

Remarks at the Launch of the James Foster Library

Egerton University

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By Emilia Ilieva

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The Chancellor of Egerton University, Prof. Shem Wandiga; the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Rose Mwonya; the Chief Guest, Mr. James Foster; the Deputy Vice-Chancellors; other Members of the University Management Board; Directors; Deans; Chairs of Department; Colleagues!

I proceed to perform the duty I have been assigned with a deep sense of humility, aware that all I have been able to do is render some minimal assistance in a vast project conceived by two outstanding individuals – Mr. Foster and Chancellor Prof. Wandiga. The project involved the idea and eventually the decision that Mr. Foster’s large and valuable library would serve a bigger purpose if, rather than remaining in private possession, it was transferred to a public university in Kenya; and the choice of Egerton University as the beneficiary.

Today’s handing-over ceremony marks the actualisation of the project. What is fascinating about this official event is that it gives us an opportunity to recount the circumstances surrounding the donation and to reflect on its significance. This is what I wish to do in my remarks.

The Circumstances in Brief

In mid-2014, our Chancellor, Prof. Wandiga, informed the then Vice-Chancellor that he had had a tentative discussion with Mr. Foster regarding the possibility of Mr. Foster’s donating his rich Africana library to Egerton University sometime in the future, and asked the VC to follow up on the matter. The Vice-Chancellor, in turn, instructed me to get in touch with Mr. Foster and maintain contact with him with a view to assuring him that Egerton University is a worthy prospective recipient of his collection. Consequently, in the two years that followed, Mr. Foster accepted the opportunities that were offered to him, through meetings, discussions, participation in university functions and in various other ways, to get to know us better. Early this year he felt confident enough to resolve that he would give the library to us. Initially the idea was to have the library at the Lord Egerton Castle, but, due to considerations

of security and accessibility, Mr. Foster later expressed preference for it to be located on campus. The books arrived on 19 May. Since the library is a special collection, it was deemed appropriate to house it at the CMRT in close proximity to the Rockefeller Library, whose staff will manage it, and from where it can be made available to researches by appointment or prior arrangement. Mr. Foster had already catalogued his collection, while the library staff made adjustments to the classification to conform to the university system and arranged the books.

Who is Our Benefactor?

Mr. James Foster was born in York, in the North of England, on 22 August 1929. James went to Twyford Primary School. His father, who was a regular Army Officer, was posted to Egypt. After Dunkirk fell during the Second World War, in June 1940, the parents in Egypt asked the grandmother, who was taking care of James and his brother, to evacuate herself and the two boys. They sailed to Australia in August. The boys went first to Knox Grammar School and then to Geelong Grammar School. On returning to England in March 1944 James went to Marlborough College. After passing his Cambridge School Certificate in 1946, James took the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, examination and passed. Later he passed the Interview for a Regular Army Commission and after six months in the ranks in a Junior Leader Training Battalion in Northern Ireland he joined Sandhurst in January 1948 and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Sussex Regiment (his father's Regiment) in August 1949. After two years he was promoted to Lieutenant. He tried to get to the War in Korea, but this did not materialise. So he resigned his Commission in April 1952. In August that year he sailed for India to work as a mercantile assistant in a section of the Inchcape Group. He was not happy with the company and so resigned and sailed to Kenya in October 1954. He joined the Kenya Police on a two-year contract as an Inspector Grade 1. After three months training at Kiganjo Police Training School he was assigned to a couple of Forest Posts in the Nyeri area. Later he was given command of two different GSU platoons. In August he was transferred to be the OCS of Taveta Police Station until his contract came to an end. In December 1956 he came to Nairobi and joined the East African Power and Lighting (EAPL) as Assistant Personnel Manager and later Assistant Sales Superintendent; finally as Training Officer and Principal of the EAPL Training School. He continued there until December 1970, when the post was Africanised. He then joined Hughes Limited – the Ford agents – as Company Secretary and Personnel Manager. After passing the examinations

he qualified as a Chartered Secretary and he then resigned and was invited to join Securicor Kenya Limited as CEO and later Managing Director. He reached retirement age in August 1989 and set up a Consultancy business. He was elected Chairman of the Institute of Certified Public Secretaries of Kenya in 2002–2004. He was elected by the Association of Professional Societies in East Africa (APSEA) to be one of the nine Professionals at the Kenya Constitutional Review Conference (the Bomas). He has been a volunteer in the St John Ambulance Brigade and was the Commissioner for Kenya for some 36 years, retiring in 2006. He was the Director of the President’s Award Scheme and has served as a Director on the Boards of the Outward Bound Company of East Africa (while Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Outward Bound Trust of Kenya); Limuru Boys’ Centre; and Kenya Christian Homes (Thomas Barnardos).

Mr. Foster’s Library

Throughout the years of his life in Kenya, Mr. Foster’s great passion has been the history of this country, indeed this country itself. This was the driving force behind the 60 years he spent collecting books and other materials on it. The library consists of nearly 4000 items and contains rare signed First Editions and other printed works spanning the last 170 years. It includes books published in many different countries, but about Kenya. The range covered is extensive and incorporates agricultural and scientific research concerning land, crops and animal husbandry. There are social studies of peoples, their origins and customs. The economics of the nation state, the health and education of the population are part of the whole. There are many magnificent photographs in sepia and colour that have been produced in that period.

The Significance of Mr. Foster’s Private Library

This significance has above all to do with the venerable tradition to which the library belongs.

This tradition goes as far back the 12th century BC, when the earliest known private libraries, the ones in Ugarit in the Middle East, were assembled. In ancient Greece in the 6th century BC private book collections owned by the elite and leading citizens were growing, as were the splendid homes and structures used to arrange and keep them. Besides the wealthy, private libraries were also built by professionals, like doctors and scholars, who needed

information within easy reach in their daily work. Preeminent scholars like Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato had in the course of their lives put together large and impressive collections which they owned privately. Aristotle, on the other hand, turned his personal collection into a library at the Lyceum, thus allowing his students and fellow scholars access to it. Private libraries in Rome, which preceded public ones, were typically acquired in times of war. For example, when the Roman general Aemilius defeated the Macedonian king Perseus in 168 BC, he rewarded his efforts by plundering the king's private library, leaving every other possession behind.

In Renaissance Europe, kings sought to imbibe the spirit of the epoch by creating vastly rich libraries, some of which have become the national libraries of today. The creation and expansion of universities inspired a type of generosity whereby notable individuals and royalty gave their private libraries as gifts to university libraries. One famous donation was by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, to Oxford University in the early 15th century. It is this particular aspect of the tradition that Mr. Foster's donation embodies. Mr. Foster may not be the Duke of Gloucester, and Egerton may not be Oxford University, but the pattern and its meaning are the same.

Africa too offers inspiring examples of private libraries. In ancient Egypt, several private tombs have endowed us with riches in the form of copious texts of scholarly nature. Since the 15th century, glorious Timbuktu was not only an epicentre of commerce on the trans-Saharan caravan route, but also, owing to the mosque and university it had enabled to thrive, the heart of learning and literacy. Like a magnet, the city drew to itself brilliant scholars and scribes. With tireless devotion, these scribes copied numerous works on a wide range of topics, including political science, history, theology, astronomy, botany, and poetry. Predominantly Arabic, but also Fulani, Songhai, and Bambara texts were copied time and again on diverse material planes – camel shoulder blades, sheepskins, tree bark, and papers from Italy. Some were illuminated with gold leaf, exhibiting exquisite calligraphic styles. The surviving manuscripts, including one in Turkish and one in Hebrew, cover an incredible span of time – from the 13th to the 19th centuries. They became the basis for the construction of a written history of Africa. The awe-inspiring “Tarikh Al-Sudan” is in itself a storied chronicle of West Africa. Defying all odds, many of these texts were preserved in mud homes and rudimentary private libraries. They represented a family heritage of the deepest value.

In this way, by creating private libraries, individuals of great intellect, lofty imagination and magnanimous soul have sustained the undiminished passage of knowledge from one epoch to another and have made it possible for humanity to tread along the path of continuous progress rather than repeatedly stumble, fall and rise on the path of uncertainty and lack of coherence in the process of knowing. This is the tradition of which Mr. Foster's library is a part, hence its significance.

The Value of the Collection for Egerton University

The library, as a special collection, will be particularly valuable to the historians of Kenya, giving an obvious advantage to those at Egerton University, and to the rest of us in the humanities and social sciences. With the resources it contains, it will help scholars within Kenya to become the main, major and vital producers of knowledge about Kenya.

As of now, despite progress, we continue to live the travesty whereby a disproportionate amount of knowledge about Africa is produced outside the continent, as a result of which Africa continues to see itself predominantly through the lenses of others. To take just one example, if one looks at the last few years, one would see that the two most cited recent histories of Kenya were written by non-Kenyan scholars: Daniel Branch's *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963–2011* (2011), and Charles Hornsby's *Kenya: A History Since Independence* (2012). A couple of weeks ago, the *Nation* newspaper corrected a certain factual error it had reported and partly defended itself by clarifying that the mistake had appeared in the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission Report (2013), from where it was unfortunately "borrowed". As it turned out, the authors of the Commission's Report had made the error by inaccurately copying the piece of information from Hornsby's book (they then excised it from the final report). The mistake itself is minor and not important in itself, but what is disturbing is that, with all the local resources and all the local scholars available to them, the Commissioners thought that the most trusted source on the history of Kenya since independence was that produced by a non-Kenyan. Similarly, the most frequent contributors to the current Kenyan press on issues of Kenyan politics are two scholars from British universities – Nic Cheeseman and Gabrielle Lynch. Cheeseman as co-editor of the high-ranking journal *African Affairs* and Sarah-Jane Cooper-Knox from the University of Edinburgh recently compiled the much acclaimed Decolonising the University Reading List on African Politics. They explained that they had collated the list in response to requests from

colleagues and friends, and in solidarity with those who are currently attempting to decolonise the university across Africa. But it is regrettable that this bibliography could not be prepared by African or Africa-based scholars.

Hopefully, the James Foster Collection will be instrumental in overcoming these anomalies.

Finally, that we at Egerton University have become – by association – part of the venerable tradition I referred to is significant in the sense that the acquisition of the James Foster Library contributes to and makes distinct our own tradition-bound life as an institution. It signifies that, rather than being marked by arbitrariness, fragmentation, ad-hoc decisions and abrupt happenings, we are, in fact, a highly-organised and integral whole, always evolving, always moving forward. As such, our destiny is to excel.

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