

The papers of Anthony Sampson (1926-2004)

Presentation at Information Session by Chrissie Webb

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The Papers

The papers are predominantly an archive of Sampson's professional career as a journalist and writer. They include correspondence, research material for his books, and copies of his articles and other writings. His correspondence reflects his interests in politics, business, the media and the issue of apartheid.

***Drum* and South Africa**

Sampson began his career in journalism in Johannesburg in 1951. After National Service in the Royal Navy, studies at Oxford University, and some months working as a printer, Sampson accepted an invitation to South Africa from a former fellow student at Oxford, Jim Bailey, founder and owner of a new black magazine, *African Drum* (later *Drum*), then in need of a business manager. Within weeks of his arrival he found himself the editor. Here he met Trevor Huddleston, then a priest in Sophiatown, and Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and other African National Congress activists as the organisation was preparing for its Defiance Campaign of passive resistance against apartheid. Though he returned to England in 1955, his active links with *Drum* continued into the 1960s. He maintained his commitment to the anti-apartheid movement and was a frequent visitor to South Africa.

The papers contain correspondence with Bailey and later editors - Sampson's successors - about the development of the magazine and establishing a market in West Africa. Relating to this period also are letters received from former colleagues and friends in South Africa (including *Drum* writers and journalists), many of which refer to growing political unrest. There are also letters to his parents from his time in South Africa relaying his observations on life and work there.

There is correspondence with Trevor Huddleston reaching into the 1980s relating to Huddleston's anti-apartheid work, his writing and other matters. Huddleston's own papers are in the Bodleian, as are those of the Anti-Apartheid Movement of which he was President from 1981 to 1994.

The *Observer*, journalism and writing

Back in England in 1955, Sampson was appointed to the *Observer*. Its editor, David Astor, had become aware of *Drum* through his own interest in Africa and had published a piece by Sampson about the magazine in the *Observer*.

In 1955 he also began work on his first book, *Drum: A Venture into the New Africa* (1956). He then spent some time in South Africa researching *The Treason Cage: The Opposition on Trial In South Africa* (1958) concerning the mass arrest and trial of anti-apartheid activists in 1956-7.

He spent four years as the *Observer's* 'Pendennis' columnist in the late 1950s. He found this a valuable opportunity to hone his skills as a journalist:

'I seized the chance to meet and interview anyone I wanted to, and sum them up in 200 words.....It gave me a precious education as a journalist: it taught me how to describe people and places succinctly, to make facts readable and difficult subjects comprehensible.'

He followed the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, on various trips abroad, including his tour of Africa in early 1960, reporting for the *Observer* (where Macmillan gave the famous 'wind of change' speech and dissociated Britain from apartheid views). He was later to write the first biography of Macmillan (*Macmillan: A Study in Ambiguity*), published in 1967. He was back in March 1960 to report the Sharpeville shootings of protestors against the pass laws. He returned to South Africa in 1962, by which time the ANC was banned and committed to armed struggle against apartheid. He heard of Mandela's arrest on his return to London. Again in 1964, at the end of Mandela's trial, he was there, and was asked by Mandela to advise on his defence speech.

In 1966 Sampson began research for *The New Europeans: A Guide to the Workings, Institutions and Character of Contemporary Western Europe* (1968). In the late 1960s he was also lecturing at the new university of Vincennes. *The New Europeans* was followed by a series of publications on corporations and business. *The Sovereign State: The Secret History of ITT*, was published in 1973. The energy crisis of that year inspired an investigation into the big oil companies and *The Seven Sisters* appeared in 1975. He then moved on to the arms dealers, with *The Arms Bazaar* (1977). *The Money Lenders* (1981) looked at banking. *The Midas Touch: Money, People and Power from West to East* was published in 1989.

Sampson was the *Observer's* chief American correspondent in Washington in 1973-4, reporting on the Watergate scandal and the downfall of Richard Nixon. From 1977 he was a contributing editor to *Newsweek*. In a letter about the paper to its owner, Kay Graham, in November 1983, he writes:

'What I would most like to see is a more vivid way of trying to put together the world problems, to give overviews and connections, to try to make greater sense of the cross-currents between continents and between money and politics.'

This idea of the global view and making connections was a theme he was to return to.

DOCUMENT: LETTER TO KAY GRAHAM ABOUT NEWSWEEK, 9 Nov 1983

In 1979-80 Sampson acted as Editorial Adviser to the Independent Commission on International Development Issues ('the Brandt Commission'). Papers relating to this include correspondence with, and input from, former Prime Minister, Edward Heath, who served on the Commission. In the early 1980s he was closely involved in the founding of the Social Democratic Party, at the invitation of Shirley Williams, one of the 'Gang of Four', whom he had known, initially as a journalist, since the 1950s. He joined the signing of the 'Limehouse declaration' that created the SDP, being in total

sympathy with the movement, despite the awkwardness of being so closely identified with the new party for a journalist writing for the labour-loyal *Observer*, who was also by then a director of the left-wing *New Statesman*. Sampson was elected to the party's national committee. The papers include Sampson's drafts of policy statements and press articles.

Sampson clearly felt that the conventional media did not fully serve their audience and, as early as 1959, he made an approach to Christopher Chancellor of Odhams Press, former General Manager of Reuters, with a proposal for a new magazine 'with an emphasis on intelligent business journalism'. In the early 1980s he explored the possibility of publishing a newsletter. In 1984 he launched *The Sampson Letter*, 'a fortnightly report on world politics and finance', independently financed and aiming to 'uncover the real forces and issues behind the news . . . and to point to the crucial connections between finance and politics and between different parts of the world'. We have a full set of these. From 1986 *The Sampson Letter* was incorporated in a new newsletter, *Africa Analysis*, which investigated the challenges and transitions facing the continent at that time.

DOCUMENT: EDITION OF *THE SAMPSON LETTER*, 7 Jan 1986

The ANC and apartheid

During the renewed wave of resistance inside South Africa to apartheid in the 1980s, and following exchanges between Sampson and Oliver Tambo, President of the ANC in Lusaka, Sampson, David Astor and others formed a committee to facilitate talks between British businessmen, politicians and the ANC. The intention was to bring pressure on Pretoria for reform and to show that the business community accepted that the ANC would be key to political reform in the South Africa of the future. Sampson's 'Anatomy' contacts proved valuable here and he made full use of them. Papers relating to these talks in 1985 and 1986 contain correspondence with participants and notes of meetings and of discussions with Tambo.

These activities led to further initiatives, in particular an idea of Sampson's for a conference on the future rule of law in South Africa between ANC lawyers and senior legal experts from South Africa which was held at Nuneham Park, Nuneham Courtenay, in Oxfordshire, in June 1989. Another initiative was the SAAEP which was set up in 1986. David Astor received a message from Oliver Tambo asking if he could help with training for young ANC people who would be needed for positions in government after apartheid. Astor provided money, and further funding came from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, New York, and Shell. When the ANC was unbanned four years later, the need for such training became even more urgent. The British government, the EU and other donors channelled some of their funds through the SAAEP and the British foreign and civil services provided top-level access and lectures for trainees.

DOCUMENT: LETTER TO JOHN QUINTON, CHAIRMAN OF BARCLAY'S BANK, ABOUT THE SOUTH AFRICAN ADVANCED EDUCATION PROJECT, 21 Nov 1987

In late 1989, banned from South Africa for his criticism of the regime, Sampson applied for a visa and was surprised to be granted one. But South Africa by then

wanted the world to know how rapidly the political situation was changing. He found himself in South Africa in February 1990 when Nelson Mandela was released. He met Mandela again then and on a number of subsequent occasions and returned to South Africa in 1994 to report on the first democratic elections and the victory of the ANC.

In 1995 he was commissioned to write an authorised biography of Mandela. In 1999, as Mandela retired as President, *Mandela* was published. Among papers brought together for the writing of *Mandela* are copies of letters by and concerning Mandela, particularly during the years of his imprisonment, copies of sources from official archives and other repositories in South Africa and elsewhere, recordings and transcripts of interviews with Mandela and copies of press and journal articles. These form a useful starting point for further research.

A letter from George Bizos, one of the defence lawyers in the Rivonia trial of Mandela and other ANC colleagues, dated 16 June 1964, just four days after sentence had been passed, contains early indications of the role Sampson was to play in the struggle against apartheid:

'I want to thank you for all you have done for them..... We have been reading with considerable interest what you have been writing and saying and we earnestly hope that they will not become forgotten men.'

There are echoes of this in Mandela's tribute on the publication of *The Anatomist*, Sampson's autobiography, in 2008:

'Anthony..... helped to make Africa a world issue through the *Observer*. He cared about Africa in a way that is rare among those from the developed world, and he never stopped caring.'

Sensitivities

A major issue in dealing with modern papers is that they often contain sensitive personal material relating to people still living. In such cases a period of closure has to be applied to protect the subjects of these papers. One such instance in the Sampson papers is a file relating to the Scott Trust.

In 1993 the *Observer* was sold to the owners of the *Guardian*, the Scott Trust. Sampson became a trustee, representing the interests of the *Observer* for three years. This was a traumatic time for the Trust, and the paper, during which three editors were dismissed. The file contains correspondence and minutes of meetings.

Conclusion

I hope I have been able to convey something of the variety of these papers. My dilemma was in selecting items and themes to include as Sampson's concerns were so wide-ranging and his investigative style gave him such a wide circle of contacts – writers, journalists and newspaper editors, politicians and people in public life, including some of the most famous names in twentieth-century Britain and beyond, whether it be David Astor examining character assassination in the press; Magnus Linklater on privacy laws; the young graduate, Michael Frayn, hoping to find a job on the *Observer* and receiving career advice from Sampson; Shirley Conran on her own

writing and design work; or Stephen Spender writing on the plagiarism of his autobiography during Sampson's time as Chairman of the Society of Authors.