

JOHN FAGE

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

BY ROLAND OLIVER

JOHN FAGE and I met first in Cambridge in 1948 as graduate students at Cambridge University, each researching on topics in the history of the colonial period in Africa. Thereafter our ways parted. He became the first full-time history teacher at the recently founded University College of the Gold Coast. I went to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where my initial duty was to investigate what could be recovered of the pre-colonial history of East Africa that might be brought within the scope of academic study. We met next in 1952, when a London publisher suggested that we might join in writing a History of Africa in two volumes designed for the academic market. Following this initiative, we spent a fortnight of that summer, together with our wives and children, at my house in Buckinghamshire to discuss the possibilities, and this proved to be the beginning of a close professional collaboration which was to last for more than thirty-five years.

We soon agreed that the proposed book must remain a gleam in the eye so long as even the basic parameters of the subject remained so ill defined. But we went ahead with his idea, of organizing summer conferences which would assemble the teachers of history in the African university colleges and those in neighbouring disciplines, like archaeology, anthropology and linguistics, who might be willing to help. Three conferences took place at SOAS in 1953, 1957 and 1961 and they helped greatly in defining what the subject might one day become. We also went ahead with another idea, very fundamental in John's thinking, which was to establish a *Journal of African History* which would display the results of new research, even though much of it would necessarily be of a tentative and provisional kind. In 1957 John invited me to spend the autumn term in Ghana to give the first undergraduate course in the history of Bantu Africa, and it was there that we opened the matter with Robert July of the Rockefeller Foundation, who encouraged us to prepare a notional schedule of what the first four issues might contain. The outcome was a grant of £5,000 to the Cambridge University Press, and publication began in 1960 with contributions from Christopher Wrigley, Joseph Greenberg, Ioan Lewis, Frank Willett, Hubert Deschamps and Jan Vansina. For the first eight years John and I edited it alone, and a considerable number of the early contributions came in response to our invitations. Occasionally, we sought outside advice, but mostly we took our own decisions and very seldom disagreed about what these should be. For four more years we remained as editors, but were joined first by Richard Gray and then by Shula Marks.

Meanwhile, in 1959, his children having reached school age, John Fage joined my slowly growing team of African historians at SOAS, staying until his appointment to found and head the Centre of West African Studies in Birmingham in 1963. His experience helped us greatly in launching an

Honours Degree in 'History with special reference to the History of Africa' which was perhaps the most specialized of its kind in any country outside Africa itself. His presence also enabled the pair of us to respond positively and quickly to an invitation from Penguin Books to write on a smaller and more manageable scale the *Short History of Africa*, which we had been discussing together for so long. We wrote it mostly during the summer vacation of 1961 and it was published the following spring. Its revised editions were to keep us actively reviewing further developments in the subject until 1997.

Our most intensive area of collaboration, however, was soon the *Cambridge History of Africa*, of which we were appointed the General Editors in 1965. Left to ourselves, we would have postponed the project for another five years, when the pool of possible contributors would have been both larger and more international. But we were hustled into agreement by the Press, which knew that a rival project was under discussion by UNESCO and were determined to get in first. They warned us that it would take ten years, and in the event it took us twenty, the final volume being published two years after John's retirement, and within a few months of my own. Our work on it was done, therefore, during the busiest parts of our academic careers, when John was building his Centre in Birmingham and later serving as Dean of Arts and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and when I was holding a succession of senior posts at SOAS. In a sense, the Cambridge History was our leisure occupation, though it kept us in touch, by letter or telephone, several times each week. It also had its fraught moments. We knew from the start that the speed of production of any collaborative volume was the speed of its slowest contributor. We had to learn by experience the academic variety of the 'debtor's syndrome', which is that when a contributor, or even a Volume Editor, gets into arrears, he never tells you in time for a replacement to be easily found. Likewise, when a Volume Editor turns in a volume that is twice the contracted length, he does not co-operate in a plan to reduce it. He tells you that if what you wanted was a children's encyclopaedia, you should have said so sooner. John, to his great credit, took the time and trouble to join the International Scientific Committee of the rival UNESCO project, and in the autobiography which appeared only shortly before his death he made a very sober and objective comparison between the two. It concluded by saying that he did not think that readers who chose to make use of one of these vast histories would get a picture of the African past very different from those who chose to work with the other. But, thanks to the UNESCO subsidy, its volumes could be sold for a quarter of the price of its private enterprise rival.

On the personal level, I remember with gratitude the many long journeys which we made together, and especially our visit to Moscow for the International Congress of Orientalists in 1960, when we joined with Mel Herskovits and Ivan Potekin in promoting the establishment of an independent International Congress of African Studies, which held four very successful meetings in Accra, Dakar, Addis Ababa and Kinshasa before collapsing for want of financial support. On these journeys and many others his companionship made duty into pleasure and expressed a friendship that was both deep and enduring.