George Winstanley

Sandy Grant*

George Winstanley died, as I have recently and sadly been informed, in England on August 22 August 2014 having some time previously suffered a serious stroke. It was only in May this year that I wrote about him in this column regarding, not least, the recent mini controversy over the adoption of the national anthem. He and I had similar beginnings –he went down from Selwyn, Cambridge in 1953 and myself seven years later, in 1960. The difference was enough to mark the change from one age to another. In 1953 young graduates such as George would have been routinely recruited by the British Colonial Office to serve in Tanganyika, or Aden or Nyasaland. Five years later, with the dismemberment of the old colonial possessions, there was a sharply reduced need for those of George's type – one of the last being, probably, Simon Gillet. So George arrived in this country in 1954 to succeed others who had similarly preceded him since the Protectorate was pronounced in 1885.

George Silbebauer stated as fact that anyone who took on these jobs was inevitably slightly mad. Indeed the (incomplete) track record of the old style British District Commissioners is enough to indicate the kinds of personal strain that they endured, such as the inevitable loneliness, but also the huge satisfaction that was derived when problems were overcome and personal objectives achieved. The challenge presented by such jobs was indeed enormous. Some, in one-way or another, cracked, perhaps because they had no wife, others, perhaps, because they did. George, it has seemed to me, somehow, contrived to avoid being dumped into either the one of the other of those categories – and thereby to avoid being cast in the mould of the colonial stereotype. But there has to be an obvious supposition about this –and that is that George had the good sense and good luck to ally himself with a lifetime partner, Bridget, who made sure that he continued to be much the same sort of person who had arrived here in 1954 as the one who eventually left it, in 1972.

The people who signed on for 'colonial' service in the 1950s were inevitably, an unusual mix of characters who had contrasting backgrounds and qualifications. Some on retirement left because of family concerns or pensions. Others such as George, stayed. George Winstanley, it seems to me, is the rarity amongst them. He had nothing of Phil Steenkamp's commanding presence or of Brian Egner's lacerating, intuitive insights. He was no Quill Hermans. Nor was he a Hugh Murray Hudson, a David Finlay or an Alec Campbell. Somehow he trod a mid-way route between the obviously bigger personalities and in some sense emerged as bigger than any of them possibly because he avoided ruffling feathers and was conspicuously uncontroversial. In a way he was ordinary but his extraordinary career suggests something very different. We can note that he served as a District Commissioner almost everywhere, that he was adjudged to be the right person to serve as Clerk to the Legislative Council before Independence and that post-independence he was asked to organise the 1965 and 1969 elections (Phil Steenkamp supervised the next two) and subsequently to be Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture. And then sometime in between, he found the time to design the country's new flag and with Bridget to finalise the design of the new national coat of arms.

That kind of transition did not happen by mistake. It meant that the Seretse rejected the idea that there might be major fault lines between the old Protectorate and the new Botswana and that there were people such as George who were well able to serve the new as they had served the old. But, lucky man, having had the great good fortune to contribute both before and after Independence, he returned to England where,

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he helped to keep alive the sometimes struggling UK –Botswana Society and to write and distribute its newsletter. But in order that others who did not know George could have a better idea about him, I include one of my favorite stories culled from his important autobiography, Under Two Flags in Africa. When he first met Tshekedi in Pilikwe George notes that, 'one of the female domestics brought a message to him. She approached bending so low that she was almost on her knees and after he had received the message she retreated in similar fashion. I was very green then and asked him if she was disabled. He seemed puzzled and when I explained that her stooping posture had led me to conclude that she was deformed he was most amused at my ignorance and said his servants usually approached him in this way'. Was this George being naïve, as he suggests, or George cleverly making his view known to an uncomprehending Tshekedi?

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