

Robert M. Wren:

An Inventory of His Africa Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator	Wren, Robert M., 1928-1989
Title	Robert M. Wren Africa Papers
Dates:	1963, 1968-1989
Extent:	10 boxes (5 linear feet)
Abstract	The papers document Nigerian and other African literature and society. Correspondence, diaries, manuscripts and other materials were created and collected by Professor Wren while living in Africa as a Fulbright scholar and while teaching at the University of Houston.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-04597
Language:	English
Access	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition	Gift, 1991 (G8745)
Provenance	After Robert Wren's death in 1989, Bernth Lindfors, a friend and colleague of Wren's and Professor of English at The University of Texas at Austin, feared that Wren's "African papers" would be lost. He suggested to Wren's sister, Nancy Wren Harris, that she make a gift of the papers to the Harry Ransom Center. She agreed and transferred the papers to Lindfors in late 1990, who deposited them at the Center in January 1991.
Processed by	Jane Fleming, Sheryl Fowler, John P. Rees, Michael Swann, 1995; Stephen Mielke, 1997
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Robert Meriwether Wren was born February 21, 1928, to Clark Campbell and Mamie (Culpeper) Wren in Washington, DC. He earned his BA at the University of Houston (1954), and his MA (1956) and PhD (1965) at Princeton University. He initially focused his research on Northern European theater, but in 1968 shifted his interests to African literature. Wren held academic appointments as Instructor in English, Douglas College at Rutgers University (1956-1960); Instructor in Drama, State University of New York at Binghamton (1960-1962); Instructor in English, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois (1964-1965); and at the University of Houston as Assistant Professor (1965-1968); Associate Professor (1968-1979); and Professor (1979-1989).

Wren was twice a Senior Fulbright Lecturer in Nigeria. His first appointment from 1973 to 1975, at the University of Lagos, was at the invitation of writer and English Department Chair, J. P. Clark. Wren accepted the appointment after originally seeking to lecture in South Africa, where he was denied a visa as an undesirable person. He spent his second Fulbright fellowship at the University of Ibadan from 1982 to 1983.

At Lagos, Wren taught Shakespeare, American and African literature, and lectured occasionally on Robert Frost (who he met in 1955). Outside of teaching, Wren traveled extensively, produced a play, and directed a Nigerian opera. He wrote fiction, including an unpublished novel, and became interested in the work of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. His interest in Nigerian writers' adaptation of British English usage and his attempt to understand the cultural context of Achebe's *Arrow of God* led to his book *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe* (Three Continents Press: Washington, DC, 1980). While at Lagos, he also developed a working relationship with J. P. Clark, the subject of his second book, *J. P. Clark* (Bernth Lindfors, ed. Twayne's World Authors Series, G. K. Hall: Boston, 1984). During his stay in Ibadan, Wren conducted interviews and produced extensive notes for his book *Those Magical Years: The Making of Nigerian Literature: 1948-1966* (Three Continents Press: Boston, 1991).

In addition to his books on African literature, Wren published numerous articles on American and African literature, European Renaissance and 17th century theater and religion. He also wrote fiction under the pen name Robert Campbell. *Singularities*, an anthology of short fiction, was published by Acolyte Press (Amsterdam) in 1989. At the time of his death, he was reportedly working on a manuscript on homosexuality in 18th century England.

Wren had a strong interest in tennis and sponsored several Nigerian tennis players from secondary school through college. He was a member of the International Federation for Theater Research, the Malone Society, African Studies Association (Program Director 1976-1977), Western Association of Africanists (President 1977-1979), and served on the editorial board of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. In the late 1980s he served on the steering committee of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA).

Wren was killed June 11, 1989, when a Scenic Air Tours plane crashed in Hawaii. He was visiting Hawaii prior to taking a Fulbright fellowship in Indonesia.

Scope and Contents

Correspondence, diaries, creative works, printed materials, photographs, financial records, and one audio tape illustrate Robert Wren's affinity for Nigerian culture and literature. The papers document his stays in Nigeria (1972-1975, 1982-1983) where he conducted research on Nigerian literature and also created works of fiction. The papers also document his involvement in other artistic endeavors, such as playwriting and production, and his activities as a participant in Nigeria's society and culture. Also visible in these materials are Wren's relationships with Nigerian public figures, including authors Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe. The papers do not reflect Wren's activities in the United States, and only minimally document Wren's academic career as a professor of English at the University of Houston. The papers are organized into three series: I. Works, 1968-1988 (5 boxes); II. Correspondence, 1967-1989 (4 boxes); and III. Other Writers, 1963-1979 (1 box).

The bulk of the papers consist of diaries, research notes, printed materials, and writings by Wren located in the Works series. These materials include notes from research concerning Nigerian writers (1982) and notecards from interviews (1982-83). These notes formed the basis of Wren's last published book *Those Magical Years: The Making of Nigerian Literature, 1948-1966*. Wren's study of Nigerian writers and culture is further revealed in collections of newspaper articles and other printed works (1968-1988) such as *The Umuahian*, edited by Chinua Achebe, and a playbill of *The Masquerade*, directed by Wren in association with the play's author J. P. Clark in 1974. Also present are articles and fiction and non-fiction works by Wren, as well as materials that he edited. Especially noteworthy is the holograph manuscript, edited by Wren, of Amos Tutuola's *The Wild Hunter*.

Extensive correspondence, dating from 1967 to 1989, is mostly personal in nature and documents Wren's concern for political events in Nigeria and the United States. Professional and financial materials are also represented in the Correspondence series to a lesser extent. Correspondents include Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark, and Isador Okpewho. A full list of correspondents appears at the end of this inventory.

The smallest series, Other Writers, contains creative works by others, such as Chinua Achebe and Peter Nwana, with the exception of materials by and concerning Amos Tutuola, which are located in the Works series following Wren's original arrangement.

Series Descriptions

Series I. Works, 1968-1988, undated (5 boxes)

This series contains works produced by and collected by Wren. All materials in this series relate to Nigeria, except for drafts of short stories written by Wren in five notebooks. The series is divided into several subseries: Diaries, Short Stories and Non-Fiction, Amos Tutuola, and Research Materials

The Diaries subseries includes two separate drafts of computer printout diaries. Handwritten diary pages from December 1972 to April 1973 were found in a correspondence file and transferred to the diary subseries. Except for sixteen pages from the period in between his stays in Nigeria (1975-1981), the diaries record the daily activities of living and teaching in Nigeria, as well as Wren's thoughts about the country's political situation. These are the only records of his first visit to Nigeria in 1968 and are arranged chronologically.

Nineteen short stories in five notebooks reveal an interest in homosexuality. The story "Billy" continues from the first notebook to the second one, but the other stories seem to be separate works and none of the stories are related to Africa. A diary entry and a letter to the *New Nigerian* are found at the beginning of the second and the end of the third notebooks, respectively. In addition to the notebooks, the Short Stories and Non-Fiction subseries holds one folder containing fiction and non-fiction works, a short story, and several professional articles on Achebe, Nigerian literature, and the African Writers Series.

The Tutuola subseries was titled and arranged by Wren and includes materials dealing with Amos Tutuola's visit to the University of Texas at Austin as a speaker. Tutuola was in residence at the University of Iowa under the auspices of Paul Engle and the International Writers Program at the time. These files contain correspondence between Wren, Engle, and Tutuola, photographs of Wren and Tutuola taken in Austin (and of Wren and Chinua Achebe), newspaper clippings and press releases about Tutuola, and a taped interview with Achebe. Also present is Tutuola's manuscript *The Wild Hunter*, and information regarding Wren's involvement in the sale of Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard* manuscript to the HRC. In addition, this subseries contains typed manuscripts of stories Wren edited for *Yoruba Folktales*.

The Research Materials subseries contains a two-volume manual on African Pidgin English, book reviews, press clippings, a partial transcript of an interview (participants unknown) and other miscellaneous materials. Also included is a box of notecards Wren created from interviews with Nigerian writers, from interviews with their British professors, and from Nigerian reference sources. This information was for a book Wren was writing about the literary heritage of the University of Ibadan.

Series II. Correspondence, 1967-1989 (bulk 1972-1975, 1982-1983) (4 boxes)

Originally interfiled, Wren's correspondence and financial records were separated into subseries as indicated. The bulk of the material was created during or immediately surrounding his stays in Nigeria. Personal correspondence with his sisters and sister-in-law and their families, and with colleagues at the University of Houston predominate, filling three of the four boxes in the series. Wren's personal correspondence in the 1980s is somewhat more revealing of both his personal and professional activities than that from the 1970s. Wren's interest in and sponsorship of Nigerian tennis players is reflected, and there are insights into the political, financial and practical complexities of life in Nigeria.

While professional correspondence is sketchy, a reading of the personal correspondence improves insight into Wren's professional interests and activities during these periods. One folder of professional correspondence titled "African Studies Association Meeting;" contains letters maintained as a separate file by Wren. These materials document his activities as chair of a 1983 panel on the oral and epic narrative traditions in African literature. Of note in the professional correspondence is an enclosure from a June 15, 1982 letter to John Ferguson that outlines Wren's work on the book *Those Magical Years: The Making of Nigerian Literature, 1948-1966*.

Financial correspondence and records mostly reflect Wren's attempts to resolve problems, particularly those created by Nigerian bureaucracy or the communication difficulties created by his residence in Nigeria.

As originally maintained by Wren, the incoming and outgoing correspondence is interfiled chronologically, except where, as frequently occurs, incoming mail was filed with Wren's reply or his related correspondence. A number of newspaper clippings and newsletters originating in the United States were originally in the correspondence files but were moved to Series I. Subseries D. Research Materials, as they could not be identified as enclosures to any specific letter.

The Notes subseries contains materials found in the correspondence files that could not be linked to individual letters. These materials consist primarily of quickly struck personal notes, address labels, addresses of friends, and some research notes taken from various Nigerian newspapers.

Series III. Other Writers, 1963-1979 (1 box)

This series consists of two fictional works by Chinua Achebe and Peter Nwana, several articles by John Ferguson relating to African and Nigerian literature and drama, and printed materials collected by Wren during research. These materials consist of student papers from Bernth Lindfors' 1971 South African Literature class at the University of Texas at Austin, professional papers on Nigerian writers, a bibliography of contributions to Nigerian periodicals compiled by Bernth Lindfors, and other papers on African literature.

Index Terms

Subjects

University of Houston. Dept. of English.

University of Ibadan. Dept. of English.

African fiction (English).

Authors, African.

Authors, Nigerian.

Places

Nigeria--Social life and customs.

Document Types

Christmas cards.

Photographs.

Diaries.

First drafts.

Postcards.

Sound recordings.

Series I. Works, 1968-1988, undated

Subseries A. Diaries

Holograph, Dec. 1972 - Apr. 1973 **box 1 folder 1**

Computer Printouts

Nigeria 1-7, undated **box 1 folder 2**

Nigeria 8-14, undated **folder 3**

Nigeria 15-24, undated **folder 4**

1968-Jan. 1973 **folder 5**

Jun. 1973-Mar. 1975 **folder 6**

Mar. 1975-Oct. 1982 **folder 7**

Oct. 1982-Jun. 1983 **folder 8**

Subseries B. Short Stories and Non-Fiction

"Billy," "Movies Star," "Evand Simon," "tennis star" **box 2
folder 1**

"Billy" **folder 2**

"One Good Work" **folder 3**

"CMA," "War," "Rodney," "Jerry Bell," "PBI" **folder 4**

"Dieu," "JC & CK," "A.V.M.," "Island" **folder
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Materials edited by Wren; fiction and non-fiction by Wren, undated **folder 6**

Subseries C. Amos Tutuola

Correspondence, Jul. 1983-Dec. 1984, May 1987-Dec. 1988 **box 2
folder 7**

Holograph manuscript, *The Wild Hunter* **box 3 folder
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Typed manuscripts, "Ade, the Traitor," "A Short Biography of Yaniro," "A Short Biography of Tortoise," "The Rich Husbandman and His Odd-Looking Pawn," "The Village Witch Doctor," "The Greedy Tortoise and the Orise-Oko," "Remember the Day After Tomorrow," "Rere, the Disobedient Son," "The Duckling Brothers and Their Disobedient Sister," "Ajao and the Active Bone," "Don't Pay Bad for Bad," "Akanke and the Jealous Pawnbroker" **folder 2**

Computer Printouts (edited by Wren), "The Rich Husbandman and His Odd-Looking Pawn," "Ade, the Traitor," "A Short Biography of Tortoise," "Ajao and the Active Bone," "Don't Pay Bad for Bad," "Akanke and the Jealous Pawnbroker" **folder 3**

Notes, undated **folder 4**

Printed material, 1983 **folder 5**

Photographs, [1983] **folder 6**

Audio taped recording of interview between Wren and Chinua Achebe, undated **folder 7**

Subseries D. Research Materials

An Introduction to African Pidgin English

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Volume II **folder 2**

Book reviews, ca. 1980-1983 **folder 3**

AF Press Clips, 1987, 1988 **folder 4**

Miscellaneous, 1974-1986 **folder 5**

Notecards from interviews with Nigerian writers and British professors, and from Nigerian reference sources, 1982-1983 **box 5**

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May-Aug. 1973	folder 6
Sep.-Dec. 1973, undated	folder 7
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Jul.-Dec. 1974, undated	folder 3
Jan.-Mar. 1975	folder 4
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Sep.-Dec. 1975, undated	folder 6
Jan.-Oct. 1976, undated	box 8 folder 1
1977-1978; 1980-1981; Jan.-Oct. 1982	folder 2
Nov.-Dec. 1982, undated	folder 3
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May-Dec. 1983	folder 5
1985-1986	folder 6

Subseries B. Professional

Jan. 1972-Feb. 1973	box 9 folder 1
Mar.-Dec. 1973	folder 2

1974-1978 **folder 3**

1981-1989 **folder 4**

Mar.-Nov. 1983, African Studies Association Meeting **folder 5**

Subseries C. Financial

1972-1974 **box 9 folder 6**

1975-1984 **folder 7**

Receipts; 1968, 1972-1976, 1982-1983 **folder 8**

Subseries D. Notes

Professional biographical information, professional activities, notes from Nigerian newspapers *Daily Times*, *Daily Express*, and "Trouble with Nigeria" by Chinua Achebe, undated **box 10 folder 1**

Personal notes and address labels, undated **folder 2**

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Ferguson, John, Various articles, 1968-1979	folder 4
Lindfors, Bernth	
<i>A Bibliography of Literary Contributions to Nigerian Periodicals 1946-1972</i> , (comp., 1972)	box 10 folder 5
English 392, South African Literature, Student papers, 1971	folder 6
Nwana, Peter, <i>Omenuko</i> , 1970	folder 7
Printed materials, 1963-1975	folder 8

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