

Rev John MacPherson, **Some personal reflections on working at the Commonwealth Secretariat**

In 1974 I had been working in the West Indies for over 20 years as high-school teacher, teachers' college lecturer, textbook author, Principal Education Officer in the Jamaican Ministry of Education, Lecturer at the University of the West Indies (both at Mona and Cave Hill) and Managing Director of Caribbean Universities Press, when I received an invitation to serve as a consultant for a Commonwealth Secretariat regional seminar on Education being held in Trinidad. I had recently taken part in preparing a module for use by Caribbean Education Ministries in assessing the readability of school textbooks they were considering for bulk purchase - and I imagine that was the theme of my address. During my short stay in Trinidad, the Director of the Secretariat's Education Division, Dr Sam Cooke (from Nigeria) asked me if I would like to join his staff which at that time was being expanded. Soon afterwards, I applied and was appointed Chief Project Officer to run (single-handed) the Commonwealth Book Development Programme (CBDP).

On arriving at Marlborough House my first task was to edit a backlog of publications which the Education Division had commissioned but which, for lack of expertise, awaited publication. Then, three months later, I was asked to attend the 1974 Commonwealth Education Ministers' Conference so as to prepare its official report. In order to comply with previous practice, this task involved providing a report of each day's proceedings to the host country's Government Printer, and working closely with him to ensure that the final report could be issued to the delegates at breakfast time on the final day of the Conference for their formal approval a few hours later. (I well remember the difficulty I had in convincing that particular Government Printer that he should not print the Commonwealth symbol in reverse merely because it would appear on the back cover.)

After breakfast on the final day of the Conference, the Secretary-General called a staff meeting in preparation for the closing session. Because he had had been away for most of the time and had returned only the previous day, it was not until then that he saw the official report – perhaps a couple of hundred pages in length. He was not a happy man! Had it contained anything untoward, he would have been in a very embarrassing position. Fortunately the closing session went smoothly, but in any event it was clear that the whole procedure was totally unsatisfactory. For one thing, the Government Printer was the *de facto* publisher of the report (and was responsible

for its subsequent distribution throughout the Commonwealth). For another, there was no opportunity for the delegates to alter the report in any way. I therefore made sure that documents for consideration at subsequent education conferences were prepared in advance so that delegates could: (a) focus attention on issues identified by the Commonwealth Education Liaison Committee (which served as an advisory body to the Education Division), (b) receive and amend a *draft* report, and (c) bring their meetings to a close by formally approving or amending whatever recommendations they had formulated during the Conference. Publication of the final report was left to the Secretariat. This may seem an obvious procedure, but I can assure you it was novel at the time.

Once the Conference was over, I was able to begin work on the task for which I had been appointed – that of advising and assisting Commonwealth developing countries to improve their book industries so as support their formal and non-formal education systems, provide the public with other kinds of reading material, and reduce costly expenditure on titles being published elsewhere. At that time three-quarters of all the books sold in Africa were imported, and Britain was publishing twice as many new books as all the Commonwealth developing countries put together. Redressing the balance was no easy matter. Book production is a complex undertaking involving a number of interlocking creative and industrial skills (including writing, editing, costing, layout and design, illustration, publishing management, printing, marketing and distribution). In Commonwealth developing countries those skills were in short supply (as was revealed by the Government Printer referred to earlier) and could be acquired only by on-the-job experience. Formal training courses for careers in publishing did not exist. Accordingly the Secretariat published outline syllabuses for seven training modules in the basic components of book production which could either be treated as entities or combined into one comprehensive course. Regrettably, that was as far as the CBDP could go. To make an impact, the modules would have to be implemented. This could have been achieved on a regional basis by forging a partnership with a university or other higher education institution, and, at least to begin with, enlisting experts to teach the modules. But the costs were too high. Proposals were made to provide the CBDP with its own funds, but perhaps to avoid setting a precedent, I don't believe they received the Secretariat's support. Certainly, nothing came of them.

The CBDP had therefore to find other more frugal ways of operating. One of its first projects was to co-operate with the Commonwealth Library Association in the

publication of a set of training modules for assistant librarians. This was followed by the publication of a Directory of Commonwealth Specialist Periodicals and another of Commonwealth National Bibliographies, along with guides and manuals on such topics as paper production, organizing book exhibitions, copyright (to protect the financial interests not only of authors but also of musicians), the management of school libraries, and the establishment of rural resource centres which even the poorest communities could set up and run at little or no cost. In addition, the Education Division implemented some of the CBDP training modules by conducting a series of regional training courses. So as to take the Secretariat's concerns about grass-root development into account, these courses included a component by which participants (who came from such diverse backgrounds as educational broadcasting, agricultural extension, adult literacy, audio-visual production, and school teaching) could be involved directly in low-cost publishing. Under professional guidance, they each wrote, designed, and illustrated a 16-page A5 booklet, transferred the lay-out to electronic stencils which Gestetner had recently invented, and printed, folded and stapled 100 copies at what amounted to a cost of no more than the price of three boxes of matches. By the time they returned home they were able and eager to teach those skills to colleagues. And by combining their newly acquired talents to prepare another booklet for offset printing by a commercial printer operating in the vicinity of the course centre, they familiarized themselves with the techniques required to produce books on an industrial scale. However, it cannot be denied that these cash-starved endeavours had no hope of providing the governmental and commercial sectors of Commonwealth developing countries with the skilled workforce they needed to increase the volume and improve the quality and sophistication of their publications.

In any case, as time went by, I was increasingly called on to devote my time to other Divisional projects. Thus, besides preparing the documents for consideration by major Commonwealth educational conferences and publishing their reports, I edited some of the manuals and guidebooks prepared by colleagues. For a time I was responsible for the Division's contribution to teaching about the Commonwealth (and was conducting a Commonwealth-wide seminar on the subject in Nairobi when President Kenyatta died). Then in 1980 I was among those members of the Secretariat's staff who were posted to Zimbabwe to support the Commonwealth Observer Group's supervision of the country's first free elections. Also in 1980, the British Government suddenly announced its decision to require students from Commonwealth countries to bear the full cost of their tuition. This threat to a long-

established and much-cherished component of Commonwealth co-operation had such profound implications for Commonwealth developing countries that for some years the issue became the Education Division's chief concern. Inevitably, much of my time and that of other members of the Division's tiny staff, was taken up with tracing and analysing patterns of student movement within and outside the Commonwealth, planning ways of maintaining Commonwealth student mobility, and servicing the annual meetings of the Standing Committee appointed by the Secretariat to deal with the matter. Much attention was focused on expanding the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, and for the last year or so of my stay I was mainly engaged in preparing a manual covering the intricate procedures involved in sending and receiving CSFP students, and in visiting some member countries to help their staff to implement the procedures.

Do I think the Commonwealth Book Development Programme was a success? Not really. Certainly the Commonwealth Library Association told us how valuable it was to them in some of their endeavours, and we occasionally heard of other book development projects which had made use of our guides and manuals and the techniques we had taught at our workshops. But from start to finish the CBDP was handicapped by a lack of funds. It could not initiate, or even contribute to, major book publishing courses. Nor could it offer even partial financial support to field officers in implementing small-scale local projects. Moreover, in comparison with other Education Division projects, the CBDP was at a serious disadvantage. Thus in spearheading new initiatives to improve teaching performance, the Division was able to rely on practical support from head-teachers, school inspectors, and those conducting nationwide pre-service and in-service training courses. The CBDP had no such counterparts to work with. Apart from the notable exception of library training (supported throughout by the Commonwealth Library Association), Commonwealth developing countries had no book development structure or existing courses for the CBDP to assist. In the circumstances, progress would have to depend on the provision of funds to employ experts from Britain or other major book producing countries where expertise was abundant and training courses already in existence. But this form of assistance lay outside the scope of most of the operations supported by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, and in any case book development was never regarded as a CFTC priority. Indeed, as important requests emerged for Commonwealth co-operation in new areas of education (such as gender disparities in education, the special educational needs of small island states, non-formal education, and the expansion of distance learning) the Education Division's

own priorities shifted, and interest in the CBDP declined. Such eventualities should have been foreseen and taken into account before the CBDP was established. Because they weren't, the Commonwealth Book Development Programme never prospered as it might have done, and by now I imagine its accomplishments have probably been forgotten.

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