

Foreword

The African Writers Series files are now held in the University of Reading library (RUL MS 8221). The archivist Mike Bott persuaded several of the leading British publishers to lodge their archives with him, creating a key resource on British twentieth-century writing and publishing.

I started by examining the publishing correspondence with some of the most outstanding authors who appeared in the Series; they were also the writers of vivid letters. I have focused in particular on eight writers who have gained international recognition. The correspondence with Bessie Head, Nuruddin Farah and Dambudzo Marechera is singularly rich. The files show something of the way in which Ngũgĩ and Henry Chakava developed publishing in the languages of East Africa as well as in English. The correspondence with Mazisi Kunene, Alex la Guma and Dennis Brutus is interlocked with the liberation struggle in South Africa. Letters, reports and three-line notes from Chinua Achebe are scattered through the files of the many other writers who are part of the extraordinary Series of which he was the Founding Editor.

The intention of the book is to provide a narrative of how the African Writers Series came together. The shape emerged from the writers and the adventurousness of their writing. It is a study of the publishing process working in unprecedented conditions. The book provides evidence of the ways in which estimation by a publisher of the work of writers grows and, sadly on occasion, diminishes. The book gives examples of how the views of publishers and their advisers emerge as they consider a new manuscript, and then coalesce and change as they assess further work by the same author. The initial discussion is literary but then reflects practical and political realities. Decisions can then be affected by the economics of the firm and the publishing industry at the time. Selective quotations are used to reveal what has emerged from the files rather than what the 'conspirators' (p. 24) think they remember. Needless to say, memories do play a lively part.