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## JOHN CARRINGTON EVANGELICAL POLYMATH

'He was an amazing man! Do you remember when he . . . ?' Many of his friends responded thus when anyone asked them, 'Did you know John Carrington?' Once on the same day he addressed a group of sceptical sixth-formers in a Midlands school and the local Rotary Club on the subject of talking drums and held both spellbound. He was a man of the highest intellectual capacity whose whole life was devoted to the spread of the Gospel. When he applied to the BMS, a referee suggested he might have become a university professor.<sup>1</sup> At the time it seemed that by becoming a missionary he was throwing this chance away, yet the words proved strangely prophetic. Thirty years later Carrington joined the staff of the Université Nationale at Kisangani. He earned two doctorates, on drum languages of Africa and ethnobotany, yet he was equally at home speaking to people in remote African villages or addressing small congregations in rural English chapels.

He was born in Rushden, Northamptonshire, in 1914, the son of a schoolmaster. Together with Nora Fleming, who was later to become his wife, he was baptized at Bugbrooke. After Northampton Grammar School he studied at Nottingham, gaining first class honours in Botany and a Cambridge Teacher's Certificate. He taught for two years at Nottingham Boys' School, but the missionary involvement of local churches and the ministry of the Revd E. A. Payne prepared him to hear the call of Africa and he offered his services to the BMS. In 1938 he arrived at Yakusu in the Belgian Congo to take charge of the boys' primary school there. In 1940 Nora went out to marry John and share in the work. On the way, most of their wedding presents were lost in the Antwerp docks, but they learned to be content in whatever circumstances they found themselves.

In 1940 he described the work of an educational missionary in the *Missionary Herald*: 'The Station drum beat out a message, "Wash your feet, wash your legs, wash your face, wash!"<sup>2</sup> It was calling pupils to prepare for the day. It also prompted Carrington's interest in this 'novel' means of communication. School life in Africa differed in many ways from that of England. Carrington distributed food for the boarders, then conducted a preparation class for the largely untrained *Instituteurs* who taught the children. He was in effect schools' adviser and inspector as well as class teacher. Everything fell into his orbit: including African languages, agriculture, and hygiene. Carrington had a great capacity for work. During the hottest part of the day most people, Africans and Europeans alike, were content to rest until the drum called them back to work. He wrote, 'Theoretically one should go to sleep at this point, but I find that now is the only time available for language study - an essential for every new missionary. Today should be an hour of Lokele. It was Kingwana yesterday.'<sup>3</sup> Thus he laid the foundation for his expertise in Central African languages, including eventually Tupo, Kimanga, Lingala and Kiswahili, which few white people ever gained.

Apart from the church's midweek prayer meeting, he used to devote the evenings to the school and workmen's classes. 'After supper there are lessons to prepare for tomorrow and I have to write to . . . the Pastor and teachers in the Bomboli forest'. When the electric light shut down at 9.00 p.m., he lit his paraffin lamp to write home. Only then did he feel justified in creeping under his mosquito net. He was often working again at 4 a.m. Such was the pattern of his days over thirty years.

One day Carrington and his colleagues set off to visit an African village. On their arrival they were amazed to find the villagers dressed in their best clothes ready to greet them. 'How did you know we were coming?' asked John, 'We sent no message to tell you our plans.' 'Didn't we hear your message on the drums?' replied the headman. Carrington realized that the drumming noise they had heard along their way was communicating information. His interest aroused, he eventually became 'probably the greatest living expert on Africa's talking drum or "gong" languages', as Henry Reuter wrote in the *National Geographic*.<sup>4</sup> He gained his first doctorate from London University in 1947 for 'A comparative study of some Central African Gong Languages'<sup>5</sup>. A popular version was published as *Talking Drums of Africa*.<sup>6</sup>

From time immemorial the so-called primitive peoples in Africa have sent messages over long distances by means of drums or, strictly speaking, gongs, as they do not have a stretched membrane to be beaten. Africans make these out of hollow trees, carving the inside differentially so that when beaten the drum imitates the high and low tones of the spoken languages, where the meaning of words depends on the tonal value of the syllables. For example, 'li-a-la' (pronounced li<sup>a</sup> la) in Lokele means 'fiancée'; the same word pronounced 'li-a-la' means 'rubbish pit'. Good relationships depend on correct pronunciation! Probationer missionaries must often have amused Africans as they struggled to learn their languages! Carrington reckoned that student missionaries need not worry about problems of grammar as long as they were musical.

Some people doubtless objected to him spending time on such a study, diverting his energies away from proclaiming the Gospel. Outstanding missionaries have usually been taken to task for time spent on cultural exploration activities, getting to know the country, its culture and peoples as thoroughly as possible. People have always accused missionaries of disrupting the traditional lives of the people they go to serve, often forgetting that all Western incursion has the same effect, often without offering anything better to replace those traditional values. Some missionaries have been insensitive and culturally domineering, but many have been aware that the people to whom they went had many values worth retaining. That is why some have become experts in different areas of traditional culture, recording and preserving aspects which might otherwise have perished. Already in Carrington's early days the encroachment of western ideas and ways was causing the Congo peoples to lose interest in playing the drums. In 1941 Carrington wrote, 'People should be encouraged to maintain this unique form of communication'.

Drum languages were, in fact, to open many doors to the Carringtons in the ensuing forty years. Whenever he visited churches on deputation, he carried his drum and explained its use. While he would normally speak to the children about this, adults listened just as eagerly. The drum gained him access to many secular organizations and the opportunity to speak about his Christian work in Africa. The Carringtons travelled to a number of countries, including the USA, speaking about the drum. Once it even proved useful to Zairean friends visiting them in England. In his latter years he became lay pastor of the small Baptist church at Bishopsdown, near Salisbury. One day some African visitors went shopping in the town and got lost. When John realized they should have been back, he went into his front garden and started beating out a message on the drums. His neighbours must have thought he had gone mad, but soon the two friends returned, saying 'We heard you calling us back'.

Schools formed an important part of the mission strategy in the early days in Congo. George Grenfell, the pioneer explorer of the Congo basin, had pleaded with the Home Committee for 'a man mad on schools'.<sup>7</sup> The Society was blessed with many such men and women. Carrington played an honourable part in this, teaching in primary schools at Yakusu, secondary and minister-training establishments in Yalemba, and finally in the university at Kisangani.

The BMS began schools partly to care for orphaned children, but soon the local population began to ask that their children too should learn. The Carringtons took over a boys' school at Yakusu with a boarding section for pupils from distant villages, serving 1938-51 and 1958-61. In the intervening years and again from 1961-64 they worked at the Ecole Grenfell at Yalemba, where the Arumwimi joins the River Zaire. For years this institution supplied pastors and teachers to the Upper and Middle regions of the country, just as Kimpese served the Lower Congo.

Ray Richards recalls how his own work in the pastors' school dovetailed with that of Carrington in the secondary department.<sup>8</sup> Carrington was well suited to this position. Not only did he stretch and stimulate his students' minds, but he identified with their way of life. With their help he built classrooms in sun-dried brick and thatch. In his spare time, he then built himself a house with the same kind of materials. The students gardened to feed themselves and their families; John cut his own plot, while Nora helped with the hoeing and planting of manioc and other vegetables. Letters and addresses from this period indicate that it was in many ways their happiest time in Africa. He could see the fruits of his labour in equipping men to take an important role in Zairean church and state life. His students were amongst the best-educated people in the country at that time.

After the Second World War a series of Independence movements spread through Africa. In the early 1950s the Belgian Government produced a thirty-year plan of gradual progress towards self-government, but events rendered this meaningless and on 30 June 1960 the Belgians handed over the country to a largely untrained and ill-prepared population. Few had any experience of high-level administration or

government and regional rivalries interfered with any concept or pursuit of the ideal of a united country. Much bloodshed resulted and thousands of trained expatriates had to leave. The country effectively collapsed into a vacuum.

Missionaries strove to maintain medical work and secondary education and to support the indigenous church, but in 1964 the Simba rebellion swept across the Upper River region, devastating the countryside and killing many innocent people. The Carringtons' home was looted and their lives were threatened several times. On one occasion Carrington sent a tape recording back to England: as he made it, crouching on the floor, opposing forces were firing at each other on either side of his house and bullets even passed over his head. John and Nora decided reluctantly to return to England, but they were determined they would return to Africa eventually.

In a sermon at Bugbrooke in 1964, Carrington compared their situation with that of Paul and Barnabas in Lycaonia (Acts 14).<sup>9</sup> Their hearers had at first treated them with caution; then, having witnessed a healing, they responded enthusiastically; but disaffected elements in the community had rioted and turned people's minds against them and they had been forced to flee, but the apostles had later returned. He recognized that things would not be the same when they returned: a changed country would call for a new type of ministry. For Carrington, that was to be at the Université-Nationale du Zaïre at Kisangani, but their lives hardly resembled those of people dwelling in the peaceful groves of academe. They lived at the end of the airport runway and during uprisings rival groups often sought to gain control of the airport.

The University appointed him Professor of Botany, Ethnobotany and Linguistics (1965-74). In addition, as President Mobutu was anxious to use experts who could provide the knowledge necessary for the developing country, Carrington was asked also to assume more public roles as Dean of Students (1965-68) and Vice President for Academic Affairs (1968-69). Studies on the Lokele grammar and proverbs helped to augment the linguistics literature of his students.<sup>10</sup> At the same time he worked hard to expand his own scientific knowledge and in 1970 the University of Reading awarded him an MSc Botany for work in Plant Taxonomy.

His identification with things Zairean showed in another way at Kisangani. He was always urging students, who were trying to equip themselves intellectually to lead a developing country, not to forget their roots. He encouraged them to remember their tribal languages and traditions. Henry Reuter, in the *National Geographic*, described him as 'an eager beaver of a man, a kind of living legend among the Lokele'.<sup>11</sup> Among his papers at Regent's Park College are many copies of theses written by his students.<sup>12</sup> Almost all attempt to collate and interpret aspects of Zairean life which would otherwise have been unrecorded and probably lost. While the rest of his overseas service was spent at the university, Carrington and his wife continued their involvement in church life in the city and surrounding villages. Nora had a notable ministry among the women. 'Africanization' was the

order of the day, affecting both church and university life. Zairean pastors led all the local churches, and missionaries worked under their leadership. Africans filled all the administrative posts on the campus and any remaining missionaries served only as teachers, often under people whom they themselves had trained. Carrington taught biological science and forestry, often having as many as ninety students in a room with very little equipment.

John Carrington was a polymath. During one period of home assignment he studied at Regent's Park College, learning both Greek and Hebrew, and gaining the Diploma in Theology. He had earlier helped the Congo-Swahili Committee which produced the New Testament (and later the whole Bible) in that language. Now he could apply his increased linguistic skills to translating the Old Testament into Lingala. Protestant missions had always emphasized the importance of translating the Scriptures into national languages and Lingala was one of the major trade languages of the Congo. From 1954 onwards he collaborated with Sigmund Westberg, a Swedish missionary. In the 1930s Malcolm Guthrie,<sup>13</sup> a BMS missionary, had completed a translation of the New Testament and now Westberg and Carrington produced a complete Bible. Lingala is a widespread language with great variety of expression and progress was slow, taking from 1954 to 1970, a period spanning one of the most troubled eras of Zaire's history. When Simba rebels destroyed Yalembe in 1964, the final manuscripts of the Old Testament and half of the New Testament revision were lost. Fortunately one poorly typed manuscript was saved for the compositors to use.

Carrington never lost his love of languages. If he and his wife took a holiday in Zaire he would learn some of the language spoken by the local people where they were visiting. He spoke Dutch so well that he was sometimes taken for a native of North Holland, so he was able to undertake a deputation tour of Dutch Baptist churches. Later in life he took up Welsh, and was delighted to win a crossword puzzle prize in *Y Mynd*, the magazine for learners of Welsh; he mentioned this with great glee in a letter to a former colleague, Margaret Hughes.

His co-workers might have been daunted by his ability and dedication but he always encouraged them. When the Yalembe school needed an extra science teacher he persuaded Margaret Hughes, an Arts graduate who knew very little about the subject, to attempt it. Eventually she went on to gain a doctorate in chemistry.

Conservation matters always claimed his attention. Many Zaireans have profound understanding of the properties of different types of wood. In order to codify and utilize this, Carrington undertook in retirement a second doctoral study, in Botany, at the Imperial College of Science and Technology on 'Timber utilization by Upper Zairean craftsmen'.<sup>14</sup> This underlined his position as the leading authority on the traditional skills found in that region and was a valuable resource for a country one-third of whose population worked in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and who desperately needed to up-grade all aspects of their rural life.

Nora too was a capable linguist and did valuable work in the Teachers' School

in Yalamba where she taught many of the wives to read. She was also well-versed in African customs. The couple never had children of their own but they adopted a young Zairean boy named Bolingo.

When they eventually returned to England they had no intention of retiring. They settled in a BMS bungalow on the new housing estate of Bishopsdown in Salisbury, glad that it had central heating and that nearby was a small Baptist mission hall in need of a pastor. So John began a new phase in his life. His induction service formed part of the Easter morning worship in 1979. Again he immersed himself in the life of the people among whom he lived. His worship services were always well prepared. He 'got his hands dirty' on every possible occasion: he restored order to the flower beds around the church, he decorated, he turned electrician and plumber, and he got alongside all sorts of people. Both old and young related to him, calling him 'Doctor John'. From the beginning, he worked with other Christians in the area. He had been used to this in Africa where all the Protestant missions and their resultant churches recognized one another as fellow-workers and co-operated wherever possible. He began holding united worship with the local Anglicans and established a regular Bible study meeting. When someone suggested starting a luncheon club for the elderly, he canvassed every home and was tireless both in setting it up and in transporting people in his car every week.

Meanwhile he continued to travel. In 1975 the Carringtons visited a number of colleges and universities in the United States, speaking about drum languages. Three years later the Kitega Choir from Kinshasa came to Britain and toured the country, visiting many churches and singing African hymns. John accompanied them and often spoke. The major part of his journeying, however, consisted of deputation visits to churches throughout the United Kingdom. His little Fiat 500 took him and Nora to many places where he told Christians about the church in Zaire, asking them to pray for its members and urging them to become more involved in world mission, even to the point of asking whether God was calling them to work for him overseas. Schools and secular organizations called on his services: as well as drum talks, he did some supply teaching in local secondary schools. Southern TV invited him to demonstrate the drum's capabilities, and once he was able to do this in Salisbury Cathedral where he was delighted with the perfect acoustics.

He wrote prolifically. A score of publications<sup>15</sup> testify to his wide range of linguistic, musical and scientific interests. In addition, he studied in some depth the role of the witchdoctor in African societies. His meticulous nature rubbed off on his students, who honoured him as much for what he was as for what he taught. It was said that many of them could be recognized by their handwriting which was unmistakably like his.

While John Carrington never sought honours, they sought him. In 1968 the Royal African Society awarded him its Gold Medal and elected him a Fellow. The

Royal Anthropological Society and the Linnaean Society both bestowed similar honours on him. To recognize his services to Africa, the Zairean Government made him a Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Leopard. One can imagine him thanking the donors for their kindness, putting the medals and parchments into a drawer, and then getting on with the next job.

On 24 December 1985 he suffered a massive heart attack while giving out Christmas cards and gifts. Nora continues to live in Salisbury and to exercise her own ministry there. John's memory lives in the hearts of many Zaireans, prominent and obscure. They remember him with gratitude and, were they asked to say something about him, they would probably preface their remarks in the way only Africans can, saying, 'Ah, Kalingitoni! Moto na kokamwa - an amazing man!'

### NOTES

- 1 The confidential references have not been found, but the Candidate Subcommittee recommended his acceptance on 14 December 1937. E. A. Payne was one of his referees.
- 2 *Missionary Herald*, vol.122, no.7, July 1940, p.78. 'A day in the life of an educational missionary'.
- 3 *ibid.*, p.79.
- 4 Article by Henry Reuter on 'The talking drums of Africa'. A photocopy in the collection in the Angus Library shows it on page 10, but does not give the year.
- 5 This PhD thesis was published by Van Campenhout, Brussels, 1949, as Tome XVIII, fasc.3 of the Collection in 8° of the Institut Royal Colonial Belge, Section Sciences Morales et Politiques.
- 6 Carey-Kingsgate Press, London 1949.
- 7 This quotation has not been found, but probably comes from one of the early histories.
- 8 Personal letter to the author, October 1991.
- 9 Quoted in 'John Carrington: a different kind of drummer', by J. R. C. Perkin, *The Second Mile*, June 1987.
- 10 'Esquisse de Grammaire Lokele'. 57pp, typewritten, Kisangani 1972.
- 11 Reuter, *ibid.*, p.11.
- 12 A number of typewritten dissertations, probably written for licencié level diplomas, are among the Carrington papers in the Angus Library.
- 13 Malcolm Guthrie (1903-72) was the leading Bantu scholar of his generation. After gaining a BSc in metallurgy at Imperial College, he trained at Spurgeon's College and served as a BMS missionary in the Belgian Congo (1932-40), returning because of his wife's ill health. He joined the staff of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in January 1942, in 1945 gained a PhD for 'The tonal structure of Bemba', was Head of the Department of Languages and Cultures of Africa 1950-70, and held the new Chair of Bantu Languages from 1951. His *magnum opus* was the four volume *Comparative Bantu*, 1967-71. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1966. While running a rapidly growing department and engaged widely in academic life, he was also active in local church life at Amersham and Kingston, on the Council of Spurgeon's College for over twenty years, and on committees of the British & Foreign Bible Society. Obituary, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol.36, 3, 1973.
- 14 PhD, University of London, 1980.
- 15 Carrington's publications include: 'The Tonal Structure of Lokele', *African Studies*, vol.2, no.4, 1943; 'Lilwaakoi: A Congo secret society', *BQ*, 1943; 'Esquisse de la langue Olombo', *Aequatoria*, 1947; 'Esquisse de la langue Mba (Kimanga)', *Kongo-Overzee*, XV, 2, 1949; 'Notes on an Idiophone used in Kable Initiation Rites by the Mbae', *African Music*, vol.1, 1, 1954; 'Notes on Dr Sims's Yalolema Grammar', *African Studies*, vol.18, 2, 1959; 'Tone and Melody in a Congo Popular Song', *African Music*, vol.4, 1, 1967; 'Charcoal Burning near Kinshasa (Leopoldville)', *African Studies*, 27, 1, 1968; 'Coalescing and non-coalescing vowel roots in Lokele (Upper Zaire)', *African Studies*, 31, 3, 1972. He was a member of the



Translation Committee for the Congo-Swahili the Lingala Bible, 1954-71.  
New Testament, 1944-49, and co-translator of

**FRED STAINTHORPE** *Minister, Wednesbury, West Midlands, and a BMS missionary in Zaire (1955-60)*

*The author and editors are grateful to Mrs Susan Mills, Librarian, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, for much help with the notes to the above article, and for the information on the Carrington Archive overleaf.*

### NOTE ON THE CARRINGTON ARCHIVE IN THE ANGUS LIBRARY

There is a large quantity of material in the Angus Library written by John Carrington and collected by him. This would repay extensive research. The papers which were deposited with the BMS after his death and not long before the decision to deposit the BMS Archives with the Angus Library fill nine large archive boxes. They include his linguistic work with Malcolm Guthrie on Lingala, his Lokele work, and other notes on African languages (which greatly excited a Zairean research student recently), his botany research papers, papers connected with his PhD research on 'Timber utilization by Upper Zairean craftsmen', other papers and notes on ethnobotany, ethnology and related subjects, his prayer letters and other correspondence, Yakusu papers and other miscellaneous papers, including some by other people. This material has been roughly sorted and very loosely listed, but awaits a detailed catalogue.

A few years later the Angus Librarian was able to visit Mrs Nora Carrington and arrange for the remainder of her late husband's research materials also to be deposited in the Angus Library, including the timber and botanical samples used in his 'Timber utilization' study and a finished bound copy of that thesis, reel-to-reel tapes and 78 rpm records of African languages, with slips of paper used in his work towards various linguistic dictionaries, notebooks of his talks and sermons, his appointments diaries, scrapbooks of cuttings, photographs and church account books from Zaire. This material has not yet been listed in so much detail as the other, and there has been a question as to whether the wood samples and botanical slides and the language tapes and records would be better placed elsewhere, with the understanding that they all form part of the Carrington archive. Finally, there is a large collection of Carrington's books, which were donated to Regent's Park College after his death, plus another box of his African books which came from Mrs Carrington with the latest deposit of material. None of these books has yet been catalogues.

All in all, this material would provide a worthwhile research project for anyone also interested in any of the multifarious fields in which John Carrington was so actively involved.