

TELLING IT LIKE IT ISN'T

by Peter Enahoro

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David Chiappetta of Rehovot, Israel is a bright kid. At a time of life when boys his age are throwing caution to the winds and hunting down the elastic string of their sister's panties to make catapults, young David concerns himself with the profound issues of the complex and difficult world into which he has been born. In a recent issue of the American Weekly magazine, *Newsweek*, he wrote to the editor:

"I am eleven years old . . . In your article "The Fallout in Zaire" there was something I didn't understand. You wrote that 'an estimated 1 000 Africans had died and almost 100 Whites had been massacred'. Why did you say that the Blacks only 'died' while the Whites had been 'massacred'?

Was there such a difference in their deaths?"

The boy will go far. Little David has asked a Goliath question that many Africans would like to put to the Editors of several foreign publications.

We Africans are often accused of being too sensitive — and too often we are. We say things about other people that we would not have them say about us. Our leaders are not only touchy they seem to read newspapers (when they do) through the bottom end of milk bottles. Our security organisations are over-zealous bullies and some of the censors should begin by going to night school. (Malawi has recently advertised for graduates to fill the position of censors. There's an admission of what the past was like for you!)

Ours is not so much a world of "publish and be damned" as it is a world of "publish and be banned".

Our Information Ministries, when they are not themselves a mystery, mistake investigative journalism for espionage. We arrest, detain and unceremoniously bundle visiting journalists out of our countries for any reasons at all and much of the time those reasons are not good enough. Things have come to such a pass that our authorities are ready to make a martyr of any irrelevant foreign journalist who narrowly steps out of line. Because they invariably control their local press or force demeaning self-censorship on the editors of the home press, the authorities in Africa are resentful and vengeful when they cannot impose the same restrictions on the foreign journalist.

The effect of all this is counter-productive. The authorities in Africa do not understand that given the highly competitive nature of the Western press, the deportation of a journalist is a bonus on which both he and his newspaper can capitalise. Nothing erodes a journalist's prestige faster than when he is continually ignored.

Africa is still a land of mysteries for most Europeans and Americans, who think that the map of Africa is an illustration of a distorted hoe. The Western newspapers in their battle for circulation have traditionally cashed-in on this ignorance. And the trick of the trade has not changed much since the old days when the European journalist came to Africa to gather reports about the natives and

returned to write tribal legends as current happenings.

But today the Western newspaper reader and television-watcher has become rather familiar with some facts about Africa. Indeed the average European now knows that Idi Amin is not a scientific political expression; that Timbuktu is not an exotic plant. The European journalist playing the intrepid writer venturing into the horrific malaria-infested jungles of darkest Africa, can no longer surprise his readers by writing strange-sounding African datelines to his story. What then to do?

What many have done is to try to perpetuate the sense of adventure and danger without actually appearing to promote their own bravery. Western newspaper offices are filled with "experts" on Africa who tell you at the first opportunity that they have been thrown out of a dozen African states as proud as veteran soldiers showing off their war wounds. The information is delivered with an air of nonchalance as though it didn't matter. In fact you are being told that you stand before a long-suffering hero.

Many level-headed Africans, admitting that sometimes they have to depend on Western newspapers to know what is really going on in their own countries, are embarrassed by the generally waspish behaviour of our authorities towards Western journalists. Yet, at the same time, those same level-headed Africans acknowledge that the Western press can be tiresome for its prejudice and racial bias when reporting Africa.

Of course the charge is bitterly rejected, especially by the "liberal" journalists who still think that they are wildly revolutionary when they write that Africans have ancient traditions. But the prejudice and the sub-conscious racial bias run deep.

Prejudice runs deep for example in the attitude of the Western press towards the Cuban and Russian presence in Africa. Why was it wicked of the Cubans and Russians to aid the Ethiopians against the Somalis in the Ogaden, but laudable for the French and the Americans to have helped and supported Zaire against the Katangese in Shaba?

Why is it wrong for the Cubans to have troops protecting the MPLA government in Angola, but praiseworthy of the French to help prop the governments in 15 African states with a total commitment of 12 340 troops?

Yet relevant though these questions are, they are not what touch most ordinary Africans. It is the evidence of racial bias that really has them worked up. This bias shows itself best in the double-stands that Western newspapers apply when reporting on the victims of violence in Africa.

Until the Steve Biko affair the deaths of Africans while in police detention in South Africa did not merit the front page. And if one may speak bluntly, one doubts that Biko's death would have earned the big headlines it did if his friend, Donald Woods, a White journalist, had not got mixed up in it.

A Fleet Street newspaper reporting the death of a Briton following an accident off the coast of Mombasa said that the deceased had been "taken to an African hospital". The apocryphal denigration of standards instantly presumed in faraway London was there. You had the distinct impression of doctors at this "African hospital" rattling cowrie shells, whispering incantations, and dancing a jig around the patient instead of using stethoscopes and other modern equipment.

No African in his right mind would jubilate over the killing of White man or woman, yet it is pertinent to recall the extent of coverage given to the sickening murder of Mrs Dora Bloch in Uganda. It just so happened that the dreadful regime in that country perpetrated this particular outrage shortly after the horrible killings in Wiriyaumu, when

Rhodesian troops invaded Mozambique and slaughtered African women and children. Who can remember the name of a single victim in Wiriyaumu?

And it does not escape attention that we know the names of some of the Whites "massacred" in Kolwezi but not a single one of those Africans who "died".

You learn also that there is one kind of language for African nationalists and another for Europeans resisting oppression. The French nationalists who fought against the Nazi occupation of their country were the "French underground". The Greek nationalists during the same period were "Greek partisans". But the African nationalist guerillas in southern Africa are "terrorists". □

THE PASSING OF PAGEVIEW

By Manfred Hermer
Reviewed by Alan Paton

Publisher Ravan Press

Manfred Hermer's "The Passing of Pageview" with its brief history, its interviews with those who tried to save Pageview and those who were ejected from it, and finally Mr Hermer's twenty-four beautiful and human paintings, is a book worth possessing.

It is the story of another triumphant operation of the Group Areas Act, another destruction of a place that had a unique inner life, a life that is irrecoverable, for it can never be found again in the soulless townships, that replace what has been destroyed.

The life of Vrededorp centred on the Pageview traders, who lived there and traded there, and whose colourful shops and streets are here so warmly portrayed.

Another such place was Sophiatown, not so affluent as Pageview, but also with a vital life of its own. It had no conventional beauty, but when it was destroyed Trevor Huddleston, using the words of Walter de la Mare, wrote: "Look thy last on all things lovely, every hour." But the loveliness that he saw was invisible to the rulers of the land, and it was lost in the matchbox town of Meadowlands. Sophiatown was replaced by the white suburb of Triomf, a name signalling the triumph of the ideology of separation over the haphazardness of human growth and imagination.

Yet another famous place was District Six, full of colour and life and song, of good and evil, and its own special kind of freedom, now lost in the sandy wastes of the Cape Flats.

In 1968 certain areas of Pageview were declared "white" under the Group Areas Act. In 1975 traders received quit notices, and the Oriental Plaza was built with very high rentals, but it has never recovered the magic of Fourteenth Street in Vrededorp, which Nat Nakasa

declared to be long overdue for recognition as one of Johannesburg's most famous streets, and which is portrayed in many of Mr Hermer's paintings.

In 1884 the London Convention meeting attended by representatives of the Transvaal Republic envisaged equal rights for Indians in the Transvaal. However in 1885 the Volksrad introduced "coolie locations" and one of these occupied the present site of Vrededorp and Pageview. By 1935 Indians owned most of the south-western corner of Vrededorp. In 1950 the Group Areas Act forced Indians who wished to own property to move to Lenasia. In 1977 the shopping areas were finally closed, and Pageview was dead.

The interviews make sad reading. The end of Pageview meant in large measure the end of the patriarchal family, though that would probably have happened anyway. Mr Essop Ismail Haffejee supported thirty-five assistants, but his business was destroyed, and very few of his old customers come to the Oriental Plaza. Mr Rashid Bulbuliya's father had one of the biggest shops in Fourteenth Street "and they took it away by the stroke of a pen".

I have a story to tell which shows clearly the great diversity of people in Pageview. I was principal of Diepkloof Reformatory, an institution for African boys, and one of them came from Pageview. He was due for release and I went to visit his family. He explained to me that I must not be surprised to find that his family was Coloured, but they claimed that he was African so that he need not be sent to faraway Cape Town. I had a long talk to his sister who must have felt some trust in me, for she confirmed that her husband was a white man, and an officer in the Union Defence Force. Such was Pageview.

This is a very beautiful book about a very ugly deed. □