



Oswin Boys Bull and the Emergence of Southern African 'Nonwhite' YMCA Work

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ABSTRACT

From 1908 to 1922, Oswin Boys Bull (1882–1971) had the primary responsibility for supervising the recruitment of African youth and students into the South African SCA and YMCA. Following the lead of overseas sojourners Luther Wishard and Donald Fraser in 1895 and John R. Mott and Ruth Rouse in 1906, Bull took his experience as a Jesus College, Cambridge classics and theology major and sportsperson into the challenging religious, racial and ethnic field of the Union of South Africa. Bringing a mix of strong spiritual roots and an unwavering commitment to the racially inclusive interpretation of Christianity, Bull blazed a trail that earned him the reputation of a pioneer ecumenist.

Ablly assisted by illustrious Xhosa-speaking intellectual and seasoned Christian proselytizer John Knox Bokwe, Bull made inroads into areas previously ignored by his predecessors. With a reach extending as far as neighboring historic Basutoland, Bull's efforts resulted in the establishment of branch associations in a variety of rural and urban locations. In spite of local opposition and tremendous geographical, linguistic, social and political barriers, Bull applied himself to the task of providing a firm foundation for Black and Mixed Race SCA and YMCA members to find places in previously lily-white bodies.

Understanding both his limits as well as his capabilities, Bull's generosity allowed him to share the spotlight with other evangelists. His correspondence with YMCA leader John Mott demonstrates a humble willingness to see the task of 'nonwhite' inclusion in SCA and YMCA work to the end. By the time Max Yergan, the first permanent YMCA and

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SCA secretary arrived in South Africa early in 1922, Bull was able to delegate most of the duties that required a field secretary to him, satisfied that he could concentrate on the remainder of his managerial duties from the YMCA and SCA center, in Cape Town and Stellenbosch, respectively. Already fluent in Afrikaans, Bull's history of attempting to build bridges between competing and often hostile populations set the standard for the type of leadership that a complex, extremely ethnically and religiously particularistic society like South Africa would need to construct a broadly based national movement.

Although O.B. Bull is known only to readers of Alan Paton's *Hofmeyr*, and those involved in the institutions with which he was associated, most notably, St Edmunds School, Jesus College, Cambridge, the Scriptural Union and the South African SCA and YMCA, it may now be possible for later generations to revisit the times in which he lived and worked to regain a sense of the odds against which he struggled and the resolve he showed in striving first to dream of and then fight for a more inclusive Southern African YMCA.

While he was by no means perfect and was clearly himself a product of his place and time, his quests for something better within himself and his adopted country were noble.

KEYWORDS: John Knox Bokwe, Jan Hofmeyr, SCA, South Africa, WSCF, YMCA

The past decade has seen a renewed interest in the study of the worldwide YMCA Movement. This has spurred the production of a series of investigations that have revealed that the trend frequently proved more relevant to and reflective of major social, political and cultural currents sweeping across the modern world than had previously been imagined.² Scholars writing of these interactions

2. The Classic North American text remains C. Howard Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America* (New York: Associated Press, 1951); Carlos E. Reig Romero, *YMCA de la Habana: memorias deportivas (1905-1910)* (Quito, Ecuador: Departamento de Comunicaciones, Consejo Lationamericano de Iglesias, 2003); M.D. David, *The YMCA and the Making of Modern India: A Centenary History* (New Delhi: National Council of YMCAs of India, 1992); Kimberley A. Risedorph, 'Reformers, Athletes, and Students: The YMCA in China, 1895-1935', Dissertation, University of California at San Diego, 1994; Jun Xing, *Baptized in the Fire of Revolution: The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China, 1919-1937* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press; London and Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996); Jon Thares Davidann, *A World of Crisis and Progress: The*

and successive generations of local leaders have thus forced reconsideration of a phenomenon of global scope and dynamism ignored or trivialized as of pedestrian or sectarian interest. Since the transformation of South African society ushered in by the end of apartheid, YMCAs have made themselves indispensable to the social fabric of the nation, taking on some of the most pressing issues of contemporary life and providing meeting spaces for community organizations seeking to forge change.

Since its emergence in urban and industrial Great Britain during the 1840s, the Young Men's Christian Association has played a surprisingly large part in the transformation of the consciousness of proletarian and petit-bourgeois youth on an intercontinental scale.³ Conceived as a religious antidote to the growing secular threat posed by the international working class vanguard movement leading the revolution against capitalist exploitation, George Williams devised an alternative recreation-oriented internationalism blending Christian principles, prayer and exercise in a non-denominational but overwhelmingly Protestant framework.⁴ This was critical for youth coming from the countryside into newly teeming cities.

(F'note continued)

American YMCA in Japan, 1890–1930 (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1998); David I. McLeod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt (eds.), *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852–1946* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Thomas Winter, *Making Men, Making Class: The YMCA and Workingmen, 1877–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Jessica I. Elfenbein, *The Making of a Modern City: Philanthropy, Civic Culture and the Baltimore YMCA* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001). A similarly impressive range of scholarship exists for the YWCA among the best of which is Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

3. See, e.g., Shirley S. Garrett, *Social Reformers in Urban China: The Chinese YMCA 1895–1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Mayer N. Zald, *Organizational Change: The Political Economy of the YMCA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Eugene E. Barnett, *My Life in China 1910–1936* (ed. Jessie Gregory Lutz; Asian Studies Center Monograph 10 Fall 1990; East Lansing: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1990).

4. J.E. Hodder Williams, *The Life of Sir George Williams: Founder of the Young Men's Christian Association* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham; New York: Eaton & Mains, 1906).

Appearing at a time of transnational influence of Western commerce and ideology the fusion of Christian reformism and market expansion in the global circulation of commodities steadily became intertwined with the rise of European nationalism and its penetration by explorers and missionaries into the overseas extensions of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Popular among the rising stratum of youth and students with middle-class aspirations, the YMCA idea spread throughout Europe and with the movement of immigrants, into North America. By the 1860s it took root in the 'Mother City' of South Africa, Cape Town. In its global reach the YMCA and its allies (like the YWCA) proved vital parts of the social, economic and ideological thrusts fueling Western Christian imperialism and colonialism. The YMCA was established to help young males confronting the challenges of urban life as a consequence of having to seek employment. This fits South Africa.

There is to date no general history of 'nonwhite' YMCA work in South Africa.⁵ Indeed there is no overall history of the movement as

5. There is no general history of either the South African Student Christian Association or Young Men's Christian Association. African involvement in these organizations is discussed in David H. Anthony, 'Toward a History of "Black Work" in the South African YMCA', submitted; Anthony, 'Max Yergan Encounters South Africa: Theological Perspectives on Race', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34.3 (2004), pp. 235–65; and "'The Men of Me': Max Yergan and the Origins of the "Bantu Section" of the South African YMCA', in Ntongela Masilela (ed.), *Black Modernity: Discourses between the United States and South Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, in press). It is also treated in Anthony's *Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). See also Alan Gregor Copley, *The Rules of the Game: Struggles in Black Recreation and Social Welfare in South Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997); Copley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924–1950* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) and Tim Couzens, 'Moralizing Leisure Time: The Transatlantic Connection and Black Johannesburg, 1918–1936', in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870–1930* (London: Longman, 1982), pp. 314–37. Memoirs and capsule histories include: The YMCA and the Non-Europeans, *South African Outlook*, 1 March 1951, pp. 39–40; T.R. Ponsford, *The War Record of the Union Defence Force Institutes (YMCA – Toc H) 1939–1946* (Cape Town, 1946) and his 'The Influence of the YMCA Is Felt in 66 Countries', *Outspan* 40. 1029 (15 November 1946); Clifford P. Dent, 'The Bantu S.C.A.', in *Youth for Christ – S.C.A. 1896–1946 [Die Jeug vir Christus – C.S.V. 1896–1946]* (The Students' Christian Association of South Africa, 1946). In-house unpublished histories include the following: George Edmund Haynes, 'The History, Aims and Policies of the Student Christian Associations Among Bantu', in *History of the Young Men's Christian Association in Africa* (New York: n.p., 1930); Henry-Louis Henriod, 'The Student

a whole. While this would be desirable, in the short term it is also important to recognize the degree to which South African society has evolved within contexts of racial and ethnic separatism.

'Race' played a critical role in the creation of the society of which the movement was a part, and both legal and customary segregation have left palpable legacies. Black South Africans have participated in religiously based recreational activities of the type advocated by Sir George Williams and his followers since the late nineteenth century, yet over 100 years later there is no in-country open archive for what still remains a vibrant institution.⁶ While this article is not intended to strengthen any fissiparous tendencies within society, it is helpful to shine a light on a little-known aspect of the movement's history, as present-day people strive to redefine it. The documents that can give a sense of what happened in prior periods are of several types:

1. official filed minutes of national executive and local branch meetings;
2. print publications produced by local and regional YMCAs and their affiliated trends;
3. published reports and memoirs of persons in or close to the work of the associations;
4. unpublished reports, recollections and correspondence housed in various repositories;
5. oral interviews with veteran YMCA staffers transcribed and recorded by other means.

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Christian Associations in Native Institutions', World Student Christian Federation Papers, Yale Divinity School; Ray Phillips, 'History of the South African YMCA', in J.D. Rheinallt Jones Papers, South African Institute of Race Relations Collection, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. By contrast the YWCA has been chronicled in Gregor Cuthbertson and David P. Whitelaw, *God Youth and Women: The YWCAs of Southern Africa, 1886-1996* (Johannesburg: The YWCAs, 1996).

6. Vusi Kaunda to author, 22 July 2004. This article is the product of extensive archival research and an academic year in Lesotho (1987-88) and three field visits to South Africa (2000, 2001 and 2002). It would not have been possible without aid from Allison Sampson-Anthony, Bob Edgar and Vusi Kaunda. Others who helped considerably include Frances H. Willmoth, Jock Asbury-Bailey, Stan Fish, Sharon Viljoen, Stephen Gill, Craig J. Hincks, Martha Lund Smalley, Dan Sheldon, Michael Hews and the staffs of the former YMCA Bowne Historical Library in New York, the YMCA of the USA Archives, the John R. Mott and WSCF Collections at Yale Divinity School Library and Sterling Libraries, the WSCF Collection at the World Council of Churches Archives in Geneva, Switzerland, and myriad YMCA and SCA contacts.

Due to the racial dynamics of South African society, YMCA work emerged as a white preserve. While there are references to such work in the 1840s, the same decade as the movement originated in London, the first bona fide organization appears to have been established in Cape Town in 1865.⁷ It was not until four decades later that formal attempts were made to begin discussions about how to extend this to the black majority. The reasons for this are many and complex but did include the racial chauvinism characteristic of the epoch in which it emerged.

Although it could be an oversimplification to aver that this led to absolute fissures along racial lines, it would be disingenuous to ignore the high degree to which the racial attitudes of both white leaders and rank and file hampered progress among 'nonwhites' in their daily attempts to function as full members of one movement.

Indeed when black outreach occurred it was due to the impetus of outsiders, sojourners from overseas involved in broadening the base of what had been primarily an Anglo-Atlantic and gradually increasingly European phenomenon. These novel voices were those of the World Student Christian Federation, represented by Luther Wishard and Donald Fraser in 1896–97, followed by American YMCA head John Mott and British YMCA official Ruth Rouse, both members of the WSCF executive in 1906, the combined forces of which led to the seconding of Oswin Boys Bull, a Cambridge graduate, to Cape Town to supervise the new initiative whereby African youth and students could be recruited into the YMCA.

This article seeks to provide some information about Bull, his background, his mission and its relationship to a largely unwritten chronicle of South African YMCA endeavors.

Background and Early Life

Oswin Bull's name is remarkably familiar to seasoned readers of Southern African literature. He looms large in Alan Paton's classic biography *Hofmeyr*, where he is one of the principal characters, the mentor for Paton's protagonist, who patiently protects him.⁸ He also

7. The date most cited is 24 August 1865. *Manhood: Organ of the Cape Town Y.M.C.A.* 4.4 (August 1923), p. 65 and 'From Old YMCA Records', 8.4 (September 1927), pp. 29–30 stating, 'On August 24, 1865, after three preliminary meetings ... Cape Town YMCA was formed. Headquarters [contains] a complete set of minute books.' I have been unable to ascertain the present whereabouts of such should they still be extant. Andrew Murray, founder of Cape Town's YMCA was also involved with England's Keswick Conventions.

8. Alan Paton, *Hofmeyr* (London: Oxford, 1964).

appears in Arthur Posonby Moore-Anderson's memoir *Sir Robert Anderson and Lady Agnes Anderson* where the author poignantly describes Bull eulogizing his mother:

Our friend Oswin Bull, afterwards Director of Education in Basutoland, was a fellow-voyager in the *Kenilworth Castle*. He recalled the time thus when he heard of her death: 'To me your mother was always one of the Great-Hearts. There are not very many who deserve the title in its fullest meaning; but those who do are the people who make all the difference in life to their own folk and to a great many more besides. I shall always remember how delightful it was to have her travelling out with me, and how inevitably she became the centre of the Christian circle on board.'⁹

A fixture in Southern African religious and educational life for threescore years, Bull has never been given adequate credit for his critical contributions to the early development of the Student Christian Association and YMCA movements in the fractious subcontinent.

Oswin Boys Bull was born 9 September 1882 in Barnstaple, Devon, the latest in a long line of clerics.¹⁰ Oswin's father was Henry John Bull, Rector of Roborough. O.B. attended St Edmunds School, Canterbury beginning in 1892 at which time it was known as the Clergy Orphan School, becoming St Edmunds in 1897. An older brother, Charles Ravenscroft Bull, born 12 December 1878 was also educated there.¹¹ Oswin belonged to St Edmunds choir, edited its magazine, received sports colors, was team captain (1900 and 1901) did football and cricket (1898–1901), and was school monitor and captain (1899–1901).

Earning a Jesus College scholarship and a Dean Boyd Exhibition, Bull completed St Edmunds in 1901, entering Cambridge that fall.¹²

9. Arthur Posonby Moore-Anderson, *Sir Robert Anderson and Lady Agnes Anderson* (1947), ch. 8, 'The Life Partner and the Family'.

10. Obituary, *Annual Report*, Jesus College Cambridge Society (JCCS), 1972. Provided by Frances H. Willmoth, Archivist, Jesus College, Cambridge, enclosed within Willmoth to author, 28 May 2004.

11. Jock Asbury-Bailey to author, 30 May 2004. Asbury-Bailey wrote of St Edmunds that 'It was a foundation for the fatherless sons of clergy of The Church of England and The Church in Wales, a foundation dating back to 1749. The school had moved to Canterbury in 1855, having previously been at two sites in London and prior to that the "foundations", as they were called, had been educated in Thirsk, Yorkshire.' Asbury-Bailey took this to mean that it was likely that Bull's father had died, probably in 1888.

12. J. Asbury-Bailey to author, 30 May 2004. Asbury-Bailey wrote further that: 'At various times at school he was the winner of the Under 16 Long Jump, 440 yards and 880 yards and was Victor Ludorum. He was later Senior Victor Ludorum, winning the Shot Putt, 880 yards, 100 yards, Mile and He played right

A Rustat Scholar, then a Gatford Scholar, Bull gained renown doing rugby, association football, in college choral concerts as well as serving 'on the committee for the management of a College Mission'.¹³ O.B. continued this career of achievement in both academic and athletic pursuits and upon his graduation from Jesus College traveled 18 months in Canada with the Children's Special Service Mission, before heading for South Africa in 1907¹⁴ in reply to John Mott's 1906 appeal. Having read classics and theology at Cambridge and surveyed North America and the US on behalf of the Scripture Union, Bull seemed just the candidate for the task of directing Student Christian Association work in an extraordinarily challenging South Africa field. It is likely, however, that he had little idea of what awaited him there.¹⁵

Oswin Bull's Mission

Ten years after the Fraser-Wishard mission, John Mott and Ruth Rouse traveled across South Africa, seeking to cement the loosely organized, far-flung branches of the YMCA and its closest affiliate, the SCA.¹⁶ It was immediately apparent to them that this field held both

(Footnote continued)

back in the football team and was a batsman and wicket-keeper in the cricket team. He was President of the Debating Society.'

13. Obituary, *Annual Report*, JCCS (1972). Bull's exploits are explored at length in several numbers of the Jesus College magazine, the *Chanticleer*, especially those of Lent and Easter Term 1902, Michaelmas Term 1902, Easter and Michaelmas Term 1903 and Michaelmas Term 1904 (Francis H. Willmoth, archivist).

14. J. Asbury-Bailey to author, 30 May 2004. Asbury-Bailey's catalogue of Bull's sport achievements includes: 'At Cambridge he took part in the Freshmen's football match and the Sports (3rd in the hurdles). He played football and cricket for Jesus and was in the Sports team against Trinity College, Oxford. He returned to St Edmund's at least twice to sing in School Concerts and to play for the Old Boys at football and cricket. He gained football colours for Jesus and played once for the University in 1903 before being injured. In 1904 he gained a BA Aegrotat degree, due to illness and was still up at Jesus in 1904-05 reading for the Theology Tripos Part II and was then Captain of the Jesus football team and captained one of the teams in the University Seniors' match. He was a Committee member of the COS Society (St Edmund's Old Boys) in 1904-05.'

15. Bull arrived at a time when the Scripture Union was in existence as the SCCM. This has been discussed in Eddie Prest, *Gems for his Crown: The Story of the Scripture Union in South Africa, 1884-1984* (Cape Town: Scripture Union, 1988).

16. Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America*, see sections on 'race'. Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865-1955, a Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), *passim*; Basil Mathews, *John R. Mott, World Citizen* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1934), pp. 174-75.

tremendous promise and uncommon difficulties. Ethnically, racially and denominationally diverse, Mott and Rouse perceived deep divisions in what professed to be movements reflecting the universal message of an all-embracing Christianity. In fact, linguistic, racial and ritual divisions created cleavages pitting Afrikaner and Anglophone populations against one another and leaving most African and mixed race ('colored') branches out in the cold.¹⁷ Despite the optimism of the WSCF appeal, deep-seated racial fears and ethnic rivalries made South Africa an acutely complex site to build 'Y' unity. Reflecting upon the circumstances that gave rise to the naming of a new YMCA Secretary for the troubled South African field, Ruth Rouse later shared this remembrance:

Dr. Mott's visit showed clearly that one line of advance was imperative. Dutch secretaries agreed that they could not do their best work in English colleges or in the native African institutions: to reach these an English Secretary was needed. The Movement decided to call one, and Dr. Mott secured his support; the impasse seemed complete. But not a few in South Africa, England and America were praying that God would show whom He had chosen. One day there came to me a thought; I went into T's [Tissington Tatlow's] office, and said, 'Have you ever thought of Oswin Bull of Cambridge as a possibility for South Africa?' 'Yes' he said. 'the same idea has come to me.' We cabled our idea to Dr. Mott in New York, and learned, when he replied, that he had already thought of Oswin Bull, and had wired him in Canada, where the latter was at that time, asking him to come to New York, to discuss the call to South Africa. At the next British Summer Conference Oswin Bull said good-bye to the British Movement, told what lay before him, and said he would like the names of any who meant to pray for him. Hundreds responded.¹⁸

Oswin Bull had as his responsibility the task of centralizing a disparate bevy of geographically dispersed, linguistically divided, overwhelmingly 'European' branches. The majority of Boer association members were called 'Dutch-speaking', Afrikaans not yet having gained general parlance as a linguistic or cultural identifier for this

17. Relations between black and mixed race or so-called colored branches are uncertain. Some of the latter such as the 44 Long Street site of the Athlone Boys Club edifice are well over half a century old (personal communication, Millard to Anthony). There are documents indicating that some of these are even older.

18. Ruth Rouse, 'God Is Working His Purpose Out', *Universitas*, 8.3 (May 1928), pp. 11. Of Bull's effectiveness Rouse went on: 'Their prayers have been answered in his work in South Africa, where through all these years he has been a missionary force and a reconciling influence between Dutch and English.' This was from a local South African reprint of an article first published in *The Student Movement* in February 1928.

population. As an Anglophone member of the Church of England it was frequently acutely agonizing for him to face the magnitude of this charge, painfully clear in correspondence with Mott.

Early in 1908, for example, he sent his North American backer this poignant *cri de coeur*:

Something must be done to counteract the ignorant and unreasoning prejudice against missionary work that is almost universal in this Colony. I was prepared for something bad, but it is far worse than I had expected. The whole question of the relation of the white and black races is, as you know, the problem above all others in Natal, and with no one in the country worthy of being considered to be a statesman, and this strong prejudice in addition, the prospects are not exactly promising. I doubt if the world contains a more intricate or difficult problem, but we ought to be able to make a valuable contribution towards its solution. I hope that we may be able to do something by means of mission study, by the development of the native work, and in one or two cases perhaps, by some form of 'school Mission' not unlike the missions supported by many of our large schools in England in the poorer districts of London. For instance, Hilton College, which you visited, has 2500 acres of land on which is a large number of huts containing in all some hundreds of Kafirs. The field is practically unoccupied and the boys could easily support a native evangelist.¹⁹

The year 1908 was still close to the cataclysmic Bambatha Rebellion that swept Natal, between 1906 and 1907 and whose after effects were felt throughout the Province in anti-Zulu fear and recrimination. It is hard to read anything from this period without remaining mindful of the hostile climate of those times. Bull is arguing how difficult this must have been, both for the missionary community as well as African residents of Natal.²⁰

Later, however, Bull was able to keep his emotions in tow, due in part to his tie to Mott. While early days in his South Africa work are not easily reconstructed, O.B. made a noteworthy visit to historic Basutoland in 1909, captured in a recent history:

The first YMCA and YWCA groups in Lesotho were established in 1909 during the visit of a WSCF worker, Mr O. B. Bull. [Bull was on a WSCF tour of the region which began in South Africa in 1908.] In that year, an article by Stephen J. Mokoena of Hermon appeared in Leselinyana indicating that the YMCA had been received with great enthusiasm, that it

19. Bull to Mott, Stellenbosch, Cape Colony, 6 February 1908, WSCF Collection # 46, Box 253, Folder 2119, Correspondence, Bull to Mott, 1906–1909.

20. The classic study of the period remains Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion An Assessment of the 1906–08 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

already had a membership of 30, and that there was also a YWCA group nearby. By 1910, a report from the Church of Basutoland Synod indicated that thriving, YMCA and YWCA groups had been established in many places. From another article in 1910, it appears that Aline Dyke (née Mabile) was the primary coordinator for all these groups in the country.²¹

Bull was evidently an extraordinary find for the YMCA and SCA. A dedicated evangelist, he was also an adept sermonizer, authoring a 1914 text on the Apostle Paul.²²

In 1915 the brilliant Lovedale graduate, preacher, journalist and isiXhosa hymn composer John Knox Bokwe (1855–1922) became Bull's first 'Native' assistant. Some thirty years O.B.'s senior, the distinguished Xhosa-speaking missionary was one of the most highly regarded African church leaders in the country, and despite failing health chaperoned Bull throughout the legion of 'Bantu' training institutions where literate African converts were confronting modernity. The earliest stages of this work are almost totally unknown, perhaps lost to us forever. However, by its second year, after smoothing out salary arrangements for Bokwe, Bull provided detailed descriptions of it and its relationship to what preceded it.²³

A 1916 series of letters to John Mott directly assess the state of play of branch development in what Bull and others designated 'Native' work. These are unusually candid for a person in authority but that is also characteristic of the direct, sometimes blunt Bull style, true to his

21. Craig W. Hincks, *Quest for Peace: An Ecumenical History of the Church in Lesotho* (Moriya, Lesotho: Christian Council of Lesotho, 2009), ch. 13 (courtesy of the author). Much of this was drawn from the Morija periodical *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 23 April 1910. Stephen J. Mokoena's first article from Bongalla, Hermon appeared in *Leselinyana*, 23 October 1909. I wish to thank Stephen Gill of the Morija Museum and Archives for passing this key reference along to me. I am also grateful to Craig Hincks for allowing me permission to quote from his monograph.

22. O.B. Bull, *Studies in the Life and Teaching of the Apostle Paul* (Stellenbosch: Student Christian Association of South Africa, 1914). Some useful letters survive between Bull and John Mott at Yale.

23. J.K. Bokwe tends to be known almost exclusively within the context of his Lovedale education and his prowess as an interpreter of Xhosa religious melodies, principally the songs of Ntsikana or Sicana Gaba, four of which continue to be performed by choral groups to the present day in isiXhosa and English. For more about the milieu in which he functioned, see Austin C. Okigbo, 'Musical Inculturation, Theological Transformation, and the Construction of Black Nationalism in Early South African Choral Music Tradition', *Africa Today* 57(2), pp. 44–65; Grant Olwage, 'John Knox Bokwe, Colonial Composer: Tales about Race and Music', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 131.1 (2006), pp. 1–37.

name. His letters fairly brim with emotion as he feels deeply the gravity of what he has been called upon to do. The greatest, most pressing question he faced was the prospect of division into exclusively English and 'Dutch' associations; coming a close second was the matter of the 'Native' associations. The SCA had branches in senior schools and universities. Afrikaans institutions had chapters of the CSV (*Christelike Studente Vereeniging*) Bull addressed this in a logical, forthright, and surprisingly comprehensive manner, devising not only a plan for African inclusion, after a meeting at Lovedale Presbyterian Institution where a Teachers Christian Association was formed (with Bull as secretary), albeit offering an innovation:

I have confined myself, in writing of the Native work, to the Bantu work, and have said nothing about another very considerable and needy section of our community, for whom we are doing nothing at present, i.e., the Coloured or Eurafrican people. Here too the need is pressing. The Coloured and Native work might be classed together, though the Coloured will need special methods and special work.²⁴

Here and elsewhere it was clear that Bull was vexed by the demands and frustrations that attended this work. He appealed to Mott to let him know where else he might go, fearing that after eight and a half years he may have been totally ineffective and then regained his composure to fight another day. Mastering 'Dutch', Bull preached in it on Sundays. No wonder he had to rely so heavily on his African intermediary. Later that year he had even more to say about the progress of work among African youth and students, writing:

I am deeply impressed by the responsiveness of the Native Teachers. They are very conscious of their need of help and have been pathetically eager in their welcome of anything that we have been able to do for them. And they, far more than the missionaries, have the future of the Church in South Africa in their hands. Their temptations are terrific. We have not to deal with a class who are prejudiced or hard to approach. I am convinced that we can employ two or three men very busily and fruitfully in serving them both during their years of training and through their careers as teachers. With, say 1000 a year for five years behind us I believe that under God we could do a good deal to alter the prospects of the whole missionary enterprise in South Africa.²⁵

24. Bull to Mott, 29 May 1916. World Student Christian Federation Manuscript Collection #46, Box 253 Folder 2120 Correspondence Mott-Bull, 1910-1925. John R. Mott Room Divinity School Library, Yale.

25. Bull to Mott, Cape Town, 18 November, 1916. WSCF #46, Correspondence Bull to Mott, 1910-1925.

By 1917 Bull was required to return to England for service on the home front. Thus Black South African 'Y' work was held in abeyance until the end of hostilities. Back in England, in response to an appeal by Mott, contemplating an Atlantic crossing, Bull's thoughts turned to the matter of sustaining the outreach to the black population:

I am still of the opinion that it would be well if I could succeed, under your advice, in raising some money for the advance of our Native work, over and above what you propose in regard to my own salary and expenses. The point is this, that I do not feel that it would be satisfactory to go back to take hold of that work with no resources other than my own salary and expenses. It needs more than that if it is to have a fair chance. There must be money for printing and publishing, for office expenses, for one or two native agents, for making it possible for people who are valuable to attend conferences or committee meetings ...²⁶

Bull's persistence and persuasiveness and Mott's Christian conscience combined to help assure the support he requested, indeed demanded from the World YMCA head.

Not until near the end of February 1918 was it possible for Bull to return 'home to Cape Town, after about 2 1/4 years'.²⁷ Yet more than time had passed for Bull. Having held off the request of Cape Town's YMCA leaders for him to serve as General Secretary he had been able to work under the banner of the Student Christian Association, using it as a vehicle through which to build the nascent African work. Now, though, he had to report:

When last I wrote you you will recall that it was with the expectation of continuing in the service of the Student's Christian Association with special responsibilities for the Native and Coloured students. But matters have changed somewhat in the intervening period, and while I am as concerned as ever for the development of that work and very eager to have a hand in it, I am expecting to approach it from rather a different angle.²⁸

In the face of renewed pressure Bull had felt compelled to accept the office of Cape Town General Secretary. The experience of observing the rapid growth of the British movement gave him fresh confidence in its possibilities in South Africa, prompting this affirmation: '...I think that it is probable that if the Y.M.C.A. in South Africa can get a new and vigorous life, it will form an easier and a better road along

26. Bull to Mott, Dolton, North Devon, England, 14 November 1917. WSCF#46. Correspondence Bull to Mott, 1910-1925.

27. Bull to Mott, 18 February 1919. WSCF #46, Correspondence Bull to Mott, 1910-1925.

28. Bull to Mott, 18 February 1919.

which to achieve the things which are on my heart for Native and Coloured men, working all the time in close cooperation with the Students' Christian Association.'²⁹ A bittersweet statement at best for O.B. Bull to make; one wonders about how he saw this given his formerly stalwart dedication to expanding the scale of South African SCA and YMCA development. But he was a truthful person whose resolve in the field of 'Bantu' work remained righteous. YMCAs were then widely respected institutions and their headquarters were frequently utilized for communal social gatherings.

Five months later, Bull was bubbling with his old enthusiasm, chagrined that Mott, responding to the parlous pecuniary position of the postwar world had been forced to cut his appropriation, particularly portentous for the present and future of 'Native' work, O.B. nonetheless waxed optimistic. Coming from deliberations with colleagues, he wrote:

I believe that Mr. David Hunter of Lovedale is also intending to write you with regard to the Native work. The position is this: We have come to a point when the possibilities of advance in the Native student work, leading in turn to possibilities in the development of Native City work, are very great indeed. The recent Conference of the special committee to supervise and develop the Native work and they have also placed me upon the General and Executive Committee of the movement for the special purpose of representing the Native work as well as for that of securing the benefits as my experience of the whole field may give.³⁰

Later Bull informed Mott of having heard from Edward Clark Carter, previously director of YMCA War Work in the East 'about a man called Yergan and suggested that he was a man of big enough calibre for work of this kind'. Bull further interrogated Mott: 'I do not know at all what this man is doing at present, but I am wondering whether it is your opinion that he could be of service in this field, either for a visit or a longer period of service.'³¹ Mott, who knew both Carter and Max Yergan, waxed equally effusive:

With reference to Yergan, I have no hesitation in saying that he would be an invaluable helper for you. A few weeks ago Sir Arthur Yapp wrote us with reference to securing, if possible, his services for work in British East Africa. I think it would be well, however, for you to get the claims of your work before him, because it may appeal to him even more strongly than the field in East Africa. I am going to have to take

29. Bull to Mott, 18 February 1919.

30. Bull to Mott, Cape Town, 23 July 1919. WSCF#46 Correspondence Bull to Mott, 1910-1925.

31. Bull to Mott, 23 July 1919.

the liberty of sending him a copy of that part of your letter which pertains to your native work.³²

Yergan, an African-American who had served with Allied troops and carriers in the East African theater during the late war, had along with several of his countrymen of similar racial background indeed distinguished themselves on the field of battle, not only as combatants, but very specifically in their ability to administer and minister to the black levies who had been called to service in the British Imperial War effort against Germany. But Yergan's wartime victory proved short-lived, as the anxious governor of what would become Kenya Colony, Sir Edmund Northey, fearing the potentially incendiary effect of having as a YMCA representative a man of African descent, overruled the YMCA when it attempted to interest Yergan in becoming its first permanent secretary for the territory.

As it happened, Kenya's loss would become South Africa's gain; after a similar period of doubt and official opposition lasting the better part of two years, and after interventions by people as diverse as J.E.K. Aggrey and W.E.B. Du Bois, Yergan was granted entry.

Leaving the States in December 1921, he arrived early in Cape Town on 2 January 1922. Elsewhere I have written extensively about Yergan in South Africa.³³ Bull, however, left some intriguing indications of his *Weltanschauung* in 1923. In a succinct but disarming article prepared for the SVM print organ, its bulletin, Bull shared his thoughts on what in those days liberals called 'racial adjustment'. Here is an especially revealing section of that reflection:

Resources of Spirit

The claim of the Black man upon the White man's patience and sympathy will also become apparent as more people try to realize the

32. Mott to Bull, 19 September 1919. WSCF#46. Correspondence Bull to Mott, 1910-1925.

33. Anthony, *Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior*; 'Max Yergan, Marxism and Mission during the Interwar Era in South Africa', *Social Sciences and Missions*, 22.2 (2009), pp. 257-91; 'Unwritten History: African Work in the YMCA of South Africa', *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 32 (2005), pp. 435-44; 'Max Yergan Encounters South Africa: Theological Perspectives on Race', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34.3 (2004), pp. 235-65; 'Max Yergan in South Africa: A Transatlantic Interaction', in Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley (eds.), *Imaging Home: Class Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Verso, 1994); 'Max Yergan in South Africa: From Evangelical Pan Africanist to Revolutionary Socialist', *African Studies Review* 34 (1991), pp. 27-55.

almost intolerable demands which are made on him for having to pass in a few very short years, from his primitive conditions, into those of twentieth century civilization, a transition over which the white races have taken centuries. To be compelled to move at such lightning speed cannot but be unsteady, and to anyone who takes the only fair test and judges a race by its best and not by its worst, the amount of poise which the Black man has retained is astonishing and eloquent of deep resources of spirit.³⁴

The thrust of the piece is to establish Bull's bona fides as a non-racialist. In this he is surprisingly effective for this particular place and time. We have only documents like this from which to make judgments. In March 1911, Bull married into the esteemed Hofmeyr family, choosing as his spouse Helen Elizabeth Hofmeyr, an elite coupling.

His moderate racial views would appear to closely resemble those of Cape Liberals. In the article he took issue with the canard that in his words, 'Missions spoil the niggers.' His retort was: 'The facts are all the other way, as the reports of every Government Commission will show.'³⁵

The remainder of the 1920s reflect the interplay between Bull and Yergan, the former in his Cape Town headquarters, occasionally venturing out into the field, the latter in the field, eventually making his home in Alice on the Fort Hare campus, the two together shaping the destiny of African SCA and YMCA work in ways blurring the distinction.

In 1928, Bull, reflecting upon developments over two preceding decades, wrote that 'There are certain important things having a direct bearing upon our Native Problem which ought to have been taken in hand long ago', adding that by then they were 'urgent indeed', and that 'They cannot be delayed any longer without detriment to the Christian cause.' These problems included the need of a 'properly organised builded Missionary Council with a permanent office and necessary staff'. In this South Africa lagged behind such other great mission fields as 'Japan, China and the Levant'. By contrast he lamented that the Union was 'still lingering in the embryonic stage of an occasional General Missionary Conference, which effects very little and is of proved inadequacy in dealing with our numerous divisions or promoting the co-ordination and co-operation which have made

34. Bull, 'White and Black', *The Student Volunteer Movement Quarterly Bulletin*, IV.1 (January 1923), p. 6.

35. Bull, 'White and Black', p. 6.

possible a new era of effectiveness in other lands'. Timely action was essential, for

Then the way is wide open for launching a Bantu Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Movement, or better perhaps, two Movements in intimate co-operation. The S.C.A. has, under God, opened this road, and as a result of its work there are young Native men and women all through the country who have tasted the inspiration of this sort of fellowship in their student days. There has been some experimentation also. Bloemfontein's Native township has its Bantu YMCA, and Johannesburg has its excellent Bantu Social Centre. There can be no question of the entire suitability of such work when well thought out and adapted to Bantu Ways, any more than there can be the least doubt that we shall shortly produce an appalling crop of Bantu hooliganism in our big urban centres unless some such counter-influence is set to work. All the testimony to hand is that the younger Natives are being increasingly lost to the church. And yet the writer can recall how eagerly the young men and women in Basutoland responded to the first efforts made to have special gatherings for them nearly twenty years ago. Something more permanent, more comprehensive and on a national scale is long overdue. Is it still possible? We believe that it is, but are not very confident about the matter if it must wait till 1930.³⁶

Generally Missionary Conferences were held from 1904 onward. These were typically white and male. In 1936, toward the end of Bull's YMCA tenure John R. Mott visited the country, establishing the Christian Council of South Africa.³⁷ Such changes occurred within a context of gradual change, ushered in by experiments in coexistence in allied organizations such as the Student Christian Movement and Student Christian Association. Mott was aware of these pioneering endeavors.³⁸

Conclusion

The early years of formal African involvement in the YMCA required an insider who was nevertheless not born in South Africa. For reasons best understood in the light of the long march toward freedom for which that land and people have now become well known, it proved inexpedient to generate an all-embracing national 'Y' movement based

36. 'Overdue', *Universitas* 8.4 (June 1928), pp. 21–22. This unsigned article was clearly authored by Bull.

37. Personal communication, Millard to author.

38. Mott was made aware of this phenomenon in the Annual Reports and correspondence generated by Max Yergan. See Anthony, *Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior, passim*.

strictly upon local resources. Relying upon WSCF founders Luther Wishard and Donald Fraser and later John Mott and Ruth Rouse, South African YMCA and SCA work was itself almost purely a missionary endeavor. Without this it never would have happened.

Oswin Boys Bull was perfectly suited for this duty. Having imbibed Anglican clericalism with his mother's milk and forefather's lineage, it seemed natural for him to follow the path laid out for him by several generations of ecclesiastical Bulls. England's YMCA also proved a good fit for Bull, as he was able to transcend the narrow limits of his denominational orientation in favor of an ecumenical evangelicalism that powerfully strengthened his appeals for Christian Unity when faced with the vehement exclusivity of both Anglophone and Afrikaner chauvinists. Moreover, in spite of the most murderous histories of racism in both his own natal land and his adopted mission field, he stubbornly insisted upon enclosing African and mixed race peoples beneath the fabled YMCA tent. Bull was also the beneficiary of a rare opportunity to visit the US under Carnegie Foundation auspices in 1934, resulting in *Training Africans for Trades*.³⁹

While O.B. Bull's connection to YMCA endeavor in South Africa persisted until the late 1920s, it has been the intention of this article to introduce to a wider audience some of the dynamics that functioned during the embryonic stages of the burgeoning trend. Elsewhere it will be possible to return to this pioneer figure and show his connection to the solidification of an institution whose foundation his pioneering work helped shape. It is hoped that this introduction to this person and his times will encourage others with data of any kind from earlier periods of African engagement with the YMCA to step forward.

One of the great challenges to historicizing YMCA and SCA evolution among all of South Africa's peoples remains a paucity of both primary sources and recollections. While it is clear that credit for the emergence of YMCA and SCA branches is not Bull's alone, as the example of John Knox Bokwe demonstrates, the peculiar relationship that subordinated the more experienced black Bokwe to the junior white Bull, characteristic of the institutional racism that then pervaded and still exists within South African society continues to stifle attempts at reconstructing institutional histories like those of the SCA and YMCA. Even so, just a cursory reading of Bull's correspondence with

39. Bull, *Training Africans for Trades: A Report on a visit to the United States of America and Canada under the Auspices of the Carnegie Corporation Visitors' Grants Committee* (Pretoria, South Africa: Carnegie Visitors Grants Committee, 1935).

Mott reveals an unusual degree of devotion to a non-racial ideal, couched in the cautious interracialism of contemporary 'racial adjustment' ideology, the language of the conciliatory epoch of Booker Taliaferro Washington's Accommodationism, the age too of Oswin Boys Bull. To get past it, one must of necessity go through it. O.B. Bull then must be given his due.

This introductory article was stimulated by research in the various John R. Mott Papers at Yale, the YMCA of the USA Archives, now also known as the Kautz Family Archives in Minnesota, the World Student Christian Federation Archives at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Little seems to have survived within the University of Birmingham's YMCA English National Council archive collection. Finally, the author hopes that it may become possible to gain more direct access to such YMCA and SCA archival evidence as may exist within South Africa. Having made three field research trips to the country that remains possible. Meanwhile, any readers with information on Bull or others in the SCA and YMCA in South Africa are encouraged to make contact.