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Obote, a Political Biography by Kenneth Ingham

Review by: Michael Twaddle

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Obote, a political biography**, by Kenneth Ingham. Routledge, 1994. xii+228 pp. £37.50 hardback. ISBN 0-415-05342-0.

Milton Obote was prime minister of Uganda from the time the country became independent of British protectorate rule to the disturbances of the mid-1960s, when Obote dismantled the southern kingdoms and declared himself executive president of the whole country. He held the office of president twice. First, he held it until he was displaced by the army commander, Idi Amin, in January 1971. Then, following Amin's removal in turn from power at the close of the 1970s and a succession of short-lived regimes, he became president of Uganda for a second time upon his political party triumphing in the elections of December 1980. Six years later, he was on his travels again. But, in January 1986, the military-based regime which had ended Obote's second presidency was itself removed from power by the National Resistance Movement of Yoweri Museveni. Museveni himself now became president of Uganda.

Before Uganda's independence from Britain, Kenneth Ingham was a professor of history at Makerere. With Obote, he was also an unofficial member of Uganda's legislative council in the later 1950s. In subsequent decades, their paths diverged. Obote became successively prime minister and president of the former British protectorate. Ingham returned to Britain, first as director of studies at Sandhurst military academy, then as a professor of history again at Bristol University: in both places he published important studies of different parts of Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To these publications, Kenneth Ingham has now added a very lively account of Milton Obote's political career.

The merits of *Obote, a political biography* derive from its author's intimate knowledge of Ugandan politics during the 1950s and personal contacts with Milton Obote in exile. Granted Obote's relative silence in print (in comparison both with his peers in neighbouring states like Jomo Kenyatta and Julius Nyerere and with Yoweri Museveni, the current president of Uganda), these merits are by no means unimportant ones. Indeed, on page after page *Obote, a political biography* reads less like a biography than an autobiography. I had to shake my head several times when first reading it to remind myself that this was Kenneth Ingham's work, not Milton Obote's. When Uganda's history during the second half of the twentieth century comes to be written, say a hundred years hence, more critical accounts of Obote's years in power will surely need to be read alongside this defence of his political record, if there is to be any realistic hope of a balanced assessment of the impact of his leadership upon Uganda ever emerging.

However, this account cannot be considered to be itself a balanced review of its subject's years in power. Obote is defended rather than considered dispassionately in context. Genocide in the Buganda region of Uganda during his second presidency? Surely the fault of insurgents in the Luwero triangle, according to this account. 'It is particularly significant that, in spite of numerous acts of terrorism in and around Kampala and the often clumsy and heavy-handed response of the UNLA soldiery, there was never any full-scale rebellion in the rest of Buganda outside Luwero. Nor was there any evidence of the "campaign of genocide" which the UNLA troops were said to have launched against the Baganda as a whole' (p. 179). No mention of Namugongo, where a terrible massacre of Baganda took place during Obote's second presidency at a shrine sacred to Muslim and Christian alike. For a scholarly biography, this is not good enough. *Obote, a political*

*biography* also seems excessively concerned with personalities, not enough with situations or institutions influencing personalities, for a work of this kind.

Other students of Ugandan politics might agree with Kenneth Ingham that, before Amin's seizure of the presidency, Obote's principal political skills were diplomatic. But, by the 1980s, Uganda's politics had changed radically in character: by then soldiers were extremely undisciplined and the export economy was on the floor. Obote might not have planned any campaign of genocide 'against the Baganda as a whole', and still wished to play the political manipulator, but times had changed and he was now quite unable to play off one faction against another as effectively as during the 1960s. Political violence now also enveloped whole villages, not just elites as during Amin's time. The parts of Kenneth Ingham's account dealing with the 1950s and 1960s therefore struck this reviewer as containing a greater ring of truth than those concerned with the 1980s and 1990s.

*Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London*      MICHAEL TWADDLE

**Black African Literature in English, 1987–1991**, by Bernth Lindfors. Hans Zell Publishers, 1995. xxxv+682 pp. £75.00 hardback. ISBN 1-873836-16-3.

**A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures**, edited by Oyekan Owomoyela. Nebraska University Press, 1993. ix+411 pp. £52.50 hardback. £21.00 paperback. ISBN 0-8032-3552-6 and 0-8032-8604-X.

**New Trends and Generations in African Literature: A Review**, edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones. James Currey, 1996. 186 pp. £9.95 paperback. ISBN 8-85255-520-5.

Bernth Lindfors has been an amazingly prolific commentator on African literatures over the last two decades and more. His work with students and scholars at the University of Texas, his editorial responsibilities with the journal *Research in African Literatures* as well as his numerous books, essays and reviews are testament to his commitment to the field. However, the roller-coaster of literary theories and academic fashions have a way of undermining even the most established of reputations and it may be that Professor Lindfors's most lasting contribution to scholarship will be the superb series of annotated bibliographies of critical resources he has produced, both as compiler/author and as General Editor of the Hans Zell Bibliographical Research in African Literatures series. His *Black African Literature in English 1987–1991* is the latest title in the series and is a continuation of the work of the same title which covered the period 1982–1986 and, indeed, of the earlier 1977–81 volume and the original *Black African Literature in English: A guide to information sources*. Together these tomes (and it is the appropriate word to describe these densely packed, two inch thick, almost 1,000 page volumes) provide the scholar with a comprehensive, reliable and accessible resource from which to begin any serious research project in African literature in English.

The sheer scale of the bibliographic undertaking is daunting; Lindfors has combed books, journals and newspaper from all corners of the world—from Bratislava to Bombay and from Shanghai to Stockholm. *Black African Literature in English 1987–1991* is particularly impressive for the number of references to Africa based publications, which characteristically have fairly limited circulation and are