

A Tribute

John McCracken



From Angela Smith

Because our friend and colleague, historian John McCracken was already in Malawi with his family in 1982, on secondment from the University of Stirling, my husband and I decided to follow them on secondment with our children. We were both in the Department of English Studies at Stirling; I had recently been appointed to a lectureship in what was then called Commonwealth Literature and was keen to read and discuss the work of African writers while living somewhere in Africa. We both remember vividly our first impression of how at home John was in Malawi, and how exuberant. He was always surrounded by a group of students, and often engaged in lively discussions with young staff like Megan Vaughan and Mpalive Msiska, as well as older colleagues including Kings Phiri. John whisked us up Zomba Plateau for walks and picnics, introduced us to a wide range of colleagues, and made sure that we knew about the impressive series of seminar papers that took place in Chancellor College. Jack Mapanje delivered one of these soon after he returned to Malawi after completing his PhD in London. He advertised the title of the talk as 'Africans have no sense of time'. He gathered a huge audience eager to hear the politically challenging author of *Of Chameleons and Gods*, and delivered a rigorously hard-nosed academic paper on linguistics. John relished this wrong-footing playfulness combined with an intellectual commitment to Jack's area of study. John's own scholarly distinction arose from his passionate engagement with the history and people of Malawi.

John made his first research trip to what was then Nyasaland in 1964. He had been born in Edinburgh in 1938 and educated in the Scottish Borders, the second son of two doctors. After National Service with the Kings Own Scottish Borderers, in which he was a rather perplexed teenage subaltern, he went to St John's College, Cambridge, to read history. There he encountered a radical approach to imperial history that accessed and incorporated the views of the colonised people themselves. His sources for the PhD that he

went on to write arose from a personal enigma: 'I began to speculate on why it was that the depressingly conformist church of my youth should have emerged as a radical critic of the British government's African policy' as he writes in the preface to the second edition of *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875-1940*, first published in 1977. He did extensive research in the mission archives of the Free Church of Scotland focusing on the Livingstonia Mission, and in 1964 he took up a temporary teaching post at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in Salisbury. He spent a night in prison as a result of taking part in a protest against Ian Smith's closure of a newspaper sympathetic to the cause of African nationalism. John left Salisbury/Harare and moved to Malawi in time for the independence celebrations. In the preface to the first edition of the book he acknowledges the role of Scottish church-people in his research: 'without the contribution to scholarly research made by churchmen and missionaries the task of the historian of Malawi today would be infinitely more difficult than it is'. There was a moving moment at the end of John's retirement conference at the University of Stirling that was attended by a large group of retired missionaries. One elderly minister said, 'We have had everything but music'. He began to sing a hymn in Tumbuka in a quavery voice and suddenly the seminar room was filled with song as all his former colleagues joined in. It was characteristic of John that an academically rigorous event should combine with an expansion of human sympathy, allowing people to be what they were and to express what they knew.

In 1964 John became part of the 'Dar School' at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, where a group of young academics and students were galvanised by the opportunity to write African history from the perspective of the colonised people. The tragic death in a car crash of John's young wife Jane Purkis radically affected what was otherwise a fulfilling and intellectually exciting phase of his life; he returned to Scotland to a post at the new University of Stirling in 1968. In Stirling he met his beloved second wife Juliet Clough, a journalist who survives him with their son Matthew, their daughter Caroline, and four grandchildren, Amelia, Charlie, Alfie and Laurie. Between 1980 and 1983 he served as professor and head of department at the University of Malawi, on secondment from Stirling, supportive as always of innovative research by younger staff and students and also conducting his own research in the Malawi National Archives.

In Stirling he and I, with two colleagues, founded the Centre of Commonwealth Studies of which John was the first director. It enabled us to cross academic boundaries, as the audiences for our seminars were always multi-disciplinary. On one occasion a group of undergraduates and postgraduates responded very positively to John's reference to a collection of very early photographs he had, for instance one of the ordination of Livingstonia's first Malawian Church of Scotland ministers in May 1914. They asked him to give us a paper about them and he did, not having done anything quite like it before. The last paper I heard him give, to a group of retired staff at Stirling, was called 'The Matter of a Hat' and focused on early twentieth-century photographs of Malawians wearing western dress. It explained brilliantly for a non-specialist audience how the colonial state and white settlers betrayed Malawians who had believed in the Christian promise of freedom and equality, and it did it through a focus on clothes and, specifically, the etiquette around the

doffing of hats. John could name all the Malawians appearing in early twentieth-century group photographs, showing them the respect that they were certainly not shown by colonial officials. His personal integrity shaped his teaching and administration and made him an inspiring colleague.

John retired in 2002, having served as head of the Department of History, returning for a short period to Chancellor College as a visiting professor with the Scotland-Malawi Partnership. He completed his major work of historical scholarship, *A History of Malawi 1859-1966*, which was published in 2012 with another powerful photograph on its cover, of a demonstration in Blantyre in 1960 against the visit of the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. One reviewer described the book as 'among the best single-country histories ever to be written about any African nation'. John heard the voices of those who were, tragically, not listened to in their own time and made them audible to those who listen now. His final book, *Voices from the Chilembwe Rising* (2015) contains transcripts of witness testimonies delivered to the inquiry into a short but violent uprising against British rule in 1915, 100 years before the book was published, in 1915.

John died of cancer on 23 October 2017; the huge crowd at his funeral included the Malawian High Commissioner and a lament in praise of him was composed and performed by his Malawian friend Nat Chalamanda and Nat's wife Fiona. It was particularly moving that the formal farewell to John took place in a Church of Scotland church, expressed by a young Malawian.