
The Bams of Grasslands Farm, A Family History

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Publisher: Jacana Publishers

ISBN: 9781991220578

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2025/n33a9>

Below is Morrow's description of Grasslands and surrounds, the 'emotional heartland' of the Bam family. It reminds me of the opening lines of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948, p. 1).

"The most dramatic approach to Grasslands Farm is from Tsolo village. Coming from the west, take the steep and stony road southwards through a rocky kloof covered in euphorbias and aloes, a terrain reminiscent of the Xhosa wars of resistance. At the summit of the pass a magnificent view opens of Goqwana, a wide grass covered valley. Grasslands farm occupies this valley, the home for nearly 140 years to the Bam family...?"

Introduction

This book covers four generations of the Bam family, from 1880 to 2011. It is based on meticulous research and extensive interviews with the family and friends. Morrow seamlessly integrates the interviews into the narrative. What emerges is a nuanced, empathetic, non-judgmental and accessible history.

My review considers one aspect of the Bam family's history: education. It deals with not only formal education, but also with the educative aspects of their initiatives in challenging and improving society.

Before I begin with this review, I suggest that the book includes a Bam family tree. Considering that Lockington and Temperance had six children (including Brigalia and Fikile), the permutations in terms of wives, husbands, partners and children are seemingly endless. It is difficult to keep track of them in the main text.

The book also needs one or two illustrated maps. One could focus on the Transkei showing specific towns and villages such as Idutywa, Tsolo and Goqwana, a few well-known mission schools. Another could show the Transkei in relation to the rest of South Africa, highlighting Johannesburg (Sophiatown) and Pretoria (Atteridgeville).

Interpreters and patriarchs

An Mpondomise interpreter, Edward Solomon Bam, aided the colonial and imperial forces on the Eastern Frontier in putting down the Mpondomise rebellion of 1880. In recognition of his services, Edward Bam was granted 500 morgens of land. This became Grasslands Farm.

Bam's son Chalmers turned it into a thriving enterprise. He was a benevolent patriarch, and a wealthy man by Transkei standards. Also, an interpreter, Bam was highly educated, and part of a small group of a Transkei elite. Concerns of this elite, including Bam's son Lockington, were voiced in the Bunga³ and in African opposition movements, as members of the 1935 All-Africa Convention. Their main concern was the increasing harshness of segregation legislation embodied in the 'Hertzog Bills'.⁴ Education was key to qualifying for the franchise, and the franchise was under threat.

Missions and education

Education was crucial to the Bam family, whose members favoured the education of both boys and girls. Chalmers's daughter-in-law, Temperance Bam was the most passionate of all the family regarding education and sent her children to the best mission schools. This was possible because the extended Bam family took on the responsibility for nieces and nephews, grandchildren and so forth.

The Bam family were devout Christians, as well as staunch Anglicans. There have been many debates about the pros and cons of 'mission education'. Morrow points out aspects of what he calls 'structural racism' in the schools, such as lower salaries for black teachers and separation of the races in church and at meal times. The author argues that ex-pupils appreciated this education, but were critical of it. It has, however, been difficult to find ex-pupils who were critical of it. Perhaps one could argue that Mandela and others of his generation took from their education what they needed and were not merely empty vessels.

³ United Transkeian Territories General Council. It was controlled by white officials, however, allowed its members to voice their concerns about the policy of segregation and other issues closer to home.

⁴ Proposed laws regarding land, urban areas and the franchise.

Morrow would agree with what a colleague of mine once said, that the difference between the mission education and Bantu education was that the former educated its pupils to transcend their circumstances, whereas the latter to accept them.

Siblings

For the remainder of this review, I concentrate on Fikile and Brigalia, who had different experiences of education. Fikile went to stay with relatives in Sophiatown, completing both primary (St Cyprians) and high school (St Peters) there. He loved the jazzy bustle of Sophiatown, as well as participating in early morning mass with Father Huddleston.

Brigalia remained at Grasslands, attending high school as a boarder at Shawbury Methodist mission school and then Lovedale, where she came top of her class and qualified as a teacher. At Shawbury, Brigalia participated in a food strike against inedible food. Many of the pupils attended church not only to worship, but also to hear about the food strikes. While at Lovedale, Brigalia founded an ANC Women's group, after she heard about the 1952 Defiance Campaign. She graduated as a teacher the same year.

In 1950 Temperance Bam joined the Pholela Centre for community based primary health care. Brigalia visited her and was so impressed with the social workers there that she switched to studying social work. She did her final practical year at Pholela.

After some time working as a social worker, Brigalia joined the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), where she worked for nine years, setting up girls clubs in Natal. She made rapid progress up the ranks and made her first international contacts here.

In 1967 Brigalia took up a post in the World Council of Churches. Here she worked tirelessly to move the Council towards addressing both racism and sexism, inside and outside the Council, including Southern Africa. Brigalia was crucial to the development of the Council's Programme to Combat Racism (PCR), that underpinned the Council's stand on racism for the next 26 years. This included boycotts and disinvestment from racist businesses and the funding of liberation movements.

Brigalia found that while men generally supported the Council's stand on racism, they had a 'begrudging and tentative approach to women'. A born educator, Brigalia threw herself into running women only workshops, and set up women's meetings prior to major conferences. Her dream was to found a broad-based women's movement, with women from all parts of the world, particularly the Third World. Morrow sums up her achievements:

During her time at the WCC, she shifted the organisation's thinking about the treatment of women in the Church and indeed outside it, she was central to moving the approach from theological, psychological and sociological to one that was more activist.

The mark of a true educator is an ability to move a person or organisation to think differently and to confront issues in new ways. Brigalia certainly did this.

In all her endeavours, and despite her loyalties laying with the ANC, Brigalia was inclusive, encouraging and available. Her focus on women and inclusive approach earned the wrath of the ANC's Women's Section, who accused her of wanting to start a women's political party with funds from the WCC.

Brigalia left the Council in 1979, a casualty of a rule limiting members serving to nine years. She worked with the YWCA and trade unions until she returned to South Africa in 1988.

In the 21 years Brigalia was residing out of South Africa, she kept in touch with Temperance, who had retired to Grasslands and had turned it into a thriving farming community again.

On her return, Brigalia became Deputy Director of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). A few months later, a bomb planted by the apartheid forces, exploded at Khotso house, the head office of the SACC. Despite the destruction, Brigalia encouraged people to keep working and made sure that the Council kept in touch with its nationwide branches. In the turbulent years between 1990 and 1994, Brigalia kept the SACC on track.

In South Africa Brigalia is mostly well-known for her role in 1994, as Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). She made use of many churchmen and women during her time at the IEC, later describing her approach as influenced by her 'pastoral theology'.

As Brigalia's horizons had broadened, those of Fikile shrank.

While Fikile was studying Law at UCT, he joined the Marxist Non-European Unity Movement, (NEUM) and its military wing, the National Liberation Front. There were several Unity Movement groups in the Eastern Cape, however, he was influenced mainly by one of the founders of the Movement, Neville Alexander. In 1962 Fikile and other members were arrested on the grounds of 'constructive sabotage', which meant that they had planned to carry out sabotage, but never implemented it. Fikile was sentenced to 10 years on Robben Island.

On the Island, Fikile and his fellow NEUM prisoners overcame their exclusive approach and worked with ANC prisoners in teaching and supporting one another. Many studied for undergraduate degrees, including Fikile

Fikile was released in 1974 and banished to the soon to be independent Transkei. Here he did his articles with the law practice of the Unity Movement's Richard Canca in Idutywa where he completed a BProc and LLB through UNISA. Despite Fikile's restrictions, he was able to visit Steve Biko in Ginsberg, where he became Biko's friend and advisor. In retrospect, Fikile said he enjoyed working at Idutywa, as the work was much more varied and interesting than that in mainstream law firms

Fikile visited Grasslands farm often and became familiar with basic agrarian problems. In 1975 he set up the Grasslands Development Project, which aimed to create a communal farm to benefit the peasants who worked there. This approach was based on the Kibbutz system in Israel. However, the many problems associated with the area's grinding poverty and the loss of funding put paid to the Project.

During the upheavals of 1980s Grasslands provided shelter for militants on the run from the apartheid regime. Temperance, who was permanently at Grasslands advised and protected them.

In 1986, after a disappointing time in mainstream law firms, Fikile joined the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) as its head office in Port Elizabeth. Here the law was used as an instrument of Justice, challenging the legal structures of apartheid. Fikile thrived in this environment, defending ordinary people as well as educating them about their rights.

As the political terrain changed, Fikile was in high demand. He left the LRC in 1992. Along with Brigalia, Fikile was asked to be on the Board of the SABC, as it changed from being an apartheid mouthpiece. He occupied many other prestigious positions.

In 1995 Fikile was made Judge President of the Land Claims Court (LCC). Even though he was now living in Johannesburg, he brought with him wide experience in agricultural issues, including the complexities of land and its control. Fikile was cautious to say that land restitution should go hand in hand with ensuring that people could make a living out of it.

The court moved from place to place, with Fikile talking to all sides of a dispute on site. His style, as commented by a colleague, was interventionist rather than presiding and handing down judgements. Indeed, Fikile was responsible for a new kind of indigenous jurisprudence. He was altogether a humane and creative individual.

Conclusion

Every time I read about the Bam family, I learn something new. The book tells a fascinating story, one that is full of surprises. A review cannot do it justice, hence, I urge readers to buy it and enjoy the journey it takes you on.