

BERNARD NSOKIKA FONLON, 1924–86

Sally Chilver writes:

Professor Bernard Fonlon died in Ottawa on 27 August 1986. He was on a visit to Canada to receive an honorary degree from Guelph University. Between 1971 and 1984 he had been head of the Department of Negro-African Literature at Yaoundé University, and until 1980 editor of the Cameroon cultural review *Abbia*, which he had helped to found in 1962. He had also served on the editorial board of *Presence Africaine*.

Fonlon was born in Nso' in the northwest province of Cameroon. He attended various, mostly Catholic, elementary schools and received his secondary education in the College of Christ the King at Onitsha. He intended to join the priesthood but, after six years of study at Bigard Memorial Seminary, was told by his superior that he was not 'suitable' for major orders. He took this reverse without bitterness, although he vowed to maintain his vows of chastity so that he could be free for any task. After a spell of teaching at his old school, he was enabled to study abroad and left for Ireland in 1954. He took a first degree in modern languages at the National University of Ireland, followed by courses at the Sorbonne, a graduate education diploma at Oxford, and, finally, obtained a doctorate at NUI for a thesis on Black protest literature in English and French.

Already a committed reunificationist, he returned home in 1961 and was soon caught up in politics and administration, first employed on special missions at the presidency, then as Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Transport and Telecommunications and Minister of Public Health. He left the government in 1971, refusing offers of employment with international organisations, and returned, with relief, to university life and teaching. At Yaoundé he built up a lively department, setting a noteworthy example by his conscientious supervision of and easy accessibility to students.

His public achievements include the inauguration of Cameroon Airlines, the policy of bilingualism in education, and the extension of water supplies to smaller towns. Although he was much in demand at home and abroad, he retained his simplicity of manner, living without ostentation and speaking his mind when he thought the single party, of which he remained an active and important member, had erred. Probably he will be chiefly remembered for his absolute moral integrity, shaped by his private study of St. Augustine of Hippo and John Henry, Cardinal Newman. He was buried at the Kumbo Cathedral Cemetery on 1 September 1986, next to his fellow seminarian Father Aloysius Wankuy, who had remained a close friend. A huge crowd lined the streets, as if for a state funeral, which, in some respects, it was.