

HOME FROM HOME

Seven months spent revelling in the ancient richness of Oxford's ambience and learning too quickly come to an end and it is time to leave, to go home — to Grahamstown. It is a tremendous distance to travel — thousands of miles over land and ocean — but the distance to be travelled emotionally and mentally is far greater. Happily engaged as I had been in research into the early Romantic writers I had cocooned myself in the recesses of the Bodleian, quite deliberately averting my eyes from the painful readjustments that I knew awaited me at the end of that sabbatical. But the time came to go and so we had at last to face the full extent of that distance from our home town — a distance which had brought a fresh perspective as well as a sense of alienation consequent on that fresh perspective. Now still emotionally straddled between Oxford and Grahamstown, I set down these thoughts about returning to the Eastern Cape in the early months of 1985.

Air travel in itself contributes to one's extraordinary dislocation. To travel from snow to tropical heat overnight is physically shocking but the shock to one's psyche of the overnight journey from Thatcher's England to Botha's South Africa is profoundly disorientating. In the old days the ten day sea voyage promoted gradual acclimatization. As the ship's course was plotted daily so one's emotional route was marked out. The first sighting of that spectacular mountain and bay always left one moved by the sheer physical beauty of this fairest of Capes. But from Heathrow to Jan Smuts is a mighty leap indeed. Our stay at Jan Smuts was brief, our connecting flight to Port Elizabeth was ironically the long one — via Kimberley and East London — ensuring that we would traverse the length and breadth of the land and have an eagle view of its particularly African dryness and spaciousness — a stark contrast to the airview of England, plotted and pieced in a quilt of rich greens and browns. All airports have their particular sordidness. At Jan Smuts one is struck by a bleak air of officialdom. In the concourse, early that morning, apart from the crumpled and bleary-eyed arrivals, there seemed to be only khaki-clad officials, policemen, and black cleaners.

"Children, it will seem very brown after England — it will be very hot." As if to mock these lugubrious warnings the Eastern Cape had put on a mantle of green and more rain started to fall as we left Ben Schoeman (yes, we're back in a land that names airports after politicians!). The countryside between Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown was extraordinarily attractive and we were saved the distressing heat and drought that always seems to lie just below the surface. Grahamstown, damp and misty, had put on its most English air to make the transition less marked. Yet as the days passed, even though the weather remained what we South Africans term "English", the particularly Eastern

Cape aspects of Grahamstown life reassumed their distinctive configurations. "Hello — glad to be back? Nice to see you. What was it like? Glad to be home?" For the first weeks we were bombarded by such questions, recognising them as the shorthand form of a welcoming back into the community by friends and colleagues. Not only friends but mere acquaintances are eager to probe one's mood and attitude, for the increasingly pariah-like status of South Africa ensures that a returning traveller is an immediate source of interest. Some reveal a touchy chauvinism especially in relation to England. They express surprise that I could have enjoyed any aspect of a country seen to be fast going to the dogs with a wretched climate to boot. Others with the self-absorption nurtured by boycotts ask "What is the Brits' attitude to us?". One hardly likes to admit that the media coverage of South African affairs is relatively small.

The avalanche of responsibilities, the minutiae of reorganising one's home after a seven month absence, the re-establishing of the network of timetables and lift-clubs — all this enforced busyness — cushions the initial shock. Repeatedly I asked myself — is this where I belong and feel at home? The English experience was still vivid and magnetic for I share with many South Africans a cultural pull towards England — grandparents and language have their source there — and in my particular case English literature and a particular interest in Wordsworth and his contemporaries has necessarily strengthened the ties. As the source of the material of the writers I study and teach, I have grown to know and love its topography, its history, its culture. In practice, on previous extended visits, I have recognised a total and immediate empathy which is finally more than a cultural attraction. England is still a society which values tolerance, a society where the young and the old are still seen to need protection, a society where inequality is not made part of a deliberate legislative programme. Thatcher's government is certainly bent on eroding the welfare state, promoting gross exploitation, increasing the divide between the favoured south and the depressed north, destroying a whole mining community and the distinctive relations between the British bobby and the populace — all these distressing aspects are very evident in Britain today and are the ones most likely to be known to South Africans, although the official South African view would seldom lay the fault at the door of Thatcherite economic policies. Particularly evident, because eminently televisual material, was the saddening and violent confrontation between police and striking miners throughout those long months of deadlock and increasing polarization. Yet it is still clear that the English are shocked by such a vicious circle of distrust and violence and that it is still considered deplorable for the police force to be, or even to be seen to be, the strong-arm upholders of the policies of

any one particular party. England in the 1980s is no paradise but returning from that society to this it is immediately obvious that the institutionalized violence and inequality of South Africa, its radically fractured society, makes most western nations still seem havens of tolerance and humane values.

Scenes of violence in Britain gave way in the Spring of 1984 to scenes of even greater and personally more distressing violence as the troubles in South Africa erupted. It was impossible not to feel deeply distressed and yet there was relief too at being physically absent. Reports from home told of Grahamstown's particular troubles — arson, stonings, shootings and deaths — as well as of the horrendous symbolism of a search-light placed on Gunfire Hill beamed across at the huddled townships around Makana's Kop. We were to return with children to a country with problems which seemed less and less capable of a peaceful and rational solution. The television pictures revealed the visible eruptions of violence with painful clarity whereas the conflicting strands of the daily experience of living there could not be conveyed. And now that we have returned I recognise how it is not so much the possibility of specific violence that continually disturbs, it is rather the sense that the deeply rooted causes of such violence remain, as always, off the official agenda.

Grahamstown's notorious poverty and unemployment with all the attendant ills has been exacerbated by the economic slump of the past year. Of course there is much unemployment in Britain — even well-heeled Oxford revealed this in the noticeable proliferation in busking. One even came across open begging — unusual in the English experience — but what one forgets about Grahamstown is the immediate awareness of lots of people with nothing to do and nowhere to go. The street urchins are only the most vociferous and most visible evidence of thwarted and wasted talent. The full iniquity of young children being on the streets and not receiving a nurturing and caring education strikes the one returning from a country that still invests heavily in its young. One feels angry, but better these angry feelings than the blind lethargy that descends and reduces those who cluster around one — “20 cents for bread, Madam” — to a rather irritating aspect of local colour. In Grahamstown it is not possible to avoid daily confrontations with the disastrous consequences of the system. Too small to have the glossy veneer of a city where standards of living are generally higher and the really indigent seldom penetrate the enclaves of middle-class suburbia, the town is yet too large to be a paternalistically controllable village. Already overflowing with talented, unfulfilled, unemployed, frustrated people it daily attracts the destitute from the increasingly unviable surrounding farms and is yet incapable of fulfilling the promises associated in rural minds with the bright lights of a “city”. The town has suffered markedly the effects of the severe recession. Shops seem barer, businesses have closed down. The drought is blamed — it is an obvious factor, but the term “drought” has metaphoric implications too and it is the dryness of spirit whose source is the denial of the common humanity of others which constitutes the basis of a racist society. And it is the racial aspect and its effect on every moment of one's life that stands out so clearly when one has escaped its tentacles for even a few months. It is rightly shocking and upsetting and one fears mainly the gradual accommodation to its sick demands which coarsens one's sensitivities.

Party to the System

In a racially unequal society everyone is a party to the system — the colour of one's skin willy-nilly identifies one. However much I might rage against it, as a white South African I inevitably partake of all the advantages of the racially biased system. The possibility of ordinary human relationships is remote. I seem to discern in many of the black faces I see that deplorable result of enforced deference — a little awe of authority, a lot of dissimulation. The doorbell rings. Because this is Grahamstown it is as likely to be a beggar as a visitor. Outside stands the first of the many who will come to seek help. Some proffer intricate and implausible hard-luck stories, others have long since dispensed with any attempt to retain their dignity. I do not want to have adults dependent on me because I am white and they are black. Such dependency breeds all sorts of ills as much in those with largesse to dispense as in those who humble themselves to receive what in a civilized society would be their right and due. Inevitably the petty crime rate has soared and with it an obsessive concern with the protection of property. Signs in a local hardware store proclaim “Is there life after death? Trespass and find out”, “Danger — landmines. Survivors will be shot”. Perhaps I should see them for the jokes they are meant to be but the humour is black — a society reveals itself by what it finds amusing.

As for the cultural deprivation — after the richness of Europe how can one help but feel adversely affected. Yet here too the racial inequalities taint the pleasure in what little there is. So much is only mine because I am white and thus even satisfying cultural possibilities are hedged around by elitism and exclusivity. In fact the political malaise infects my whole life, taints the pleasures of my home and garden, destroys my freedom of spirit. Returning to this country is like returning to a prison where the privileges granted me solely because I am white paradoxically destroy my well-being. Every action one makes has political implications, every move is a moral choice — to live constantly with that knowledge is very taxing.

Romantic Writers

It is a privilege and a relief to have been away — away but never unmindful, for in my researches into the seemingly remote early Romantic writers I saw a society and conditions that reflected my own. I am exploring the lives and writings of middle-class intellectuals who in the 1790s found themselves in opposition to a government waging an ideological war and passing increasingly repressive measures against its own people. Despite their profound love for their country they were often branded as unpatriotic. Increasingly aware of the growing politicization of the disenfranchised masses, they recognised the need for radical changes in the structure of their society if only to avoid the bloody consequences of revolution. Pacifist at heart they were faced with the dilemma of the need for violent measures in the face of an intransigent government. Unlike the more rugged politicians like Jefferson, they could not accept with equanimity that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.” Often they found it hard to resist a paternalistic attitude to the people whose cause they were advocating. They grappled with problems of poverty. Often recognising the inadequacies of humanitarian aid, they still generally shied away from the radical redistribution of land and resources which alone could

solve the growing problems. When the polarization became more marked, when the people began to reject the cautious measures of the liberal approach and assert their ability to organise themselves and advance their own cause, some took fright and retreated into support of the status quo. Others, younger and perhaps thus fortunate not to have lived through the trauma of revolutionary wars, retained their faith in liberty, equality and fraternity and remained committed to the cause of the people. But is it perhaps significant that it was from the distance of his self-appointed exile in Italy that Shelley wrote his rallying cry in reaction to Peterloo:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable Number!
Shake your chains to earth, like dew
Which in sleep had fall'n on you
Ye are many — they are few.

Weeks have now passed into months since we left England. Around me the Eastern Cape is in daily turmoil as unfulfilled and rejected aspirations are being transformed into angry and assertive demands. The Eastern Cape's history of early black/white frontier conflict and consequent politicization, its long tradition of missionary educational foundations, combine now with its crippling economic decline to ensure that it is now one of the country's most troubled areas. Returning to a quiet backwater I find it an area which promises to be in the vanguard of change. I must acquiesce to the reality of my being here, painful as it is. Perhaps the sensitivities honed by the respite abroad make it a little more painful but I welcome that opportunity to have been resensitised. May I retain what sensitivity and perspective I have gained thereby, for if that is dulled all that I have thought about and re-examined will cease to be creative forces, sustaining my awareness, and those seven months will subside into a dream.□

review by M.G. Whisson

DISSECTING THUNDER

Jeff Opland: *Xhosa Oral Poetry — Aspects of a Black South African Tradition*. Ravan, Johannesburg.

The **Imbongi** in the Xhosa tradition combines in his person several elements which have their own terms in English. He may be the **poet laureate** to his chief — the person singled out by virtue of his various gifts, to produce his poetry for special occasions. He may also be a **bard** who, through the memorable phrases he declaims, ensures that the history of his chief and chiefdom remains close to the consciousness of the people. This he achieves less through poetic narrative or anecdote than through allusion as he refers to the qualities of his chief and ancestors. He may be the **cheerleader**, rousing his audience to support their chief by acclamation or by their arms in battle. He may be the charismatic **soothsayer**, speaking in a state of ecstasy the truths (which are not always palatable to the authorities) which he perceives through his unique combination of knowledge and inspiration. While any element may be dominant according to the occasion, all are, in essence, combined in the one person — the character who dominates Dr. Opland's book as wholly as he dominates his audiences.

To try to pin him down — to record the cascading words whose reflections glisten in the hearer's eyes; to translate them out of the resonances of Xhosa into the nearest approximate literal meaning in English; to examine each

phrase to see if it is an original creation or a recollected "formula"; to count the allusions to beasts, ancestors, gods or events as indices of his changing role in a transformed political culture, — and say, "this is the **Imbongi**," is to try to dissect thunder, or to take a bucket of water and say "this is the Victoria Falls".

To the early European travellers to Xhosa country, the **Imbongi** had something of the quality of Cacophonix, the bard who sings to Asterix the Gaul, as the visitors understood neither the words nor the cadences and rhythms of the language. Contemporary non-Xhosa audiences, treated to the poetic performances of even such luminaries as David Yali-Manisi or Chief Burns-Ncamashe, are probably no more sophisticated in their application, and the translations do little to help them in the absence of a detailed commentary. Further, the examples of those events which Opland gives — the installation of a new Chancellor at Rhodes, an address to St. Andrews School, the opening of the International Library of African Music in Grahamstown — are as circus performances beside the olympic gymnastics for the **Imbongi**, whose genius is in his power to communicate with his own people. It is perhaps, one of the few regrettable aspects of **Xhosa Oral Poetry** that the