

The Ruth First Award for courageous journalism

Gavin Williams

IT IS APPROPRIATE that the presentation of the award for courageous journalism in Ruth First's name should take place in a department of journalism and media studies at a university.

Ruth was a political activist, committed to socialism and to the liberation of Africa. Ruth was also a journalist.

She wrote for *Guardian* and *New Age*. She also edited *Fighting Talk* which published many of the exciting black and white writers of the 1950s, such as Es'kia Mphahlele's stories and the text of Athol Fugard's *The BloodKnot*.

Ruth was also to become an academic. She was a fine university teacher. Journalists and academics share common professional obligations — to search out the truth and maintain their independence.

Their claims to freedom of the press and to academic freedom can only be justified if they do so.

They are not required to be neutral or uncommitted; the best reporting and writing often emerges from deep convictions. But the obligations to research and investigate, to report and to explain, do not sit easily with political loyalties and commitments.

Ruth brought to all her writing the skills of a campaigning journalist. Her first concern was to get to the facts. The facts don't speak for themselves. You have to get out, find them, and express them.

Ruth had a perceptive eye for the particular and a capacity to describe people in an evocative way. Here she describes Gadaffi's address to the people of Libya:

From him comes an inexhaustible flow; didactic, at times incoherent; peppered with snatches of half-formed opinions, cryptic self-spun philosophies; some sound common sense, and as much prejudice. Few of his speeches do not contain the germ of at least one sound idea, and little of its real development. For Gadaffi's view of the world is uncomplicated by any knowledge of it.

Three themes link Ruth's writings on South Africa in the 1950s with her later work on other African countries.

The first theme is that the proper focus of social explanation should be on capitalism, in all its complex forms. From her experiences with mineworkers and farmworkers in 1946 and 1947 she saw racism in South Africa as the product of a structure through which mineowners and farmers gained control of labour. Control over labour was central to the story she told in her first book, *South West Africa*:

South of Ovamboland, in the aptly named police zone, men are handcuffed by slips of paper. They must have permits to seek work, permits to be in the area for any purpose other than to seek work, service contracts to prove they are working, passes to prove they are schoolboys and too young to carry passes.

A second key theme of Ruth's work was her view that there are moments when the people are able to seize and shape the political agenda. She wrote of the bus boycotts of 1956-7:

Political controversy moved away from the sterile debates in the House of Assembly... and nationwide attention was focused on this demonstration by a voteless, voiceless people.

The third theme in Ruth's work was her commitment — which now appears so old-fashioned — to socialism, her recognition of the difficulties of achieving it, and its problematic relations to nationalism, and of both to feminism.

She visited both the Soviet Union and China and reported rather naively on the achievements of Soviet civilisation and the Chinese people.

In the 1960s and 1970s she looked at independent Africa and at communist countries, and their policies, with a far more sceptical eye.

The twice-titled *Power in Africa: The Barrel of a Gun* sought to explain the most striking manifestation of post-independence politics in Africa, the *coup d'état*. Its central actors, and the focus of her indictment, were politicians, bureaucrats and soldiers.

Colonial inheritances, economic dependence and even direct foreign intervention, provide the contexts for political developments but not the explanation. Ruth did not allow them to become an alibi for failures for, she wrote, that "is a form of patronising"; it makes Africans "ever victim, never perpetrator".

Socialists were not exempt from Ruth's critical eye. She shrewdly observed how Nkrumah's 'socialist' policies were designed to extend patronage to his supporters and to undermine the economic base of his political opposition.

She disagreed strongly with the policies of the Soviet Union and its allies, including the SACP and was unpersuaded by the claims of Mao and the cultural revolution to offer an alternative path to socialism. She publicly supported the claims of Eritrea to independence in opposition to the "socialist" line and Soviet-aligned government of Ethiopia.

In the 1970s Ruth First turned to an apparently very different subject. A biography, written with Ann Scott, of Olive Schreiner. Their primary concern was to understand how Schreiner was able to go beyond her family, class and racial background and how her feminism was nevertheless limited by her own white, middle class experience and predominant forms of reference, and by the ambiguities in her views on female sexuality, motherhood and the nature of freedom for women and men.

In the 1980s, as Director of the Centre for African Studies in Mozambique, Ruth was a trenchant critic — and not always a popular one — of Frelimo politics — state farms for example — and, as Joe Hanlon wrote, her comments, however unwelcome, "were always listened to... she was a militant insider, speaking a language people understood".

Her life's work, then, illustrates the classic dilemma which Max Weber poses of which God to serve: the Daimon of politics with its concern for the consequences of action, or of Science with its overriding concern to promote the truth.

There is no easy resolution, and it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to reconcile these claims. Ruth's work is a practical tribute to each of them.

Gavin Williams, of St Peters College Oxford, is a member of the Ruth First Memorial Trust. A longer version of this article will appear in *The Journal of Southern African Studies*.

COMMENTS FROM THE JUDGES

Entries for the Courageous Journalism Award competition, often put together with considerable effort and motivation, were a welcome counterweight to commentaries which claim a decline in South African journalism.

Contributions received included entering a dangerous hostel, violence in Crossroads, reporting Rwanda, mine-clearing in Mozambique, paedophilia and pornography, a Third Force exposé, chronicling the anti-Mangope uprisings, conditions at farm schools and emigration by neo-Nazis.

The decision to choose Louise



Flanagan (Daily Dispatch chief reporter and Rhodes journalism graduate) as the winner was in recognition of her sustained (over three

years), brave and in-depth investigations into Eastern Cape dirty tricks (on several political sides).

The judges also agreed that the kind of journalism exemplified by Moses Mamaile (entries from his work for *City Press*) deserved a special commendation. His articles exuded the compelling human interest that derives from pursuing a story through to those right at its centre.

This entailed Mamaile smuggling himself into a jail cell to interview a child held for allegedly stealing a watermelon. Subsequently, he tracked down the farm where she worked as a child-labourer. Despite incurring an assault by the farmer, Mamaile later returned with police to collect his notebook.

Also singled out for special mention was Donna Hornby (*Natal Witness*) who spent two months living in destitute communities.

Judges: Prof Guy Berger, Rhodes Journalism Department (ex-South editor) Shamim Meer, consultant, Jeanette Minnie, Director, Freedom of Expression Institute.

The South African Award for Courageous Journalism, worth R7000, is sponsored by the British-based Ruth First Memorial Trust. It was previously awarded to Enoch Sithole, of *New Nation*, for his exposé of the military signal that led to the assassination of Matthew Goniwe. The award will be made again in 1996, for work conducted during 1995/6.

● **Deadline for submission is August 1, 1996.**