*. Mr. Davidson was pictured on the sleeve cover, with pipe & hunting hat he looked every bit the ex-colonial lad. Truth be told I wondered how much history there was to tell... but how Davidson brought to life (!) the monuments of ancient Ethiopia including Axum, and of Meroe civilisation (Sudan\*); the wonderful stories of ancient Ghana\*/Songhay and the empires of Mali\*

(with the fabled library of Timbuktu); tales of desert caravans and famous travellers; the famed trading cities of the Swahili Coast in East Africa including Kilwa [destroyed by uncomprehending Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century]; and the mysteries of the ruins at Great Zimbabwe.\* These stories made me ashamed for my ignorance as a History major (undergraduate). But inspired all the same.

One enduring regret is that I wasn't able to meet the great man personally. But we shall know him by the awesome corpus of work that he bequeaths us. He taught us that here was a practice of history in the making, of evidence drawn from across a range of disciplines, from archaeology to ethnobotany, linguistics and more to fashion a picture, an interpretation of a dynamic past. Davidson fought successfully against a 'history of Africa without the Africans.' And revealed to us such possibilities of the great many stories that remain to be told.

To read a lengthier review of his life and position among the pantheon of great Africanists, see *Pambazuka News* at <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/66149>

A list of the books Davidson wrote or co-authored is at <http://www.biblio.com/basil-davidson~125929~author>

\* with the present countries bearing these names bearing little resemblance to their historical namesakes, geographically or otherwise.

*Matthew Doherty*