

PRESS RELEASE**Mandela's Handwritten Letter from Prison
Thanks British Government for Books
Now Online**

To mark World Book Day on 7 March 2013, The National Archives reveals a [personal handwritten letter from Nelson Mandela](#) while he was in prison over 50 years ago, thanking the British Ambassador for sending him books while in prison. The letter has been made available to view online for the first time as part of a selection of records on Nelson Mandela's arrest and trial.

The letter penned by Nelson Mandela reveals the personal gratitude and appreciation for the books which he describes as a "valuable present" from Sir John Maud British Ambassador in South Africa, and his "friend in England", David Astor, journalist and former editor of *The Observer*, who spearheaded the quest to give books to Nelson Mandela in prison.

Simon Demissie, Records Specialist at The National Archives said: "Mandela's handwritten letter is a great example of the honour and respect which he spent many years struggling for. We are delighted to have this preserved in the collection at The National Archives and to make it available online so that people across the globe can appreciate this unique piece of history from the man himself."

The letter, dated 14 September 1962, is contained within formerly top secret government papers ([DO 119/1478](#)) which reveal how Astor and Maud used their connections to reassure the authorities in South Africa that the books sent were not of a subversive nature. Otherwise there was a danger that the books would not reach Mandela as the authorities in South Africa would be "obliged to scrutinise slowly and in great detail". Astor wrote to Maud, who then personally approached the Commissioner of Prisons in South Africa, to arrange for Mandela to receive the books for him to study for his London University law degree.

The files contain correspondence between Astor, Maud and the Commissioner of Prisons, showing the extent of the government's support for Mandela and the wish list of books that David Astor wanted Mandela to receive. The correspondence in the file confirms that Nelson Mandela received six books from David Astor while in prison which were:

- *A Short History of Africa* by Roland Oliver and J.D. Fage (Penguin Books)
- *A History of Europe (Vol I and II)* by H.A.L Fisher
- *Essays in Biography* by J.M. Keynes
- *Anatomy of Britain* by Anthony Sampson
- *The Making of the President* by Theodore H. White

The choice of books, selected by Astor for Mandela, provides more insight into the thoughts, topics and philosophies that would have occupied Mandela during his 27 year prison sentence. Astor also attempted to send another five books to Mandela, including *My Early Life* by Winston Churchill*, but it is not clear from the files if any of these reached Mandela in prison.

Also contained in file [DO 119/1478](#) and [FO 924/1507](#) are the details of Nelson Mandela's trial where he represented himself and comments from the British Embassy on the delivery of Nelson Mandela's opening remarks.

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For enquiries please contact Rebecca Simpson, Press Officer at The National Archives on 0208 392 5277 or by email: press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk .

Notes to Editors:

Images available:

Image: Gov Secret File Cover

Image: 1st page - Letter from Nelson Mandela

Image: 2nd page - Letter from Nelson Mandela

Other Digitised Files on Nelson Mandela:

[FCO 105/443](#) - Civil disturbance in South Africa: political prisoners, including James Mange and Nelson Mandela

The full list of books Astor and Maud intended to send to Mandela in prison:

*Three of the following books (unidentified in the file) were also sent to the prison where

Mandela was held, although there is no evidence on file that these were received by Mandela.

The Sleepwalkers by Arthur Koestler
The White Nile by Alan Moorehead
My Early Life by Winston Churchill
Chitty on Contracts (Specific Contracts)
Chitty on Contracts (General Principles)

Also on David Astor's list of other books to send to Mandela were as follows, although there is no evidence that these were sent or received by Mandela in the file:

Life of Gladstone by Magnus
New Architecture of Europe by G.E. Kidder Smith (Penguin Books)
Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War by Edmund Wilson

About The National Archives:

For the record, for good...The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files.

Our 21st-century role is to collect and secure the future of the record, both digital and physical, to preserve it for generations to come, and to make it as accessible as possible. We do this by devising technological solutions to ensure the long-term survival of public records and working to widen access to our collection. The National Archives also advises on information management across government, publishes all UK legislation, manages Crown copyright and leads the archive sector. We work to promote and improve access to public sector information and its re-use.

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