

IVOR WILKS (1928–2014)

TOM MCCASKIE

I first met Ivor in Ghana in July 1968, and became his Ph.D. student at Cambridge and then at Northwestern. We collaborated for six years on the Asante Collective Biography Project (1973–79), and latterly with others on bringing the *Asantehene* Agyeman Prempeh I's genealogical and historical memoir of Asante (1907) to publication in 2003. In between these dates, and after them, was a close intellectual and personal intimacy between us that was ruptured for a time in the 1990s, but then happily mended. I knew Ivor very well indeed over a long period, and here I just want to recall the man himself in the context of his (and my) core interest of Asante history.

Ivor taught me above all else that publication was everything, for as he often said wryly but with intent, “anything else is just conversation.” He often asked me if I believed in “writer’s block,” for he found it baffling. To Ivor, academic life was simplicity itself; field and archival research, contemplation of findings, thought, writing, and publication. Ivor had a phenomenally single-minded drive, and he applied this to his work on Asante as he did to every other topic he concerned himself with. He could not abide “lightweights” (his word), people who had the opportunity to do proper work but frittered this away. He did not have time for those who proved to be slipshod, lazy, silently non-productive, or what he called dismissively “journalists”—academics who lacked the tenacity and the staying power to keep on writing at the appropriate scholarly level.

If this makes Ivor sound forbidding, then this was seldom seen in public. He had the impeccable manners of his generation of Englishmen (and Welshmen), was always polite (even when deeply uninterested), and was in the end unsparingly harder on himself than on anyone else. We used to work twelve, sometimes even eighteen, hours a day on the ACBP, and Ivor was disappointed on those frustrating occasions when we had to call an exhausted halt with an unsolved problem still before us. The work came first, last, and always.

Ivor shaped Asante historiography, and beyond that the recuperation of Africa's neglected past. He—and I—were both fortunate in our encounter with Asante people. It is by no means a culture that would suit everyone—hierarchical and self-absorbed, loud and combative—but its sheer brio and fascination with its own past suited him and his intellectual temperament. It was, he always said, like a big onion. You peeled one layer away, and there lay another one, puzzlingly unlike its predecessor, and challenging in novel and unexpected ways. Looking back, I think the reward for both of us in working among the Asante was precisely that it rewarded long and deep fieldwork, for it required an unrelenting application in research to reveal and to get round the next bend in the road. It was complex, secretive, rebarbative, and unsettlingly direct about the sheer importance of power, position and status in human life. Other, similar historical societies (see Syme on Augustan Rome, for example) have fascinated in more or less the same way as Asante. Ivor was of the party of Thucydides in a western world that during his lifetime became evasive about how power of all sorts shaped and marked human lives. Ivor knew that the workings of power (Asante *Twi, tumi*) affected all people all of the time, and if this human invariable was to be engaged with it had first to be investigated and understood.

Of course, Asante benefits from an unrivalled written record among Africa's historic polities. But the compelling fascination was the Asante people themselves. As I read through the volumes of Ivor's fieldnotes and interviews I can see the appeal laid bare. The voices have hypocrisy but no cant, moments of disclosure and concealment, but above all a quality that is akin to duelling. These were not informants who recited a story, but historically involved actors with whom one had to fence (or debate) in order to be judged fit to be told things of interest. Both of us had the same experience. Only returning again and again to the place and its people signalled the kind of seriousness that qualified one to be admitted to any kind of understanding, let alone any signal or unique revelations.

Ivor worked in Asante on and off for thirteen continuous years (1953–65) and intermittently thereafter. Like all of us who have done this sort of work, he assembled a coterie of informants (and guides) who also became intimates. In Ivor's case these included Joseph Agyeman-Duah, Domfe Kyere, the sons of Kwame Boaten, Baffour Osei Akoto, and others. He often told me the story of his part in arranging Agyeman-Duah's second marriage, a union that eventually produced a son named in his honour. He often told me too of the sheer emotion of Baffour Osei Akoto with whom he was talking when news of the overthrow of Nkrumah arrived in 1966. Ivor saw these relationships in patently human terms, and he coaxed me towards the same densities of association and of friendship because he

thought this was necessary to me both as a person and as a scholar. It is impossible to quantify—perhaps even to define—the sorts of contextual insights that arise in such relationships, but they are palpably there.

Hard as it might be to believe now, when Ivor started to write about the Asante past it was a *terra incognita*. It was Ivor who played very much the largest part in erecting the infrastructure of what became Asante historiography. The diachronic incisiveness of his work in the 1960s drew admiring comment from his peers. And his 1975 *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* was and is still a huge landmark in the history of the continent. This too was the result of that single-mindedness I have described. The book began as a draft of his lectures from Legon in the 1960s (and it looked like something out of the library at Alexandria, for it was written on a huge roll of paper, the only materials available to him in Ghana when he started writing). Then it underwent endless rethinkings, revisions, and enlargements until it was finally submitted to the publisher. On a notably fine morning we drove up from London to Cambridge to hand it over, and throughout the journey Ivor fretted about things he had not covered in his draft, and even at this final stage about the very title itself.

It is not my intention to review Ivor's career bibliographically (I am pretty sure that every reader of *Ghana Studies* is or should be aware of it). He wrote and wrote and wrote on Asante (and of course other things) and saw this as both a privilege and a responsibility towards the people he had spent years among and who had talked to him. In 2004, I had the pleasure of taking Ivor and his wife Nancy to Kumasi, his first visit for some years. Initially he was appalled, for the famous “garden city” of his early time there is now a sprawling, overcrowded, messy urban sprawl. He and I talked over this visit when we returned to Accra. Ivor felt that time had finally caught up with him in a Kumasi he no longer recognized or felt truly at home in, and he gently warned me that this was just in the nature of things and would happen to me as well.

Over his last twenty-five years Ivor lived in his beloved Wales, in the west between Lampeter and Aberystwyth, with his wife Nancy. I often visited (and at one stage we even managed a holiday in France together). Until his last illness, Ivor remained as deeply engaged with Asante as ever. I travelled to Ghana a lot over this period, and he always wanted to hear about my visits to Kumasi, and most especially about people and places. We settled into a routine of Asante-centred discussions, often after Nancy and my partner Lynne had gone off to bed, and we both came to understand what a huge part we had played in each other's lives. Our battles were long over, and Ivor had been blessed with happiness in his marriage to Nancy.

For my own part I came to understand as never before just what I owed to Ivor. For those who know me slightly and publicly, the following may come as a shock but, as I said my *nante yi, m'adamfo* over Ivor's casket in a rural Welsh cemetery, I wept. Not a lot, for Ivor would not have approved of that. Indeed, I almost expected his voice to tell me to go away and to get on with my work.

University of Birmingham