

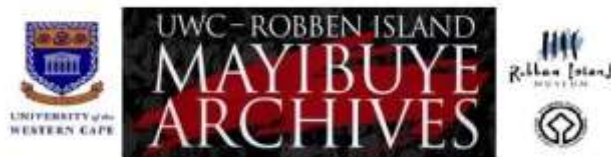
Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Mary Benson part 2

An interview conducted by **Don Pinnock** c. 1992. Part of a series carried out at Grahamstown University and held at the UWC/Robben Island Mayibuye Archive.

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MB: ... Eton, the posh school here, and he resigned a couple of years before he was due to retire in order to become visiting Professor of Education at Wits, and he'd done that - I met him in Johannesburg before he'd made that decision. He did it because he saw the connection between South Africa and Nazi Germany, and the need for de-Nazifying education. And he saw the need to build up the - all the elements that were opposing the government. So he had no fear of the fact that some people were communists and they were black, and -

DP: As long as they were anti-fascist.

MB: Well, yes, as long as they were anti the government. And he was a huge, flat-footed man. He once said that if Verwoerd had married Margaret Rutherford, who was a British comic actress, he would have been the - **[laughs]**. He looked a bit like that! And he had wonderful connections with the Black Sash and with academics and schools, and he was so impressed by some of these black school-kids, who under Bantu Education would be asking him all about revolutions at some period in history. And also he went to the trial of - I forget who it was, I think it was a young Indian who'd been very badly tortured, and saw him standing up the the security police. And Burley would come back to England, where half the government had been his pupils at Eton, and then he would dine out on these stories. And he would read Shakespeare in his flat at Wits with some young black politicals ... I think he and his wife helped people cross the border sometimes too, on occasion.

DP: When was he there? What period?

MB: He was there - I met him there first - I don't know. A couple of us did a little book

on him. Where is it now? He was there in '65 for about three years ... I'm not sure ...
Sheena Duncan did a nice piece about him ...

DP: Is that a book about him in South Africa?

MB: Partly. I'm trying to see what - he did the Richard [indistinct] lecture on academic freedom in 1970 ... John Kane-Berman, who's become so pro-Buthelezi ...

DP: And heavy-handed! He's getting rid of all the people slightly left of him.

MB: Really? What went wrong with him?

DP: I think he dined out with too many of those kind of people.

MB: I hardly know him, only met him once. I mean, Burley was terrific with the young saboteurs too ... oh, '64 to '66. And then he went back a couple of times. Randolph Fine, Jonty Driver ...

DP: Was that just a few - little bits of -

MB: Yes. Frans Olbach, Eldridge Stubbs, Raymond Tucker ... he talks about Burley and Jonty Naidoo. I did a bit - yes, I met him there in '62. That's when he was deciding how he might come back and work there.

DP: I'd like to get a copy of that.

MB: I'll see if there's still one in existence.

DP: Must be in the library somewhere?

MB: No, I don't know. We did it privately. Can you write your - oh, except there are no mails. **[makes arrangement for DP to get hold of copy]**

DP: When did you do it?

MB: Don't know - after he died. Because we didn't think the official biography of him properly dealt with - there's a little forward, isn't there, where we explain. Does that not give a date?

DP: No. Goodness! That's unforgivable!

MB: Dear me! My god! **[laughs]** Maybe it says when he died - it would have been a few months later.

DP: How much are they?

MB: They aren't anything! Might have made a profit, after all.

DP: You started telling me about Burley in conjunction with Christopher Gelb.

MB: Well, they both had this capacity ... they both had the sheer knowledge of history and of public affairs that they could bridge all these gaps between organisations, and

had no fear of communists. You see, the liberals were petrified of communists, and in those days the Black Sash were - the Black Sash now get on at all these meetings ... they're terrific, those women and how outspoken they are, and the way they get together with UDF regardless of who the UDF's made up of.

DP: It's because of people like Miriam Hepner.

MB: Yes. Now is her daughter married to Neville Ruben?

DP: I don't know their children at all. I've not met them. I know them well, but ...

MB: Did the father die recently? Did her husband die?

DP: No.

MB: Oh. Maybe I'm mixing it up with another family. **[explains map to DP]**

DP: It sounds like Gelb would be a very nice subject for a book.

MB: Somebody was doing one, and then she never did. His wife, who remarried and lives in France was all ready with materials and so forth, and then nothing came of it. I wonder who - she, I think, has most of his archives. I could give you her address and phone number. Her name is Norah Lydall ...

DP: What was the paper? It was **X-Ray**, wasn't it?

MB: I think so. And then they started an **X-Ray** in Britain.

DP: But he died in the Eastern Cape, didn't he?

MB: Yes, in PE, in about 1963, I suppose. Oh, I know what you could use. I'm going to get something out of my luggage-case, since you can't go until two o'clock ...
[discussion about Norah Lydall's phone number]

DP: The 'fifties are not sufficiently written about.

MB: Well, everyone's forgotten about it now.

DP: There's not enough people around, I mean people who could write about it.

MB: Well, when my memoirs come out!

DP: How can I read them?

MB: You can't, till they come out, can you? You could pinch it, or ring up the publisher and say how desperately urgently they are needed!

DP: I'll do that with pleasure!

MB: Now, let's go and get something out of the luggage-case. You can earn your keep, then I'll give you a bit of bread and fish or something ...

DP: Am I not staying too long?

MB: No ... [voices fade out, traffic noises]

DP: So who wrote the Charter, Mary?

MB: Oh, I think it was a hotch-potch of people.

DP: Not Rusty Bernstein?

MB: Well, he may have edited the whole thing, but I don't think any one person. I don't really know, but I assume it was, because when you read it, it's quite a hotch-potch. And some of it is so - not primitive, not corny ... I don't know what I mean. I mean, it's very touching. And now it's become so frightfully respectable. You think of all the suspicions at the time of who wrote this seditious document, etcetera.

DP: I only asked that half in jest. It's one of those contentious issues that are still around.

MB: Still.

DP: I asked Rusty if he wrote it, and he chuckled and wouldn't answer!

MB: Oh really! Well, who knows. I don't know.

DP: The Atlantic Charter seems to have had a lot of influence.

MB: Yes. Well, I don't know. In the 1940's they took things so seriously, I don't really know ... I don't know where that photograph's gone, this is all chaos.

[end of side three]