**CITATION: HENRY FANYANA NXUMALO *(Posthumously)***

The history of investigative journalism in South Africa owes much of its resilience to the one person considered by many to be the father of that brand of journalism in this country.

While major exposés are published each week, bringing to light nefarious activities of the mighty and powerful in state and private sectors, most of it is done from the comfort of air-conditioned offices through data analysis and interviews.

Not for Henry Nxumalo. He lived the histories he wrote about in the *Drum* magazine of the 1950s.

Whether it was the hiring of prisoners to potato farmers in Bethal, and their abuse through beatings and even murder, leading to corpses being buried in the fields to serve as fertiliser; or Baas Snyman in Koster, North West Province, who was known to beat and kill his “recalcitrant workers”; or terrible prison conditions and practices such as ‘tauza’, where black men were made to parade naked every morning and evening for their behinds to be inspected for contraband stuff, Nxumalo lived all those stories.

He got himself hired in Bethal, Mpumalanga, and his 1952 exposé of the conditions on the farms led to the now famous national potato boycott. He escaped with barely minutes to spare from Snyman’s farm and arrived at the railway station just in time for the Johannesburg train, and made it back at the office with just enough time to catch the deadline for the monthly magazine.

Nxumalo’s arrest and incarceration at the Johannesburg Fort, now Constitution Hill and the seat of the apex court of our land, is a story in itself. He had spent two weeks walking the city streets each night without a permit, hoping to be arrested. But it was not to be.

He resorted to getting drunk and walking past a police station singing, but even that didn’t get him into jail. When he was eventually arrested, the pictures taken from a nearby roof by his photographer led to an outcry that saw the government pass a new law, not to protect prisoners, but to outlaw the taking and usage of pictures of prisons and prisoners.

The magazine dubbed him Mr Drum and his stories would make the cover page with bold announcements such as, “Mr Drum goes to Jail”. However, he was more than an investigative journalist; Nxumalo’s influence on *Drum’s* content and style was immense. As the first black journalist employed at the magazine, he provided a connection to the black urban life that Drum would chronicle. According to Anthony Sampson, the first editor, he was instrumental too in key decisions about content that would come to define the magazine. He suggested the investigations to give the magazine substance; he approached American writer Langston Hughes to be a judge in the first fiction competition the magazine ran, which brought a number of black writers into Drum.

Nxumalo, born in 1917 at Mvutshini village near Margate in KwaZulu-Natal, was the first-born child of Lazarus and Josephine Nxumalo. He attended a missionary school and his interest in journalism started whilst still at school, submitting articles to a number of publications such as the *Post* (Johannesburg), which published them. The *Post* eventually offered him a job which he took up, but did not stay long.

He was intent on exploring the world and World War II saw him enlisting and being sent abroad, during which time he managed to even visit London where he made contact with a number of well-known journalists and other intellectuals. Returning home after the war, the media landscape was virtually barren for the kind of journalism Nxumalo wanted to practise. This was to change when *Drum* came on the scene. Nxumalo became its first black journalist and its assistant editor.

According to SA History Online, *“Drum* became the antithesis of the entire South African press of that time, and was eventually read all over Africa. It provided a racy and irreverent blend of humour, sentiment, fiction, sport, scandal, weighty commentaries on continental affairs by renowned thinkers and devastating exposés of labour abuses and political and systemic injustice. “Nxumalo was directly or indirectly responsible for much of the magazine's sparkling content. He persuaded the intelligentsia to contribute, directed the efforts of the staff members and himself wrote many of the feature articles, often literally risking his life through investigative reports that, he believed, were desperately needed in Africa. A number of *Drum* writers were to become household names in South Africa, but they would all agree that the magazine’s most brilliant star was Nxumalo himself, whose nickname was ‘Mr Drum’.”

Jürgen Schadeberg, who took many of the pictures for Nxumalo’s exposes, said of Nxumalo in 2012 interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists: “White Afrikaners were consistently uneasy when Nxumalo introduced himself as a journalist, they couldn't handle it. We interviewed a white official. Henry was asking a question. When he talked to Henry, he used a voice with authority and superiority. If [the official] talks to me, he has a specific type of voice because I’m white. He had to change his voice all the time. He started stuttering!”

Nxumalo also worked with Ruth First at *New Age*, a leftist publication that chronicled the socio-economic conditions of black people under apartheid, and wrote a regular column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a rare feat for a black writer from SA at the time.

Describing him as “a very good journalist, very courageous”, Schadeberg bemoaned the fact that Nxumalo’s murder, at just age 40, whilst investigating a backyard abortion racket in Sophiatown, had not led to justice for his killers.

Instead, even his brand of lived investigations waned, and *Drum* eventually folded and was bought by the National Party-supporting Naspers which has turned it into a celebrity rag that bears no relation to the legacy of Nxumalo.

Nxumalo was posthumously honoured with the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for excellence in journalism by President Thabo Mbeki in 2007. A street has been named after him in the cultural precinct of Newtown, Johannesburg, in recognition of his role in South African journalism. It is only fitting that an institution such as the University of the Witwatersrand should honour Henry Nxumalo and his work by bestowing on him a posthumous doctorate.

**Sources and additional information:**

http://www.thejournalist.org.za/pioneers/henry-nxumalo-courageous-caring-father https://cpj.org/blog/2012/01/remembering-henry-nxumalo-pioneer-under-apartheid.php

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