

*This issue of the
Australasian Review of African Studies
is dedicated to*

Cherry Gertzel OA (1928– 2015)

*Former Editor of the Australasian Review of African
Studies; Founding member and former President of
the African Studies Association of Australasia and the
Pacific*

*For your inspiration and dedication to African
Studies.*

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OBITUARY

Cherry Gertzel OA (1928– 2015)



On the 25th August 2015 the African Studies community lost a great scholar and a dear friend. Cherry Gertzel OA died peacefully at her home surrounded by her beloved books and garden. Reflecting on her life and works, her friends and colleagues all agreed that she was a very private person and that while we all knew something about her, none of us knew her whole story – hence this obituary has been compiled by a small collective. Cherry spent her lifetime researching, teaching, writing and talking about African studies, a subject about which she was passionate, and she inspired passion in others. Her academic career began at UWA studying history and English literature, her honours degree being one of the first research projects carried out in WA on convictism. She then went on to Oxford University to do a BLitt, followed by a DPhil in African studies, with the remarkable Dame Margery Perham as her supervisor.

In 1953 Cherry went as the first Goldsmiths Scholar to the then University College of Ibadan in Nigeria being the first overseas postgraduate student at that university. Ibadan introduced her to Africa, began her transition from history to politics and started a life-long career in African studies.

Cherry taught and researched in political science from 1958 to 1975 as a staff member at, in turn, Makerere University – Uganda, Nairobi University – Kenya, and at The University of Zambia. During these years, which was a very interesting and important time in East and Southern African history, she was involved professionally with many prominent leaders of African society and politics. The first President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, for example, remembers her fondly and with great respect. Some of her letters to Margery Perham from this period, held at Rhodes House, Oxford, discuss not only the challenges of teaching, but her view of how a newly independent state attempts to create new institutions of governance and how the personalities of the politicians involved influence the directions these institutions take. Indeed, Clare Buswell remembers one of the papers she presented at an AFSAAP conference in Adelaide when she began her paper with a description of the day Independence was gained in Kenya. It was a description that portrayed both an important victory for some and a pyrrhic victory for others. Her recollection of the moment that the British flag came down and the new Kenyan one went up, forty years after the fact, was vivid and intimate and her audience was immediately transported back in time to that historical occasion.

She returned to Australia in 1975 and became a staff member at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia between 1975-1993, where she established the Centre for Development Studies. Throughout those years, while her teaching and research remained focused on Africa, her intellectual interests expanded increasingly into the broader field of development studies. Regular visits for field work across Eastern and Central Africa and to African conferences enabled her to maintain and to extend her links with those universities where she had taught and with many of her former students. Through those years she also spent time as a Visiting Research Fellow at The Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex at Brighton, and at the University of East Anglia. In 1984-5 she was Smuts Visiting fellow in Commonwealth Studies, Cambridge University. From 1982-6 Cherry was the President of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP).

At Flinders University she taught many students about the history of Africa, in particular Tanya Lyons and Pal Ahluwalia (current and past AFSAAP Presidents respectively), and Clare Buswell (long time AFSAAP Member), to name a few. Clare recalls her time as a student, sitting in Cherry's tutorials on Comparative Politics and being struck by her ability to guide the class as they struggled to gain an understanding

of the interlayered and complex processes of African states as they emerged from their colonial positions. Within the short fourteen weeks of this topic, Cherry was able to ignite what became a lifelong passion for the subject of Africa south of the Sahara. For Tanya, Cherry's reputation as a teacher of African politics was the main reason for enrolling at Flinders University in the first place. It was Cherry's encouragement, if not her insistence, that Tanya continued her doctoral research into the subject.

Cherry then moved to Perth where, as the Visiting Professor for the School of Social Sciences and Asian Languages at Curtin University between 1993-6, she became the Foundation Director of the Development Studies Research Unit. Cherry remained an Adjunct Professor in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Curtin University, and was an Honorary Research Fellow in the History Department at the University of Western Australia, until her retirement. Cherry was the Editor of *The Australasian Review of African Studies (ARAS)* between 1984-2004, and managed its transition from AFSAAP's Newsletter to the internationally recognised journal that it is today.

Cherry's research skills and her library are legendary. 'Organize your material' was a constant mantra to her higher level students, like Clare and to the then emerging researcher Margaret. Cherry's frequent visits to Kenya and Uganda saw her return laden down with yet more material for her research students. She inspired them to continuously question the information before them: 'what is its value; why; does it facilitate change and for whose benefit; where does it lead us; is this new knowledge'? She never gave her opinion until you had worked out your own, after which you would go away and have to rethink your so-called well-argued position. She set high standards, and expected her students to achieve them.

Issues of class and power were uppermost in her mind. She had no time for IMF or World Bank policies, using their statistics only as '101 knowledge'. Instead, she was always articulating arguments that came from within the countries she researched on, as they were far more important to understanding what was occurring on the ground and future political directions. She engaged in research relating to the politics and administration of African states, but also on more wide ranging issues of social change. In her latter years she became very interested and concerned about the environment and also the rise of terrorism across the continent and the impact of the recent Ebola Crisis in West Africa.

Up until about three years ago, Cherry made regular trips back to Africa - a commitment she considered vital to maintaining a genuine

understanding of the complex societies that were the subject of her research. She was 'planning' yet another academic 'safari' in her final year. Whenever we spoke to her, she would be working on an article or a book on a topical matter, and continued her research right until the end. There is no doubt that her work and writings leave an important legacy, as does her library – that enormous collection of books, papers and documents that, as any visitor to Cherry's house will know, fills every nook and cranny of her lovely home in the Perth hills. It is a worthy reflection of a long and fruitful life dedicated to Africa and African studies and AFSAAP believes it is important that this collection stays together and ideally be housed in an Australian library.

She was a tireless campaigner for Africa and African studies in Australia. In June 1994, in well deserved recognition of her services to Australian / African relations as an educator, researcher and advisor to government and community air organisations, Cherry was appointed as a Member of The Order of Australia. She was a woman of strong opinions, great intellectual ability and a prolific writer. She was a good friend to many and an inspiring person to all. Consequently, she earned the respect and admiration of many. She will be missed.

By
Clare Buswell,
Tanya Lyons,
Karen Miller, and
Margaret O'Callaghan