

## Book notice

Pádraig ÓMáille, **Living Dangerously**, Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1999 189pp.(paperback)

Pádraig ÓMáille long awaited memoir, *Living Dangerously*, has finally appeared. It has been brought out by Dudu Nsomba Publications of Glasgow, Scotland, the United Kingdom.

Though he arrived in Malawi in 1970, the critical events that ÓMáille recounts in his book date back to 1976. He says his political involvement was sparked off by the sight of two families being sent home up north after the men, two university lecturers, had been detained by Dr. Hastings Banda's special branch. That's when he first become alive to the reign of terror then sweeping through the country and to the operations of the 'repressive one - party system'. The experience of 1976 was to be for him the beginning of a long involvement with prisons and prisoners.

Not surprisingly, what one finds detailed in the pages of the memoir are activities – which to the Malawian authorities were clearly subversive – intended by the author to precipitate social and political change. They include the provision of accommodation for over a year to two ex-detainees seeking reinstatement in their University of Malawi jobs; the initiation and maintenance, through an intermediary, of contacts with detainees; the supply of food and medicine to inmates; the establishment of communication channels with the outside world through Amnesty International and the BBC, and towards the end, the distribution of Martyrs' Day leaflets in order to conscientise community leaders throughout the country. All these activities required courage, dedication and organisation, which the author had in abundance, although there were moments of self – doubt.

Throughout his account Pádraig ÓMáille criticises himself, his fellow intellectuals, the clergy and the donor community for having for so long been blinded to the human rights mess in Malawi by Banda's 'law and order' and 'peace and calm' myths. People who could have made a difference lulled themselves to sleep on the basis of stories of Malawi's relative stability and prosperity when compared with the neighboring countries. As for western governments, before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, they were simply happy to have Malawi as an ally against communism. They continued to pour aid into the country.

A significant portion of *Living Dangerously* deals with the local and international efforts to secure the release of Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet arrested by the special branch on 25th September, 1987. This is quite natural, considering that Jack was both a friend and a colleague. Besides, he came to represent all those detained without charge or trial by the Banda regime. Such central chapters as 'Back to Basics', 'A New Enthusiasm' and 'Hopes and Fears' specifically refer to the ordeal undergone by the poet's family and to the many messages sent throughout the world on his behalf. They also illustrate the dilemma in which the campaigners found themselves in as increased publicity given to the case made Banda and his lieutenants more determined than ever not to release the writer. Much to everyone's relief, Mapanje was eventually freed on 10th May 1991, and several months later he and his family left Malawi for the United Kingdom. However, as ÓMálle discovered, the work of publicizing the lot of the remaining detainees had to go on.

The penultimate chapter of the memoir, 'Sea Changes' is about the Catholic Bishops' Lenten Pastoral letter which was read in all churches on Sunday 8th March 1992. As ÓMálle rightly points out, it was a 'watershed in the story of Malawi's transition to multiparty democracy' (p151). His own contribution to its impact was to send excerpts from it for reading on the BBC and to read it out to Chancellor College students on the said Sunday. Another was to encourage the students in their march in support of the bishops a week later. This latter act was to earn him a deportation order on 18th April, a fact reported in the closing chapter of his book.

*Living Dangerously* makes compelling reading for both those who are reliving the experiences narrated therein and those who are reading Malawi's story for the first time. The drama of the human rights struggle and the process of political and social change are truly brought alive before the reader. There are so many characters and episodes that stick in the mind. For this reviewer the ones that stand out are the enigmatic figure of 'Noriega' the prison warder and the temporary loss of a sensitive file.

For all the forcefulness with which it is written ÓMálle book is not without faults. The most glaring one is a problem with dates. For example, Dr. Banda returned home to Nyasaland not in 1959 but a year earlier. Similarly, the country gained its independence from Britain not in 1963 but a year later. Orton and Vera Chirwa were abducted from Zambia not in late 1982 but a year earlier, when Bakili Muluzi was still secretary general of the Malawi Congress Party, (MCP). In this reviewer's opinion, this problem arises from relying too much on memory.

Other items which are not remembered properly include the names of organisations.

For instance, the Students' Christian Organisation (SCO) is rendered as the Students' Christian Association. The association of which Jack Mapanje was chairman at the time of his arrest was Linguistics Association of SADC Universities (LASU), not Linguistics Society of the Association of Southern African Universities or Linguistics Association for Southern African Universities, as given by ÓMáille (pp 45 -6).

Despite the weaknesses indicated above, the book is still a formidable testament which deserves to be read by anyone interested in the progress of multiparty democracy in Africa today. It belongs to the same shelf in the library as *Democracy with a Price* by Bakili Muluzi and others.

Anthony Nazombe  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
CHANCELLOR COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI  
P.O.Box 280  
ZOMBA  
MALAWI