

Sandy Grant, *Botswana: Choice and Opportunity: A Memoir 1963-2018*

Edinburgh: Humming Earth, 2020, 386 pages, ISBN: 978-1-84622-070-8.

Sandy Grant's *Memoir* is a remarkable historical document. It weaves together a rich tapestry of ordinary people and happenings over half a century in the corner of Botswana occupied mainly by the Bakgatla. It is a humble story told with good humour and eloquence. It does not honour the lives of famous men and women, nor for the most part are the events recorded memorable. Yet the book does an extraordinarily good job of recording local social history -what local people did, what they said, and what happened to them. He pays almost no attention to the bigger events taking place in Gaborone except where it has immediate impact in the Kgatleng. Over the past half century Gaborone has been developing at breakneck speed, while Mochudi remains a relatively sleepy backwater.

Sandy infuses his story with deep empathy for those around him. Yet, at the same time, he does not hesitate to cast a critical eye on humbug and hypocrisy wherever he encounters them. He gently castigates those who have, as he sees it, acted selfishly or lazily and he is angry about those who blocked well intentioned initiatives for short-sighted reasons or dishonourable motives. And he cites many examples of both.

As a contribution to social history, the book has a loose structure; it is largely a chronological record of anecdotal events and people as he encountered them, wonderful rich though it is. As a memoir, the book offers a fascinating insight into the life of the author, an eccentric and extremely likeable individual who decided to eschew the career of a typical professional Cambridge-educated Englishman in favour of a lifetime spent in an tribal African village where he was able to have more impact on the lives of the local inhabitants over the past 50 years than probably any single other individual.

The book suffers from two unavoidable limitations. The first comes from Grant being an outsider, notwithstanding his lifelong commitment to the Bakgatla. However much one might wish it otherwise, he is attempting in his *Memoir* to cross a huge and almost unbridgeable cultural chasm, something he implicitly admits. The second comes from trying to do two things in one -both to provide a record of the first half-century of Botswana's independence viewed from the perspective of one relatively backward rural area and to set out an account of his life's work.

The book starts with a description of how Grant was recruited at the end of 1963 by the anti-Apartheid activist, Martin Ennals, and Nana Mahomo, the representative of the Pan African Congress in London, to establish a refugee transit centre in Botswana to help those fleeing oppression in apartheid South Africa. This initiative was approved reluctantly by the Bechuanaland Protectorate (colonial Botswana) government which worried that the project would antagonise the South African regime and lead to reprisals. The British author, Naomi Mitchison, had persuaded Kgosi Linchwe of the Bakgatla to offer a site for the centre in Mochudi. The Bakgatla were persuaded to approve the project after it was explained that the refugee centre would be combined with a community centre to benefit the local population. Over the next few years, under Grant's inventive leadership and the participation of the community, the combined project was successfully implemented with funding from Church World Service.

The Mochudi community centre opened its doors at the end of 1964 and almost immediately was fully engaged in helping mitigate the terrible famine caused by the drought which had gripped the country starting in 1962, and had steadily worsened until the rains came in mid-1966. The centre became deeply involved in various feeding and food-for-work programmes with Grant playing a lead role. These provided critical famine relief filling gaps left by the government programmes. Once the famine was over, the centre concentrated on a variety of initiatives to create jobs, including growing vegetables, leather work, establishing a printing works, and forming a marketing cooperative. The centre thrived for many years,

with more than a dozen staff and a steadily expanding range of activities, including a football team and an active tennis club. A hall was built for meetings, talks and concerts, and even church services.

As a result of this project's success, Jan van Hoogstraten, Director of the Church World Service, proposed in 1968 that Sandy Grant be appointed Development Programme Organiser for the Christian Council of Botswana. Over the next six years Grant was drawn into working with the various Christian denominations present in Botswana on a range of initiatives aimed at supporting social and economic development. The projects supported over the following six years included the Botswalelo Pottery Craft Centre (which still survives), the funding of a measles vaccination campaign, a village water supply programme which became the precursor of a much larger programme funded by the Scandinavians and the Odi Weavers project initiated by Peder and Ulla Gowenius.

Grant's account of the Botswana Christian Council's involvement in this development programme tells a sad story of petty squabbling, tone-deaf missionaries, and the rigid thinking of religious zealots. His preoccupation was on actions that were likely to have some visible impact on the lives of local people. The clerics were mostly concerned to 'improve' the spiritual lives of their flock and were ill-prepared for the practical work of development. They are described as competitive rather than cooperative and dispiritingly narrow-minded with a few notable exceptions, such as Bishop Urban Murphy who led the Catholics with compassion and intelligence. Eight of the 20 odd projects supported by the Christian Council were run by Catholics. The London Missionary Society, which had dominated the country's Christian life for decades, was far behind. Another outstanding cleric was Ben Hopkinson who was in charge of the Anglican Mission in Mmadinare; his selfless efforts did much to mitigate the adverse social impact of mining in Selebi Phikwe.

Despite all his work initiating and supporting Christian Council projects aimed at improving Botswana lives, Grant recounts how he was systematically opposed and undermined by various Council members. The Dutch Reform Church pastor, for example, told van Hoogstraten that the Council had made a big mistake in employing the 'devil'. Part of the problem was jealousy engendered by Grant having access to basic resources for his work, such as a type-writer, which they did not have. And part of the problem was his more progressive views on a range of social issues such as how to treat unmarried teachers who became pregnant. There was also the divisive topic of the elite Maru a Pula School established by Deane Yates in 1974 in Gaborone. Yates sought the support of the Christian Council and was strongly supported by both the Anglicans and the senior government ministers. Grant was more in favour of the anti-elite Swaneng Hill School model established by Patrick van Rensburg, an avowed atheist. Despite all these difficulties, Grant struggled on until 1974 when his second contract with the Council ended.

From 1975 onwards, he devoted himself to researching and recording Botswana history and culture, with a particular focus on the Bakgatla. He persuaded the local district council to allow him to undertake the restoration of the abandoned National School in Mochudi as a Bakgatla tribal museum. In pursuing this project, he overcame a myriad of obstacles related to fund-raising, design and construction. In 1977 the marvellously renovated old building was opened by the Minister of Home Affairs as the new Phuthadikobo Museum, a triumph of persistence over adversity. For the next 30 years, the museum became a centre for local cultural activities and a site to which foreign dignitaries were proudly brought by government officials. In 1998 Sandy's wife Elinah was appointed museum director and the two continued to care for the museum until 2007, the year Kgosi Linchwe died. For several years before that both Sandy and Elinah found that obstacles were being put in their way which undermined their work at the museum and they decided with regret to end their involvement. He says after they left, the museum went into decline. Sadly, the government lacked the vision to step in with support. Likewise, the National Museum in Gaborone was allowed to deteriorate despite Grant's eloquent protestations.

Sandy and Elinah were married in 1985 and they decided to settle in Odi close to Gaborone part-

time in 1986 and full-time from 1989 onwards. Elinah became involved in running a football club for teenagers, while Sandy was active in pursuing his interest in Botswana history. His writing on Botswana topics has been prolific. He contributed a weekly column to the Gaborone newspaper *Guardian and Sun* from 1991 to 1997 and again from 2000 to 2018 in *Mmegi*, as well as innumerable articles. In 2001 Grant edited a collection of letters written by Sheila Bagnall describing life in Botswana; Sheila had been vice-principal of Swaneng Hill School. In 2012 he published two slim but important books on Botswana history -*Botswana and Its National Heritage* and *Botswana: An Historical Anthology*. For two years starting in 2005 he served as Chair of the Botswana Society, helping to put the Society back on its feet after it collapsed through lack of support. Sandy contributions to Botswana history included making the only existing recording of Bakgatla tribal initiation songs but this eventually was no longer useable.

Grant also liked teaching. His first stint was running a course on civics at Molefi Secondary School in the 1960s. Based on this experience, he argued without success against the use of a South African history textbook in Botswana's schools. About the same time, he was instrumental in establishing a Botswana History Society that was soon displaced by the founding of the Botswana Society. He saw a need to help students to get through Standard 7 and set up a night school at the Mochudi community centre for that purpose. In 1976 the principal of Molefi Secondary School invited Sandy to teach history, but his appointment was blocked by the Ministry of Education. Finally, in 2009 Grant joined the staff of Limkokwing University in Gaborone where he set up from scratch a course on the history of building.

Over the years he was engaged in a wide variety of other initiatives too numerous to mention in this brief review. Suffice to say that his book is a fascinating account of an extraordinary life. He had many run-ins with the authorities as a consequence of his courageous defence of those he considered to have been mistreated by the authorities, or for his opposition to government policies he considered misconceived. He has also had many supporters -most notably Kgosi Linchwe whose support was crucial over the 44 years Grant was active in Mochudi and his wife Elinah who has provided Sandy with a vital bridge between the two very different worlds Sandy has occupied as a citizen of both Britain and Botswana. Perhaps, most significantly of all, Sandy gained the admiration of President Festus Mogae, who awarded him the Presidential Honour in 2003, the second highest award in the land. This was a greatly deserved recognition of his services to Botswana.

Reviewed by Pierre Landell-Mills
 Email: pierrelandellmills@gmail.com