

William Abraham: All Souls' first African scholar returns to Oxford

Philosopher William Abraham caused a sensation in 1950s Oxford — but is the university any closer to resolving its diversity problem?

Alec Russell, Aug 3, 2018 *published in Financial Times*, Posted here 8/5/2013



William Abraham outside All Souls © Hannah Norton

The distinguished philosopher with a trim beard and an impish grin took his seat on the dais in the Old Library at All Souls, Oxford. The evening sun was streaming through the windows of the dark panelled room. Church bells were ringing. A few dozen people, mainly silver-haired fellows, sat awaiting his observations.

It was a timeless scene in the loftiest of Oxford's ivory towers — yet with one difference from the norm: the speaker's ethnicity. William Abraham was elected in 1959 as All Souls' first African prize scholar; he is still All Souls' only African prize scholar. A few years after his election, he left Oxford to become the informal court philosopher to Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's independence leader. Now he had returned, almost 60 years later, to be honoured with a portrait to hang in the dining hall.

It is long overdue. Abraham, 84, has had a remarkable life, half a century of it spent lecturing in philosophy in the US. But as Oxford faces scrutiny over its record in admitting black students, his history also has a sharp resonance — as Edward Mortimer, a fellow of All Souls (and a former FT columnist) conceded when introducing Abraham on the occasion of his return.

“When I arrived at All Souls [in 1965], Willie Abraham was a bit of a legend,” Mortimer recalled. “The shameful truth is that it is still the case [that he is the only African prize fellow]. While it may not reflect too well on the college, it reflects well on Willie Abraham.”

For more than 500 years, All Souls has been renowned as the home of Britain’s brightest scholars. Each year a handful of graduates take the three-hour scholarship exam. Only recently did the tradition of setting a one-word title for an essay come to an end.

In Abraham’s year the word, serendipitously, was “suffrage” — which suited him well, given the debates then surging across Africa. It was just two years after his homeland had become the first African colony to win independence. He was in Oxford having won a postgraduate scholarship from the University of Ghana. “It [my essay] was full of agitation,” he recalls. “I didn’t expect it to go down well.”

His candidacy split the fellows. The most nerve-racking part of the entrance procedure, he recalls, was a black-tie dinner with the fellows. Alerted to one notorious reactionary, Abraham says, “I picked up that gauntlet and walked towards him. When I was within steps of him, he told me he did not like black people. He did not respond when I asked him the reason. The dinner went well — and so did the changes of wine.”

They clearly did. The Observer reported that All Souls “astonished Oxford and itself by electing a young African fellow”. Some electors were “visibly upset”. As Abraham soon learnt, the college warden, John Sparrow, accepted his election only through gritted teeth.

One of Abraham’s duties as the most junior fellow was to pour the wine at dinner. One night, his thesis supervisor asked Sparrow how his new fellow was faring. “And as I was pouring the wine, Sparrow said, ‘Not exactly my cup of tea.’ I didn’t drop the bottle. I just made sure I put more wine into my glass. But he was that kind of person. I felt hurt. It was very unnecessary.”



The new college portrait of Prof Abraham

The new college portrait of Prof Abraham “I believe in rules — not for their own sake,” he says, but as a way of mitigating the ill effects of prejudice, “so the person who has power over you doesn’t have to like you. The rules are not just law, they’re also human rules. Otherwise there would be no society; society would be Hobbesian.”

When Nkrumah asked him to head the philosophy department at the University of Ghana and help build his new country, Abraham wrote to Sparrow for advice on whether to stay or leave. “Sparrow seized the opportunity. What he wanted to do in the beginning he could now do.” Sparrow swiftly announced that Abraham had resigned.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the debate at All Souls and the Pan-Africanist revolutionary spirit of Nkrumah's inner circle. For three extraordinary years Abraham reprised, as he puts it, the philosopher Leibniz's tutoring role to the House of Brunswick, the ruling family of Hanover, at the turn of the 18th century.

"We were not friends," he says of Nkrumah, who, like many independence leaders, became increasingly high-handed and fostered a personality cult after taking power. "It's true he was apt to call me at two o'clock in the morning and ask me what I was doing. Whenever he was in a corner he would consult me. That's why, when I wrote an article saying he was not a God, the party press didn't know what to do. He was the sort of person you wanted to do something for. One of the reasons he liked me was because of my youthfulness. I told him what I thought."

Abraham was a committed pan-Africanist, codifying his vision in *The Mind of Africa*, which he wrote at All Souls and which was republished a few years ago. Even now he is reluctant to criticise Nkrumah — although he and others did remonstrate with him over his crude intervention in a trial of political opponents. "I said no, you can't do that." The death sentences were commuted.

Abraham's family teases him that Nkrumah said he liked to leave a philosopher to run the show when he travelled as they would never make a decision. Abraham was in charge in February 1966 when the army and police launched the coup that toppled Nkrumah, who was then visiting China. "He was informed by the Chinese that there had been a coup in Ghana. He said, 'Are you sure you don't mean Guinea?'"

After a brief stint in "protective custody", Abraham went in 1968 to the US. He settled in California, teaching and researching at the University of [California] Santa Cruz. It is there he was contacted this year by Kofi Adjepong-Boateng, a Ghanaian banker and philanthropist who commissioned the portrait.

In 1959, *The Observer* suggested that after Abraham's election, "Some prophets may speculate what kind of 50 fellows will be present . . . at the turn of the century." Its writer would have been disappointed. As Labour MP David Lammy has argued this year, the university has a poor record in recruiting black students.



President Kwame Nkrumah in the Ghanaian parliament, 1962 © Alamy

President Kwame Nkrumah in the Ghanaian parliament, 1962 © Alamy Abraham is not surprised that he is still the only African prize fellow at All Souls. Most Africans want to go home to help their countries after graduating, he says. He took the exam only because he had just been turned down for a full lectureship in Ghana. He favours a systematic reduction of entry pass marks for candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds. “Entrance requirements have to be sufficiently high for it to be selective, but that does not mean that those who cannot make it should be discarded.”

He also believes universities should fund foundation courses like the one run by his old Oxford college, University College, to bridge the gap for those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. “Every country faces the same,” says Abraham. “We face it in Ghana. They face it in America. How to bring in more people to universities? I have said you can bring people in from elementary school but you have to be willing to keep them there [at the university].”

But Oxford has changed immeasurably since he was there, he adds. The age of Sparrow is over. All Souls last year launched a Codrington scholarship for Caribbean students, in recognition that Christopher Codrington, who funded the college library, made his money from slave plantations. And now in pride of place in the great dining hall is a splendid portrait of Abraham, clutching Leibniz’s *Philosophical Essays*, surrounded by other illustrious fellows, looking utterly at home, as if he had always been there. *Alec Russell is the editor of FT Weekend*

Comments

Toquam *2 days ago*

The Crimson is bragging about 4 African-American women heading 4 major schools, but then they are in court for race-based exclusion of qualified Asians and yet another review of an African-American quota/goal several standard deviations below other groups. Bad example?

ohneigenschaften *2 days ago*

Just as there is no University of All Souls, there is no University of Santa Cruz. It's the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Toquam *2 days ago*

And California banned race-conscious admissions, what, 20 years ago?

beachcomber *2 days ago*

Considering the enormous wealth that the then British Empire derived from the colonies it was and is rather churlish of them to have held an attitude against someone who obviously had the intelligence to become part of their system. But as a friend here in Cape Town told me recently, his son (with three excellent degrees) has returned home from the UK because "if you didn't go to the right school it was just too much of an effort". And in that photo on the lawns he looks as if he fits in perfectly!