

**LIBERAL WOMEN IN RHODESIA:  
A REPORT ON THE MITCHELL PAPERS,  
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**

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**KATE LAW  
UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD**

**I**

The Mitchell collection at the Manuscripts and Archives Department of The University of Cape Town (UCT)<sup>1</sup> consists of the papers of Diana Mary Mitchell, a leading white Rhodesian liberal in the 1960s and 1970s as well as private papers of some other politically active Rhodesians, such as Morris Hirsch, Pat Bashford and Allan Savory.

<sup>1</sup>I visited for three weeks between March and April 2010. The department has a comprehensive website, (<http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/index.php?libid=41>) and during the planning of my trip I was in contact with the very helpful head archivist Lesley Hart. Ordering files is simple and the staff are efficient in carrying out research requests. The Manuscripts and Archives department is strong in a number of areas. Perhaps its most important collection is the papers of Wilhelm Bleek (1827-1875). Bleek was German linguist who chronicled the 'language life and folklore' of the now extinct Xam bushmen. Many of Bleek's notebooks have been digitised, alongside the works of his daughter Dorothea Bleek and those of his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd. Whilst I was in Cape Town, descendants of Dorothea Bleek were being interviewed to add to this already rich collection of material (see [www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/index.php?html=/mss/info/collections.htm&libid=41](http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/index.php?html=/mss/info/collections.htm&libid=41)). Another notable collection which will interest the historian and sociologist alike is the District Six Community Papers. Donated by Father Basil van Rensburg in 1986, the papers comprise of court reports, photographs, letters and press clippings which chart the tumultuous forced removal of 60,000 black Africans and so-called coloreds from this Cape Town suburb. The author would like to thank Diana Mitchell, Miriam Dobson, Ian Phimister and Daryl Gowlett for all their help in preparing this piece for publication.

This report presents the Mitchell collection as an instrument to investigate issues of agency by liberal White Rhodesian women in the period 1950-1980, thus aiming to counter some dominant trends in the historiography of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe.

Diana Mitchell was born in Salisbury, Rhodesia, in 1932. Her father was a merchant marine officer and her mother was originally from Australia. She attended Eveline High School in Bulawayo and with financial help from her mother she completed a BA in History at Cape Town University in 1953. Before entering formal party politics, Mitchell ran a “backyard school” which provided schooling for African children who otherwise would have had no access to education. After the announcement of the illegal Declaration of Independence (UDI), in 1965 the Rhodesian Front (RF) closed such schools and Mitchell charges this move as being “the key to my activism.”<sup>2</sup> While Mitchell acknowledges that she “worked voluntarily because I could afford to, my husband was the breadwinner [...] so I could afford to be this so called ‘liberal’ because of my standard of living,”<sup>3</sup> she became heavily involved in parliamentary politics and was one of the founding members of the Centre Party (CP). Yet as was often the fortune of talented women in Rhodesia’s patriarchal political landscape during this period, Mitchell was frequently relegated to speech writing and office management. She unsuccessfully ran for parliament twice, in 1974 and 1977 respectively. Her papers consist of comprehensive minutes, press releases and party directives for the CP, Rhodesia Party (RP) and National Unifying Force (NUF); consequently Mitchell’s papers offer a valuable insight into the spectrum of opposition politics from the mid-1960s through to 1980.

Acquired by UCT in 1990, the Mitchell papers are vast in both size and scope, with material spanning the period 1963-1980. Prior to UCT’s attainment of the papers, Mitchell made the material available to interested academic parties, amongst whom Ian Hancock and Martin Meredith are some of the most prominent figures.<sup>4</sup> During my

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Diana Mitchell, Haywards Heath, 7 December 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Diana Mitchell, Haywards Heath, 7 December 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Ian Hancock, *White Liberals, Moderates and Radicals in Rhodesia, 1953-1980* (London, 1984); Martin Meredith, *The Past Is Another Country: Rhodesia 1890-1979* (London, 1979).

time in Cape Town I was able to work through the collection in its entirety. As my thesis examines political representations of white Rhodesian women from 1950-1980, the material within this archive has proved to be extremely useful. What is particularly striking about the collection, apart from its distinctiveness, is that alongside material relating to opposition politics, it also houses the private papers of important figures such as Morris Hirsch, Pat Bashford and Allan Savory (see below for further details). The transcripts of interviews carried out with prominent African Nationalists—which formed the basis of Mitchell's monograph *African Nationalist Leaders in Rhodesia: Who's Who*<sup>5</sup>—also form a large part of the collection. Consequently, from the diverse material within this collection, Mitchell's papers are of interest to researchers of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, settler nationalisms, opposition politics and the role of women in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe's history more broadly. Considering that the limited historiographical material which examines the position of white Rhodesian women suggests that women had a "lazy existence: playing cards, or tennis, gossiping, drinking tea, shopping, arranging flowers and organising the servants,"<sup>6</sup> Mitchell is the antonym to such ideas as she was one of several women who featured prominently in Rhodesia's political landscape. Consequently, examination of the Mitchell papers will help shed light on a historical area which to date has been largely neglected.

## II

From working with the collection, I have identified several key areas in which the papers are particularly strong. Firstly the documents offer an abundant amount of material which contextualises the emergence of opposition groups. Of particular relevance to my study were the various minutes, records and press releases of the Women's Section of the CP, RP and NUF. There is a remarkable level of continu-

<sup>5</sup>Diana Mitchell, and Robert Cary, *African Nationalist Leaders in Rhodesia: Who's Who* (Salisbury, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Peter Godwin, and Ian Hancock, *Rhodesians Never Die, The Impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia c.1970-1980* (Oxford, 1993), 31.

ity in all of the archive material which directly relates to women's groups in this period. Firstly it is clear that the avenues open to women in parliamentary politics in this period were limited, as there was little evidence of women breaking through into party politics. Such ideas help to reinforce the notion that the public sphere was a masculine construct; and that the women who joined organisations such as the CP, RP and NUF invariably did so as the concerned colonial wives of "liberal" officials, propagating the image of the colonial woman as a middle class philanthropist. The various meetings held by the differing women's sections also served as platforms for party officials to update the members of the Women's Section with party developments as well as reassuring female party members that party officials were "getting on with business." The parochial tone adopted by such speakers is particularly revealing about the ubiquitous attitudes regarding the place of women in Rhodesian politics. Women are described as a "marvellous lot,"<sup>7</sup> who are undoubtedly part of "an elite" who "know that what we are trying to do is right,"<sup>8</sup> yet women are depicted as being wholly passive in the attempt to attain a multi-racial society. Thus the lines between "men's and women's work" are clearly drawn and the presence of an implicit gender code regarding suitable behaviour is clearly discernable.<sup>9</sup> Consequently an examination of the Mitchell papers helps to shed light on gender relations in this period. Indeed, for all that Ian Hancock notes, while "there was a sexual imbalance [...] [in Rhodesian politics – KL] such problems were secondary."<sup>10</sup> Mitchell was initially invited to take part in the Centre Group (later CP) to take the minutes of the meeting. She commented that, while she "wasn't wildly a women's lib type," she did "fight against" gender discrimination.<sup>11</sup> It

<sup>7</sup>BC969/E15.5 Address to the Women's Section of the Centre Party by the Party President T.P.H. Bashford given at the Arcadia Community Centre, 19 September 1973.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>For a monograph which examines the nature of patriarchy within Zimbabwean nationalism, see Horace Campbell, *Reclaiming Zimbabwe The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation* (Claremont, 2003).

<sup>10</sup>Hancock, *White Liberals*, 132.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with Diana Mitchell, Haywards Heath, 7 December 2009.

is therefore interesting to note that while women were the “mainstays of all the modern parties. The white males took precedence and received the credit but the females generally worked harder.”<sup>12</sup>

The Mitchell papers also challenge the historiographical contention that white Rhodesian society was characterised by homogeneity, and allows for a reinterpretation of these studies which have argued that public opinion was wholly galvanised behind the RF.<sup>13</sup> Indeed as Richard Hodder-Williams notes: “It is seriously misleading to think that European electors preserved a monolithic entity; after all, in every general election except one between 1924 and 1965, more than 40 per cent of the voters were against the Rhodesian Front.”<sup>14</sup> By contents alone Mitchell’s papers show that the move to UDI did not necessarily spell the end of Rhodesia’s relative political liberalism, which began under the premiership of Garfield Todd in the 1950s. While the success of “liberal” and reform groups is debatable, in this period it is important not to overlook their very existence. However any attempts to reinterpret this period of Rhodesia’s history through an analysis of liberal organisations can quickly run into problems. Firstly as Ian Hancock notes:

The use of the labels “left” and “right” may cause problems. In a different and more familiar context they describe attitudes towards capitalism or socialism or state intervention. The terms employed here as White Rhodesians used them: to denote attitudes towards race relations and, specifically, on the desirability or otherwise of African political, social and economic advancement.<sup>15</sup>

This position is further complicated when one remembers the contemporary Cold War context in which the terms “liberalism” and the “left” were used. There is also the additional difficulty of analysing such terminology as Mitchell herself noted that “liberalism was the only word we could’ve applied to ourselves [...] liberalism for me

<sup>12</sup>Hancock, *White Liberals*, 132.

<sup>13</sup>See for instance Anthony Verrier, *The Road to Zimbabwe* (London, 1986).

<sup>14</sup>Richard Hodder-Williams, “Party-Allegiance among Europeans in Rural Rhodesia—A Research Note,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 10 (1972), 130.

<sup>15</sup>Hancock, *White Liberals*, 1.

was always a misnomer but it was always a shortcut to saying that we didn't despise blacks."<sup>16</sup> Consequently the contested nature of liberalism in this period has tended to obscure the activities of liberal and reform political groups. As most of the members of opposition groups appeared to be "'wishy washy' liberal[s] [...] [who] weren't demanding instant power to blacks,"<sup>17</sup> the significance of their attempts to reform Rhodesian society has been overlooked. From an analysis of the Mitchell papers, it appears that for many "liberals" the desire to reach a settlement with Britain and to gradually extend the franchise to Black Africans was the end point of their "liberalism"; indeed by the late 1970s political groups which accepted that black majority rule was inevitable did so with a sense of fatalism. This attitude is clearly discernable in a campaign speech from the NUF candidate for Salisbury, Penny Smith. Smith explained that she was standing in the "election no[t] because I'm a liberal, not even because I'm an idealist, but because I'm a realist. I have come to accept that majority rule is inevitable and there is no way that we whites can ignore that fact."<sup>18</sup>

Other areas of note within Mitchell's papers are material relating to the Committee to Organise Support for a Settlement (C.O.S.S). Headed by businessman Robert Cary, this group had the interests of Rhodesia's private sector at heart and attempted to mobilise African support for a settlement after the results of the Pearce Commission. In a letter to Mitchell, Cary wrote that "there is no place in Rhodesia for a multi-racial political party," as he hoped that "a new basically European (though with membership open to Africans) party will emerge."<sup>19</sup> Consequently it is clear to see that "reformers" such as Cary were interested in settlement as a pathway to maintain white political hegemony rather than as a means of extending African enfranchisement. While my research interests mean that my focus is on the women's sections of the respective parties, use of the Mitchell

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Diana Mitchell, Haywards Heath, 7 December 2009.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>BC969/G7.2 Speech to be delivered by Penny Brown, NUF Candidate Salisbury, 25 August 1977.

<sup>19</sup>BC969/C2 Letter from Robert Cary to Diana Mitchell, 22 March 1972.

papers could build a comprehensive picture of opposition politics in this period. The papers are particularly strong on policy directives, AGM minutes, press releases, regional correspondences, newsletters, speeches, and electoral material for all three opposition parties.

### III

As previously mentioned, the Mitchell collection also houses private papers of Morris Hirsch, Pat Bashford, and Allan Savory, all of whom were important figures in opposition politics throughout the period. Morris Hirsch had helped draft Rhodesia's 1961 constitution and had served as an MP under Sir Edgar Whitehead. He was a source of political inspiration to Mitchell and was a founding member of the RP. Pat Bashford was a tobacco farmer who was a founding member of the CP, chairing the party for six years. Unlike the overly intellectual Hirsch, Bashford attempted to appeal to ordinary voters. His assertion that he would "sooner be at home playing cricket" than taking part in politics but felt compelled to pull Rhodesians "out of this sentimental dream world [...] to face realities" was a typical example of his oratorical style.<sup>20</sup> Allan Savory is by far the most complex figure in this picture. Originally RF MP for Matobo, he crossed the floor in 1972 and continued to be a controversial figure. As the *Financial Gazette* reported, Savory was "an undoubted rebel-rouser with potentially greater gifts [than Hirsch], but with a flair for indiscretion in public speaking that may prove his obituary."<sup>21</sup> Young, energetic and charismatic, Savory highlighted the profile of the opposition parties he worked within whilst also alienating the more conservative elements of the groups. Indeed, when both Hirsch and Savory ran for the leadership of the RP in 1973, Hirsch left the party refusing to serve under Savory.

A large proportion of Hirsch, Bashford, and Savory's papers are in the form of letters. While some historians may question the validity of such archival materials, Miriam Dobson argues that the study of

<sup>20</sup>BC969/ F5.12, Speech by Pat Bashford, n.d.

<sup>21</sup>BC969/ F15.2 *Financial Gazette*, 1 June 1973.

letters allows us to understand how “individuals create their own place in the world.”<sup>22</sup> Consequently through an examination of the papers of all three men, it is clear just how divided the “left” were and exemplifies the factious nature of opposition politics within this period.

#### IV

At this point it seems pertinent to examine the archival construction and subsequent limitations of the Mitchell Papers. Thanks to the efforts of women’s historians and feminist scholars over the past thirty years, the boundaries of the archive have been dramatically redrawn. As Antoinette Burton notes, the inherent problem regarding the form of the archive is instantly complicated due to the presence of the “new imperial history.” For Burton, the “archive itself should be subject to continuous suspicion and radical doubt.”<sup>23</sup> Central to such a suggestion is the issue of archival evidence; “what counts, what doesn’t, where it is housed, who possesses it, and who lays claim to it.”<sup>24</sup> While Burton argues for the redefinition of the archive in relation to the domestic (i.e. female) interior in light of the often marginal relationship women and women’s history has had to the archive, the Mitchell Papers bypass some of these concerns. As the papers constitute a more “formal” type of archive, as they are based on political ephemera, rather than documents which conform to a cultural history code, they are of equal importance to the “white, male and middle class model” of the archive.<sup>25</sup>

It is also interesting to reflect how Mitchell’s papers relate to the intersectional problems surrounding the archive in relation to state, power and knowledge. While the Foucauldian notion regarding the

<sup>22</sup>Miriam Dobson, “Letters,” in: Miriam Dobson, and Benjamin Ziemann (ed.), *Reading Primary Sources—The Interpretation of texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History* (London, 2009), 64.

<sup>23</sup>Antoinette Burton, “Thinking Beyond Boundaries: Empire, Feminism and the Domains of History,” *Social History* 26 (2001), 66.

<sup>24</sup>Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford, 2003), 138.

<sup>25</sup>Burton, “Thinking Beyond,” 68.



connections between power and knowledge gains transparency in the space of the archive,<sup>26</sup> I would argue that the contents of the Mitchell papers in some ways surpass this concern because of the virulent rejection of Rhodesian history in modern day Zimbabwe. While “coming to terms with the past has emerged as a grand narrative of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries,”<sup>27</sup> I would question how the narratives of white Rhodesian women can be part of such a discourse when it is remembered that after 1980, many whites were now “orphans of the Empire,” featuring in the “loser’s” narrative in the context of national history.<sup>28</sup> As Cheryl McEwan argues in relation to post-apartheid South Africa: “The fundamental issue for archiving [...] is ensuring that those previously denied agency [...] play a full part in the documenting of their lives.”<sup>29</sup> At one level while white women’s historical subordination may seem inconsequential compared to the treatment received by black men and women, I would nonetheless argue that it is vital for imperial and women’s historians alike to engage with material such as that presented in the Mitchell papers, to ensure that the history of white women in Rhodesia is not omitted from Zimbabwe’s national narrative.

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<sup>26</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972).

<sup>27</sup>Cheryl McEwan, “Building a Postcolonial Archive? Gender, Collective Memory and Citizenship in Post-apartheid South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (2003), 740.

<sup>28</sup>Karin Alexander, “‘Orphans of the Empire’: An Analysis of White Identity and Ideology Construction in Zimbabwe,” in: Brian Raftopoulos, and Tyrone Savage (ed.), *Zimbabwe Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Cape Town, 2004), 193-213.

<sup>29</sup>McEwan, “Building a Postcolonial Archive?” 743.

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