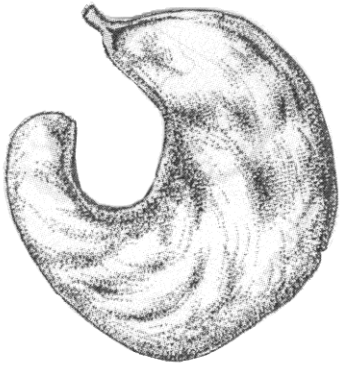

Journal of Namibian Studies

History, Politics, Culture

29 / 2021

Otjivanda Presse.Bochum

ISSN 1863-5954 (print)
ISSN 2197-5523 (online)

Journal of Namibian Studies
History Politics Culture

Review: Gwen Lister, *Comrade Editor. On Life, Journalism and the Birth of Namibia*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2021.

Gwen Lister, Namibia's foremost journalist, founding editor of *The Namibian* and the writer of a long-running 'Political Perspective' column in that newspaper, has written a memoir that interweaves her remarkable personal story with that of her adopted country from the years of apartheid and the struggle for independence to Namibia's post-independence present. Her very readable book is not, and was not meant to be, a scholarly account of the fascinating times she has lived through. Divided into of 66 short chapters, it is mostly written in a journalistic, anecdotal, rather than academic style. There are no references (she briefly mentions her diaries, most of which, she tells us, were confiscated by the security police), and – very annoyingly for anyone trying to find their way around her book – there is no index. But it is one of the most substantial Namibian memoirs to have appeared, one that deserves a place on a bookshelf of Namibiana alongside, say, that by her friend and close colleague, the lawyer David Smuts, founder-director of the Legal Assistance Centre.[1] While there will be those who will read her memoir mainly for what it says of her personal relationships and her often tortured personal life – for she is often candid and even self-critical in what she writes about herself[2] – in this review I shall focus primarily on her political life and what she says of the struggle for Namibian independence.

Lister arrived in Windhoek in 1975 from South Africa an anti-apartheid activist. First as a political reporter on the *Windhoek Advertiser*, then as reporter and writer of a weekly political column on the *Windhoek Observer,* and then as editor of and contributor to *The Namibian,* she exposed what apartheid meant in Namibia, in order to help to bring it to an end, which meant ending South African occupation and achieving independence. Through her reporting and commentaries, she aimed to reveal realities of what was happening in Namibia that were otherwise hidden. That meant telling Namibians about the liberation movement SWAPO, both in exile and internally (for, unlike the ANC in South Africa, SWAPO was not banned and was able to operate within the country), for she saw, as many did not, that Namibia's future lay with SWAPO, and was proud to be called 'Comrade Editor', the name given her by one of her staffers on *The Namibian*, Chris Shipanga (p. 207).

A key thread running through her story, then, is her relationship with SWAPO. From soon after joining the *Windhoek Advertiser* she covered SWAPO rallies in Katutura and elsewhere, and in the early 1980s she was able to meet the leaders of SWAPO in exile, in the United

[1] David Smuts, *Death, Detention and Disappearance. A Lawyer's Battle to Hold Power to Account in 1980s Namibia*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2019.

[2] She writes that some of her staff members "said they were actually afraid of me when I fixed there with a gimlet-like gaze" (p. 200). Cf. the memoir by her ex-husband, Mark Verbaan, *Incognito. The Memoirs of Ben Trovato*, Johannesburg, Pan Macmillan, 2014.

 ISSN 1863-5954 (print) ISSN 2197-5523 (online)

States and in Zambia. Her aim in her reporting was to give SWAPO a 'human face', a valuable corrective at the time to the negative stereotypes of the liberation movement propagated by the South African authorities. Now, looking back on the struggle after three decades of independence, she is able, as we shall notice, to be more critical of SWAPO than she was at the time, and to present a more nuanced picture.

The first section of her book, entitled 'Activist in the Making', takes her from her childhood in East London, South Africa, through the years when she was a liberal arts student at the University of Cape Town, years in which she was radicalised, to the painful interview she underwent for a position on the *Windhoek Advertiser*. She became a political reporter on that paper in her early twenties with no experience in journalism. Her 'Baptism of Fire', the title of the second part of her book, meant having to work under the maverick 'mad' Hannes Smith (Smittie), who was often bullying and abusive to her. When she comes to write of his death in 2008, however, she pays a moving tribute to him as a legendary journalist.

In part by reading in the *Advertiser*'s 'morgue' (Smittie's name for its archive), she quickly learnt to find her way around the very complex politics of Namibia in the years of the Turnhalle, and she soon showed the feistiness and determination to challenge the South African occupation for which she became so well known in later years. From May 1978 to 1984 followed 'The Observer Years', the title of the third part of her book, in which she provides a detailed account of her years on Smittie's idiosyncratic weekly newspaper, during which she was arrested for the first time and put on trial for possessing banned publications.

Before she parted ways with Smittie and the *Observer*, she built up her connections with SWAPO, becoming close friends with leading internal members of the liberation movement and visiting the leadership in exile. She says she told them not to tell her anything of the armed struggle because she would not want to reveal anything of it if she was interrogated by the security police. But when in the United States in 1984 she asked them why Tauno Hatuikulipi, the former Director of the Christian Centre, who had gone to join SWAPO in exile in Angola, had died, she 'received no answers', though she heard later that he had probably died in the dungeons at Lubango (p. 155). In 1989 Aaron Muchimba, another SWAPO stalwart, told her of his detention at Lubango as an alleged South African spy, and she learned of other atrocities against members of SWAPO. 'The full truth' of what happened, she suggests, "will only be told after Nujoma has passed on" (p. 155 and cf. pp. 179 and 258). Nujoma is criticised for sending SWAPO guerrillas into northern Namibia at the beginning of the United Nations (UN) process in 1989: "a foolhardy decision that achieved nothing, and cost the lives of hundreds of people" (pp. 257-258). Toivo Ya Toivo, whom she first met on his release in 1984, and became close to in later years, is for her the "greatest hero of our struggle" (p. 125).

A major coup for her was her exciting visit in 1984 to Lusaka for the talks that

were held there under the auspices of Kenneth Kaunda between SWAPO, the South African government, and the internal Namibian parties. She writes about this "brief season of hope" (p. 140) in detail and of how she was given a scoop when she was told by Kaunda and Nujoma that the talks had broken down because of South Africa's insistence on the withdrawal of the Cuban troops from Angola (p. 139). It seemed, she writes, "as if Swapo was prepared to abandon its 'sole and authentic' status" (p. 140), but there was no such abandonment, and it is clear from the documentary record that the South African government was not then ready to consider allowing an election in which SWAPO might come to power in Namibia.

When she left the *Observer*, after it was banned, she decided to begin her own newspaper. For that to be credible, she had to obtain the support of SWAPO. When she met Nujoma, he suggested she join SWAPO in exile, but she insisted she wanted to remain in Windhoek and persuaded him to support her venture, for which he then gave her a large sum of money (p. 175). She subsequently arranged to return this, so as not to be beholden to SWAPO. Her 'Forays for Funding', the title of the fourth part of her memoir, should be read alongside the chapter on 'Setting up *The Namibian'* by Smuts, who adds mention, say, of his visit to meet Muchimba in Gaborone to win SWAPO support for the new venture.[3] It was 'Against all odds', the title of the last chapter in this section, that *The Namibian* was founded, a few months after the *Weekly Mail* began publication in South Africa, also as a radical anti-apartheid paper concerned to expose state repression and oppression and to give voice to the resistance.[4]

As *The Namibian* came into being, Namibia was increasingly militarised, the war in the north was intensifying, and a Transitional Government of National Unity suggested so some that an alternative to SWAPO was possible. The fifth part of her memoir, appropriately entitled 'Working under siege', contains much about the harassment and intimidation she and her colleagues were subjected to, which included acts of arson and constant death threats. She was detained again in June 1988. After a chapter on 'Spies, threats and hidden dangers', she recounts how, after the paper reported a coup plot, the offices of *The Namibian* were firebombed in August 1990. One of her most moving chapters, entitled 'Anton's life cut short', details the shocking assassination of Anton Lubowski in September 1989 and the impact it had on her.

Along with the many 'bad days', and the very real dangers, went some 'good times' and at *The Namibian* there was sense of camaraderie and of working for a just cause, that of an independent,

[3] Smuts, *Death*, chapter 7, 161ff.

[4] I suggested a comparison between the two in Chris Saunders, "25 years of the *Mail & Guardian*", *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 32 (3), 2011: 86-88. Cf. Christopher Merrett and Chris Saunders, "The Weekly Mail, 1985-1994", in: Les Switzer and Mohamed Adhikari, (eds.), *South Africa's Resistance Press. Alternative Voices in the Last Generation of Apartheid*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000: 458-486.

democratic and free Namibia. Not all her personal relationships on the paper remained good ones, however. The war in the north was documented in remarkable photographs by John Liebenberg, many of which were taken while he worked at *The Namibian*, and Lister explains how she fell out with him, in part because he took the negatives of his photographs with him when he left the paper (p. 242).

When she traces the events of the crucial year, 1988, which culminated in the agreement by South Africa, Angola and Cuba that allowed the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435, she admits that at the time she was too sceptical, though with good reason, of South Africa's willingness to permit the UN process to proceed. Part 6 of her memoir takes Namibia from the arrival of the UN Transitional Assistance Group in early 1989 to the birth of the new nation a year later. Her account of this period could be read alongside that by David Lush, who worked under her on *The Namibian*.[5] Though she had been a strong advocate of the implementation of UN Security Resolution 435, she was initially very critical of the UN role in April 1989, and only later came to acknowledge how valuable a role the UN had played in the transition to independence.[6]

As independence approached, she realised *The Namibian* needed to review its role and "This would include our attitude towards the new government, which some would argue we had helped to bring to power" (p. 288). She includes a photograph taken when she met Mandela when he visited Windhoek for the independence celebrations, and then goes on to recount how she was not invited to the independence banquet. She watched as others arrived for it, including a wealthy businessman who had called her the "Gaddafi of journalism".[7] The "newly minted prime minister" told her that it was an oversight she had not been invited, but she had already written a column that she had ended with the accurate prediction that "a different struggle was about to begin" (p. 297). She was later to acknowledge that *The Namibian* had been so caught up in "pure day to day survival" that it had not pressed hard enough for guarantees for media freedom and media plurality in the negotiations that led to the new democratic constitution.[8]

In Part 7 of her memoirs she writes about the adjustments to life after independence, the increased tensions with the SWAPO government, and how it banned advertising in *The Namibian*

[5] David Lush, *Last Steps to Uhuru*. Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 1993.

[6] For UN criticism of *The Namibian* see Cedric Thornberry's diary, September 1989: "Nice to be liked by *The Namibian* for a change…As much from principle as inclination they've given us a pretty bad time since our arrival, with savage cartoons and a fair amount of abuse. It's actually quite good for us, even if we are sometimes gripped by self-righteous indignation at *The Namibian's* interpretation of our actions." (*A Nation is Born,* Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2004: 262).

[7] Verbaan, *Incognito* : 116.

[8] Gwen Lister, "Priorities in the Struggle for Press Freedom", *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2004, accessible at: https://niemanreports.org/articles/priorities-in-the-struggle-for-press-freedom

(chapter 59). Namibia's struggle history was now, she writes, too often told from the perspective of those who had fought from outside the country, diminishing the role of those who had opposed the apartheid regime at home (p. 232), and her own memoir can be seen as an attempt to help set the record straight. In a relatively brief Part 8, entitled 'Into the sunset' she writes about 'passing the torch', when she reluctantly gave up the editorship of *The Namibian* in 2011. She comments on what has happened to journalism in Namibia in recent years, and offers reflections on her life. She had hoped that Namibia would "by now" have become a non-racial society, and be a success story (p. 384), which it clearly is not. She acknowledges that though press freedom in Namibian remains fragile,[9] it survives, despite the weakness of civil society. In recent years she has chaired a trust that safeguards the assets of *The Namibian* and campaigns for media freedom and access to information.

While some readers may find some of the personal detail she includes in her memoir extraneous and self-indulgent, no-one can deny her record of courage and dogged determination. Her exposure of the realities of the last years of South African occupation and of the war in the north, her advocacy for the UN process leading to independence, and the support she gave to SWAPO, all helped the transition to a new Namibia, free of South African rule. Like David Smuts' memoir, *Comrade Editor* shows how much can be achieved by individual non-violent action in the context of an oppressive system.

Chris Saunders
University of Cape Town

[9] Cf. Gwen Lister, "Namibian Media: Mostly Free But Fragile", *The Round Table*, 107 (2), 2018: 229-231.