

Herinneringe / Reminiscences

Dr Xuma comes home

Howard Phillips (UCT) and Nicholas Southey (UNISA)

For the last dozen years the Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of Southern African Historical Documents (the VRS) has tried to launch its annual volume of edited historical documents at a venue connected in some way with the volume's subject. Thus, its 2005 volume, *Trials of Slavery*, was launched at The Castle in Cape Town, alongside the very room in which the slave trials it records were held in the 18th Century, while its 2008 volume, *Isaac Williams Wauchope: Selected Writings 1874-1916* was launched in a building overlooking the memorial in Rosebank, Cape Town to the *Mendi*, aboard which Wauchope was drowned in 1917. In 2011 its edited collection of the letters of Thomas Pringle was launched in the first home of the South African Public Library in central Cape Town (the building now houses the Slave Lodge Museum) where Pringle had worked as sub-librarian from 1822-24.¹

However, it would have been difficult to find a more appropriate site at which to launch its 2012 volume, *A.B. Xuma: Autobiography and Selected Works*,² than the very house in Toby Street, Sophiatown in which this seventh president-general of the African National Congress (ANC) had lived for nearly 30 years, until apartheid forced removals compelled him to move to Dube, Soweto in 1959. Today his house – which he named “Empilweni” (“place of healing”) – houses the Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre.

The sometime lounge of Dr Xuma's house was filled to overflowing on 12 June 2012 when some 70 guests gathered for the launch of the volume on a chilly Johannesburg evening. The launch was hosted by the VRS together with the Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre and the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Johannesburg, and we were delighted that our joint invitations resulted in a good turnout of VRS members as well as people from various walks of life. We were particularly pleased to welcome Ms Baleka Mbete, the national chairperson of the ANC, Dr Gwen Ramokgopa, the deputy minister of Health, and Professor Mac Lukhele, president of the South African Medical Association, as guests of honour – Dr Xuma's important medical and political legacy was rightly accorded proper recognition by the presence of these three prominent individuals.

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1. For more information about the 95-year-old VRS and these and other volumes see <http://www.vanriebeeksociety.co.za>
 2. P. Limb (ed.), *A. B. Xuma: Autobiography and Selected Works* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 2012). To hear Peter Limb speaking about this volume go to <http://www.vanriebeeksociety.co.za/home.htm> or <http://afripod.aodl.org/2012/06/afripod-64/>

The guests were entertained by three presentations from our guest speakers: Dr Sifiso Ndlovu, executive director of the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), Professor Howard Phillips, chair of the VRS, and the editor of the volume, Professor Peter Limb. Their combined contributions covered extensive ground, reflecting on aspects of history, heritage, commemoration and legacy, mainly linked to the life and work of Dr Xuma within the context of the important commemorative year of the centenary of the ANC. The lively questions and reflections of audience members on the addresses of the three panelists added to an extremely successful launch.

Without wanting to detract from the quality of what everyone had contributed, the climax of the evening undoubtedly came with the screening of a short clip of an interview conducted with Dr Xuma on 14 December 1954 for the American television programme *See it Now*, a copy of which the VRS had fortuitously found at UCT.³ To see and hear the man himself projected onto the wall of his erstwhile lounge, was a thrilling and dramatic moment, eliciting gasps, tears, ululation and applause from the rapt audience. A.B. Xuma had finally come home!

Just how providential was this occasion became even clearer two nights later in Cape Town when the volume was launched there, this time at the Colleges of Medicine headquarters, in acknowledgement of Xuma's medical career. For at this second launch Professor Rodney Davenport related how touch-and-go had been the very survival of Dr Xuma's original letters and documents which now make up this volume. Because he played a key role in this drama, the VRS requested him to put down on paper his recollections of exactly what had transpired in 1972 and it is this account which we now reproduce for the sake of archival posterity. What follows is his account written in December 2012:

During the 1970s, when I was in Johannesburg as chairman of the Grahamstown branch and a member of the Council of the South African Institute of Race Relations, I was told that Benjamin Pogrud [then a journalist on the *Rand Daily Mail*], whom I had known as a member of the Liberal Party in Cape Town, had traced the A.B. Xuma papers to a garage in Soweto, the owner of which wanted to give them greater security.

Benj accordingly took them to the Institute of Race Relations, where they were housed in the Institute's basement; but that basement had been flooded and sabotage was suspected.

I therefore offered to take the papers back with me to Rhodes, where I was a member of the History Department's staff, calendar them, and return them to Johannesburg – I think with the intention at the time to place them in the library archives at Wits University, where they could be secured against fire and damp.

While driving back to Grahamstown with the papers in my boot, I decided to take an alternate route from the Orange River through Hofmeyr

3. Oppenheimer Library, UCT, Special Collections Division: *Report on South Africa* (See it Now series, 1954) by Edw. R. Murrow and Fred W. Friendly. Two-disc set.

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and Molteno instead of the usual one through Colesberg. I did not know that the tarred surface gave way to gravel [and realised this] at about the same time as a thunder storm broke out. The road became greasy in no time and it was hard to keep on a straight course however one drove. But I did not expect to be spun around so thoroughly that the left side of my car was off the road and facing in the wrong direction.

My first reaction was that if the police were to arrive, there was a chance that my car would be searched and the papers discovered and confiscated. But to my amazement a group of Africans, perhaps ten of them, I think of both sexes, appeared from over a small rise on that side of the road, and offered to turn my car around, almost as if that was a normal thing to do. Unbelievable?

It would have been hard to say 'No', and I don't think I even needed to think 'No'. I could not have done it alone, and was amazed that it would not be necessary to leave the car and go – which way? – for help. So I kept back the money I would need to make it to Grahamstown and gave the rest (probably not very much) to them to distribute among themselves.

The rest of the story is easy to tell. With the help of Sheila Meintjies [now professor of political science at Witwatersrand University] who then had a job in the Rhodes Library, we put the papers together in separate categories and in strict chronological order (unfortunately neglecting the strict rule of professional archivists not to separate enclosures from the letters to which they were linked).

The papers were then returned to the Wits Library for storage,⁴ as agreed.

The VRS, historians and South Africans in general owe a debt of gratitude to the anonymous ten who readily turned a car around – and thereby the writing of the history of the ANC – on a muddy road to Grahamstown in 1972.

4. These papers may be accessed at the University of the Witwatersrand Library, Historical Papers Research Archive, Accession AD843.