the new explorers: sash emigrants and residents venture into the unknown

sarah-anne raynham

Who doubts the topicality of emigration as an issue? Allusions to emigration on the covers of glossy magazines have become sure sales stimulants, with many variants of 'The Agony and The Exodus', '101 More Reasons for Staying' and 'Apocalypse When?'. For most of us the bittersweet wit and black humour resonate too uncomfortably with our own experience for us merely to enjoy these clever pieces of journalistic craft.

In these and other forums the political debate about future scenarios, the scoring of points about leaving versus staying, the prognostic satire, all have personal dimensions to which Sash membership is not immune. We are part of that segment of South African society where personal choices can be debated, made and implemented. In fact, it is the very nature of Sash work which so harshly illuminates the extent of both our national malaise and our personal privilege. These contradictions and the heavy demands of the present have been instrumental in the development of a new band of explorers – those among us who leave and those who pioneer new ways of staying.

It is on the level of having to face new realities in a state of heightened awareness that I find the common ground between Sash emigrants (how we still own them!) and Sash residents. For the latter there needs to be a new classification. 'Resident' hardly conveys the characteristics of those unblinkered, consciously active stayers-on. More than ever, they now share with emigrants the less obvious but increasingly real need to wear the mantle of explorer. Both are faced with the challenges of very different but nonetheless new territories to conquer. The emigrants must come to terms with forging livelihoods and lifestyles on other continents, while the residents have to open up a newly created hinterland – South Africa of the 1980s and 1990s. The physical contours are the same but recent political and economic constraints have created a jungle as daunting as the dark continent of Africa must have been to the explorers of the past. The paradox is that once the mental leap has been made, this dark region offers the same hope, excitement and room for innovatory exploration and achievement as that which sustained the early pioneers.

Derryn Heilbuth

GILL COWAN

From those bold generalities the view from here on will be modest and internal to Sash. The modesty derives from tackling a very large issue through five personal perspectives. Our approach here is not to contest their arguments but to allow our members to speak for themselves. We begin from the interest we in the Sash have in understanding why some of our members choose to leave South Africa while others actively choose to stay. The balance between the viewpoints is a simple numerical one: two decisive emigrants, two committed residents, and one whose decision to stay is conditional upon her capacity to cope with the demands of working for change in Grahamstown. The others are all members of Cape Western Region.

The emigrants

Derryn Heilbuth

The interview with Derryn Heilbuth took place ten days before she left for Australia with her husband and two small children aged five and two. Derryn and Bruce are both journalists, and while the reasons for emigrating were largely political, they were also swayed by significant professional considerations. We wanted to know not only the reasons for their going but also what it felt like to make that decision.

'It was terribly, terribly difficult and at no stage in the whole process were we ever sure which way it was going to go. I was initially very against going and my husband was the one who wanted to go. It took about a year's discussion, arguing and convincing each other in order to decide. Then, once we had started the whole emigration process and Bruce had been offered a job in Australia, we were still at every stage of that process stopping and saying, 'Well, let's not do it'.

'The thing that you really have to stress is that obviously the reasons for leaving are

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highly political, that you are leaving the country, which in a normal situation you wouldn't think of leaving. Although perhaps that's not strictly true. I was a student in Paris and lived in Europe for three years. There were lots of Americans who lived in Paris and there wasn't the same kind of value or the same kinds of implications when Americans left America to come and live in Paris as when South Africans leave the country for good. I think emigration is never solely political.

'The 'ordinary' reasons would be that as journalists, frankly, the prospects for newspaper journalism in this country are not particularly exciting. You write under all sorts of restrictions, which become more and more restrictive as time goes on. Australian publications are exciting and innovative.

'While there are professional career reasons, there are also others to do with adventure — going into a whole different society, learning new codes, making new friends, whole new lifestyles.

'Here we are living in a society that is very threatened, a society under siege that, from the reactions we've been faced with from some people, one has to stay and die for. All this great patriotism. I don't want to stay and fight for the present situation, and yet this is actually what it boils down to. That's what we would be doing, in a sense, with our son if we stayed — fighting for white privilege. We would be caught up in the military support of the present regime.

'You've asked what I would be prepared to stay for? An absolutely equal, open society. Again, you don't want to sound trite and clichéd — but a truly just society. Living in Africa you would frankly want to live under a black government — that's what I would stay for.

'I've always fought for a black-governed South Africa, yet what worries me now is that the future government is going to be just a shadow of what we have at the moment. I think there is a very strong danger of the repressive measures of now being repeated in the future. I remember seeing an interview with Breyten Breytenbach where he said the tragedy of apartheid is that it has brutalised both the oppressed and the oppressor, and I find that very true. There's no longer room for open debate. I think when that happens, it's just so dangerous.

'What I find so hard on a personal level is that you live here in a position of constant swaying between intense pessimism and intense optimism, especially if you're involved in an organisation like the Sash. My moments of doubt about going come most often when I'm sitting in a Sash meeting, because there is this feeling that there is so much to be done here. But after a while, being faced with enormous moral dilemmas every single day of your life just becomes so exhausting that you just think, 'Let me be out of here, let me be free, let me be liberated just to enjoy my life and be with my children and make some kind of career for myself'. This becomes an almost impossible thing in this society if you are aware in the way Sash members are aware. We are increasingly living with the most appalling things that a normal society would never tolerate. But because we're in it, and in a sense there is nothing one can do about it, to a certain degree the brutalisation and dehumanisation become a norm. And I actually don't want to bring my children up in that kind of society.

'And yet in a lot of ways I think it's very much harder to leave than it is to stay, because you are cutting off so much for yourself and for your children. Both sets of our parents are still alive; we both come from big families, so there are lots of uncles and aunts and nieces and cousins. To cut your children and yourself off from that whole support system is dreadful'.

Glynis Lawrence

Glynis Lawrence and her husband also worked through a long period of vacillating between going and staying before deciding to emigrate to England in June this year. Both are involved in education and they have two young children.

'We decided to go because I see the situation as being so totally out of control that it is beyond anything I can do to change it. More than that, I just cannot take the extent to which the government can impose itself on me. My anger and annoyance at what I read in the newspapers is there, I suppose, because there's no real opening to vent your anger and to show how you feel about things.

'There are many other reasons: I don't like the way my children are assuming the attitudes of the average South African through their contacts with their peers at school. Neither they nor the peers mean it intentionally, but by the time they're sixteen they may be as prejudiced as everyone else. I also don't want to impose the military aspect on my son by staying here, by waiting until he's 18 and then saying, 'OK, it's your problem'.

'How can things get better when people display the attitudes they do? For instance, in my husband's work situation, as one of several outspoken 'left'-thinking teachers in a white suburban high school, he can't have the normal working relationships he would want to have. On 16 June last year everyone saw the headmaster of his school being marched off between two Special Branch officers. He was detained for a day and thereafter he asked teachers not to 'open their mouths' about

Glynis Lawrence

GILL COWAN

'It's a war situation, and people have become so numbed.'

things. Posters and everything else contrary to government policy had to be taken off classroom walls. John resents that; he cannot function as he wants to because he can't talk the way he would like to and doesn't know who will be reporting on him.

'I have a fantastic job at a new tutorial college — ideal hours and a very good salary. We're educating people who are there because of the boycotts. They're getting an incredibly good education, but they're being ostracised because they've left the black system — they're regarded as sell-outs. Everything you do has this other side to it and you can't turn your back on things and pretend they're not happening. You can't negate all these issues — they look you in the face all the time.

'Strangely, being in the Sash made it easier for me to decide to leave. Seeing the hardships of other people made me more aware of the atrocities that were being committed and I realised the extent of the state's involvement and how we couldn't work against them and their power. I worked at the Red Cross from the start of the Crossroads burnings, and I was aware of what was happening before anyone else I knew. No one knew the background, and I became very distressed trying to talk to others who knew nothing about it.

'It's a war situation, and people have become so numbed. When we were collecting affidavits I was taking a statement from someone. The question was, 'What was the most important thing you lost in the fire?' She answered, so calmly, with a straight face, 'The most important thing I lost in the fire was my baby'. The other Sash member and I just began to cry. It was such a shocking thing – her hopelessness in the situation — not even seeking further help — not to be outraged — she just accepted it.

In my position, with a family and children to think about, I suppose I'm selfish, but I'm not a complete revolutionary. If you do something I think is minimal, you get detained, and I'm not prepared to get detained. Whatever you did might not have changed anything after all.

'We're a close-knit family, we're happy and we have a nice home which we restored from a derelict state ourselves. We have everything we need, but then we have nagging thoughts that we've got it all 'illegally' in a way. We've got a guilt complex about how others have had to suffer while we've got everything.

'So, it's against all logical reasons to go — the reasons are entirely political.'

Rosemary van Wyk Smith

BLACK SASH ARCHIVES

On the border ...

Rosemary van Wyk Smith

In her work as a social worker for the Grahamstown and District Relief Association, and as co-chair of Black Sash Albany Region, Rosemary van Wyk Smith is heavily involved in a broad front of concerted action in an area that has been extemely hard hit by measures of repression.

She was born in England and over the last 21 years has lived and raised a family of four children in Grahamstown.

'If it were not for the momentum and enormous strides towards non-racialism made by the progressive movement here over the last four years, one would see the future as possibly rather bleak. Now I think the role of the white liberal has changed so much — it's no longer merely protest but action-oriented, and there is no need for the individual to feel alienated by the groundswell of change if one becomes involved in collective action. We'll need all the resources and skills available for the processes of reconstruction and consolidation. It's saddening to think that those who have chosen to leave often possess so many skills and are people who are most receptive to change.

'I suppose my reasons for wanting to stay finally boil down to a sense of commitment to the people of this country — there are so many incredibly impressive people here. They have really had to define their morality and their ethics — the issues are so important. I was in England for a year and I felt the issues were quite trivial there. So, I have a sense of pride at being part of the movement for change.

'And then there is also the land, the terrific feeling of space and the indefinable quality of light. For the first 15 years of my life in this country I sighed for the green hills of 'home' until one day I suddenly had an almost St Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus conversion, looking at the low hills of the Eastern Cape, the scrub, the thyme bushes and cycads: I thought, 'I really love this land'. It has all truly got inside me, and that has a strong pull when one talks of leaving. Grahamstown is probably deeply entwined with my own identity.

'Living here now is very different from living in places like Cape Town. The townships are very close and you are very aware of what is going on. The Casspirs and police are very visible and it feels so much like a frontier. It has something of the Wild West heritage – whatever goes into the townships passes through the main areas of Grahamstown.

'The benefit of living at such close quarters to the townships is that we have established very firm links with the people. Through them we feel the harsh conditions of poverty and unemployment, the effects of the violence unleashed by state repression. We face a magnitude of problems. You get terribly involved — it gets quite heady working in the struggle, you know. But you feel quite

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breathless sometimes, and I think there is a limit to what you can shoulder. I do feel this tremendous sense of commitment, but I don't know how I'll feel in six months' time. You wonder how long you can go on coping emotionally with these problems.

'I've decided that this year I'm going to try to define the boundaries. I haven't been very good at saying 'no', at taking on only one task and doing it well. I think you mustn't ever see yourself as indispensable. The problems are so awesome that it'll take years ... Aside from the things I've mentioned, what keeps me going is the rapid change over the past two years, and the fascination! I do think we're living in a very, very interesting time.'

The residents

In the following perspectives the decision to remain here was by no means a foregone conclusion. Although she now unambiguously places herself in this category, there was a time when Beverley Runciman and her husband faced the dilemmas of leaving.

Beverley Runciman

'When our son was born we started to talk about leaving with a sense of excitement, of going off and doing something together while we still had one small baby. 'Let's go out and explore!' By the time our second son was born I was working for the End Conscription Campaign and my attitude had hardened to 'I want to go — yesterday'. All this time Dunstan was convinced he was staying because his skills as an industrial designer were needed; he saw a role for himself and he was quite happy to contribute. We had arguments — not fights — but they got quite divisive!

'Several years ago I met an impressive woman at Pollsmoor while she was on a visit to her husband, a long-term political prisoner. We talked at length about the thousands of conscripts who were leaving. She said, 'We can't all go. Who is going to fight the struggle?' and then she said something that made me think for a long time, 'Anyway, they'll leave their toes in Africa'.

Beverley Runciman

GILL COWAN

'The conversation affected me deeply. On one level, and in a strange way, I felt that for the first time I was being given permission to be white with integrity in South Africa by being invited to remain here and take part in the inevitable process of change. I was honoured that a black woman like her included people like me in her use of 'we'. That was some time ago and since then, of course, the ANC and other organisations fighting the struggle have called publicly for whites to remain here and participate in the reconstruction of the new South Africa — and this has strengthened my resolve to stay.

'On another level that conversation started me thinking, 'Can I pull my toes out of Africa now?' I'm not from Cape Town; I'm from Zambia — and that is real Africa, you know. I lived and grew up in a place where there were no cars. I became an urbanised African only later when we moved to the cities.

'The question for me then was 'Could I go?', and as I became more and more politically committed, the question changed further to 'Do I want to go?' I began to wonder what I was going to do over there — fight apartheid? Well, why not stay here and fight apartheid? What's the point of moving your whole family to do something you can do at home much more successfully? Or if not more successfully, then at least in a different way. And that just gelled.

'Another major motivation for not leaving is simply that I feel I have no right to take up that option when 80% of the population don't have that option. When I think of what people in the townships are forced to live with, I really succumb to the whole guilt trip bit.

'I have had to face what I was frightened of and come to terms with that. Nothing I was specifically frightened of has happened to me yet. I suppose a bloody revolution frightens me most, but then who's to say that is definitely going to happen? We don't know what's going to happen, so why flee?

'People use so many contradictory positions to support their decisions to leave. Some arguments seem to be implying I'm doing something wrong by staying and so each time I hear somebody's leaving I have to reaffirm my desire to stay and why I'm staying.

'Commitment is such a funny word. I never think of myself now as 'committed'. It's more a case of 'permanent' — this is my home. Where else in the world can I make as genuine a contribution as here? I feel we have such an opportunity to make a significant impact on life here even if the impact is in little things. I have a chance to do things that count, and in other countries there may not be the big issues to grapple with.

'I must say, the fact that every choice you make is a difficult one, is a bit exhausting. I long to get up in the morning and just be free of those stresses, tensions, the anxieties about people in jail, the knock on the door. It has never happened to me, but the consciousness that it could makes you into an incredibly light sleeper which seems to last for life — it doesn't go away after the emergency!

'In the end, I'm a bit of a fatalist (or is it the Christian ethos of my upbringing?). I think I'm here to work out what I can actually change. What is the ultimate potential in your personal growth? It's how you land up when you're an old lady and you think, 'What have I done with my life? Have I accepted the challenges or have I run from them?' The

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macro challenge is right here in my country, and I'm hopeful for the future.'

Jenny de Tolly

In 1980, after living in Canada for eleven years, Jenny de Tolly and her husband, South African-born architect and planner respectively, returned to South Africa with their two children. The visit, which was planned as a two-year 'break' with no intention of staying, has been lengthened and changed to permanent residence of a kind which is anything but passive.

'In a lot of ways, coming back was almost as accidental as going. When we left in 1969 the economy was in much the same state as now. It was the Verwoerd/Vorster era and Cape Town was hopelessly stultified. Professionally, work in Canada was very exciting and we both became very involved there. I went through a very germane experience as part of a community living in 250 houses on an island off-shore from downtown Toronto. We were all faced with eviction, and we mounted a very strong and incredibly effective campaign to stop it.

'That was a very important learning experience for me. As a white South African who escaped from here because of a feeling of utter helplessness and uselessness, that experience gave me a sense of 'Hey, I've got rights and I can do something about my future!' I came back with the knowledge that I couldn't be passive again, and my family were well forewarned!

'We came back initially for my kids to spend time with my family, who are a terribly strong and important thing in my life. We also came back after Botha's 'Adapt or Die' speech, choosing to believe that he realised that radical change was needed, and hoping that our skills would be useful in the construction of a more equitable society. We were both strongly motivated by a sense of being able to contribute in a society where there wasn't the abundance of skills that there is in North America.

'We are a family who debates everything endlessly, and of course we keep challenging ourselves on the relevance of what one is doing here. But in the most real terms, I think, having looked at ourselves very honestly, when you look around the world there are really only so many choices. We had a wonderful life in Canada but when you have lived in the cold you have to be very realistic about whether you want to grow old in the cold. And then there are the Cape mountains, which are Peter's spiritual home and which exerted a very strong pull.

Jenny de Tolly

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'Having changed continents twice has given us a degree of perspective on the way in which your lives are controlled no matter where you are. Living in North America you begin to perceive the degree to which you are subliminally manipulated. It is a very consumer-oriented continent and, in fact, its very balance is dependent on the degree to which you consume. As to overt political control in Canada, a lot of the same rules apply there as here and one mustn't kid oneself that the politicians are any less powerful or ruthless. The essential difference between here and there is what the public will accept, and that the contests between opposing forces are conducted in a very public arena provided by the media.

'Being involved in Sash and getting to meet more black people has opened so much for me. I found the first two years back very hard — most women were so depressing, obsessed with the colour of their pools and their children's education. Joining Sash was an important turning point. I found women who were prepared to get up and do something, and who were just so much more interesting.

'Possibly one of the most germane experiences for me here has been meeting Matthew Goniwe. One is denied access to meeting people of that quality through the way apartheid works, and one comes to realise there are plenty of people like that. Of course, they don't dare show their leadership too strongly or they'll be killed or detained.

'In the present climate you have to explore and find the gaps for creative action. You can't go for big ambitious schemes, and you really just go on doing those simple things which keep alive what you want there to be at the end — reinforcing the democratic process in our own organisation and with other groups and organisations that are trying to establish themselves. Now that's very, very hard in the context of the state's actions, the violence and the brutalisation. The challenge of working for Sash has become so strong in me that a lot of other things become peripheral. It is an incredible, special organisation and, having survived 30 years, it is now going through a transition. I want to be a part of that.

'I understand my privilege but I'm not massively burdened by it. My privilege and Sash's privilege give us certain spaces that other people can't use, and we must use them as effectively and creatively as we can. The protections we have may well be getting very frail but the reality is even if you hit jail you're unlikely to die in jail, which in itself is something we should recognise as allowing us to push the boundaries a lot further than we do.

'Having experienced so much change I'm not scared of it, although I find it painful. As an optimist I look that much further ahead. If I were to let the horrors of now and of what I know is going to have to happen in the next ten years overwhelm me, then I would become immobolised and useless. And I don't like being useless!' □