

## OBITUARY - SIR ALAN BURNS

Sir Alan Burns, GCMG, one of the original Honorary Members of the African Studies Association, died on 29 September 1980, in his 93rd year. At the age of seventeen he followed his father and grandfather by joining the Colonial service, and spent twenty-three of the ensuing forty-two years in Africa. He first went to Nigeria in 1912 during the period of Lugard's union of Northern and Southern Nigeria. Promoted to Colonial Secretary of the Bahamas in 1924, he returned to Nigeria as Deputy Chief Secretary five years later, from which he became Governor of British Honduras in 1934 and Governor of the Gold Coast from 1941 to 1947. Though he retired in 1947, he then became British Representative on the United Nations Trusteeship Council for nine years and subsequently undertook the preparation of a report on the resources and population of Fiji.

The title of his book In Defence of Colonies (1957) indicates his viewpoint on the career to which he gave his energies for so many years but he was also the framer, in the Gold Coast, of the first African Colonial Constitution to provide for an unofficial majority in the Legislative Council. His first book was the Nigeria Handbook, which he founded on his own initiative in 1917 and which was taken over officially seven years later. It showed his gift for the lucid organisation of diverse material, and this was also reflected in his best known work, History of Nigeria, first published in 1929 and often revised and reissued. Though centred on the European period; and long predating the development of the modern school of African history, this was a very able pioneer account of one African country. Other volumes included the massive History of the British West Indies, Colour Prejudice, and Fiji. His autobiography, Colonial Civil Servant, displays his humour and his humanity as well as his wide experience. Not long before his death, he recorded an account of some of his early recollections of Nigeria which was used in the radio programmes and subsequent book, Tales from the Dark Continent.

Among Alan Burns's diverse interests were cricket, ornithology - as Governor of the Gold Coast he gave valuable support to David Bannerman's Birds of Tropical West Africa; bridge; and particularly books and libraries. He was Chairman of the Library Committee of the Royal Commonwealth Society and did much to enable its Biography Catalogue to be published, and initiated the series of Library Talks given in the Society. He was for many years Chairman of the Library Committee of the Athenaeum (indeed for a period of the Club itself) and enhanced the position of the library and the status of its staff. His particular interest in exploration and voyages was reflected in the lead he gave to the publication by the Royal Commonwealth Society of Drawings by William Westall and by his very active Presidency of the Hakluyt Society, which resulted in an overtaking of arrears of publication. He brought to all these tasks a brisk efficiency, combined with courtesy and friendliness towards his colleagues on Committees and the members of staff with whom he was concerned.

When the African Studies Association initiated the category of Honorary Members in 1965, to acknowledge distinguished Africanists of an older generation Sir Alan Burns was, on the proposal of Professor Daryll Forde, one of the seven then elected. Though he did not play an active part in the work of the Association, he greatly appreciated this recognition of his status in scholarship as well as in public life. He was physically active until well after his 90th birthday and mentally alert, retaining a keen interest in current work in African history, until his death.

DONALD SIMPSON