3 The Coming of the Europeans

The most potent foreign influence on the Press in Africa was the coming of the Daily Mirror Group after the Second World War. Though there is today a generation of Africans who know nothing of the nationalist fervour of the forties and fifties, there is also an older generation of educated Africans who lived through those days. It is difficult to find any one among them who has anything but respect for the way that the Mirror Group conducted itself in West Africa. All the credit for this must go to a rather strange, aloof Anglo-Irishman, Cecil King, who seemed an improbable choice as the person to take West Africa into the modern post-war newspaper age but whose record, and the record of almost all the fairly small group of Europeans he brought with him from Britain in 1947, is acknowledged as unblemished by the most fervent anti-colonists still alive in West Africa.

Cecil King says in his Strictly Personal that the idea for the Mirror’s African adventure began with a visit shortly after the war from somebody in the British Colonial Office. He suggested it might not be a bad thing for the Mirror to have a look at West Africa with a view to doing business there. This seems improbable. With the fires of African nationalism beginning to fan all along the West Coast and with men like Zik in Nigeria and Nkrumah in the Gold Coast setting a pace which was leaving British officials breathless, the idea that an organisation which produced a razzmatazz tabloid like the Daily Mirror (which had given the British Government so much trouble during the War that it was
almost banned) should enter West Africa seems totally out of character with what Whitehall would have wanted. King says the official from Whitehall saw the chairman of the Mirror Group, Guy Bartholomew.

There is an alternative version from David Williams, the British editor of the magazine West Africa, which seems more likely. Williams says that the Mirror had made a lot of money during the war and was wondering what to do with it. This was before the days of diversification, when newspaper empires began to include in their superstructure everything from television stations to pie factories. Thus, when the Mirror looked around for expansion, their reasoning was simple; they must produce newspapers, they must be in English and they should have good growth prospects.

None of these conditions seemed likely prospects for post-war Britain, so the Mirror looked to the Empire on which there was no reason at that time to think the sun would ever set.

King was put in charge of the project and was to work very closely with David Williams for many years. Twenty-nine years later, when the Mirror Group finally left West Africa, they had established something which even the military dictatorships of that part of the West Coast may never totally eradicate.

The Mirror Group’s philosophy in Africa from the start was exactly the same as its philosophy in producing British newspapers: Will the reader be interested in this?

King toyed with the idea of starting an entirely new venture, but came round to the view that it was better to re-vamp an existing newspaper than start a new one. He settled on the Daily Times in Lagos which had two off-shoot magazines, West Africa and the West African Review. Between them, the three publications were making £2,000 a year and King bought the triple package for £46,000 towards the end of 1947.

His recipe for the new Daily Times was direct and simple; it must not take sides in the political gang war; it must cater for Africans and be edited by an African (if this sounds unoriginal, then one only has to look at many other parts of British Africa to realise how novel it was), and finally it should print more local news. In fact he turned the Daily Times into an African-style London Daily Mirror tabloid—but minus the sex. This was in no way a reflection on his somewhat conservative, even prudent nature which had always seemed out of character with the flavour