

Fear in South Africa

by Roland Hindmarsh

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It is disturbing to realize how little the educated reading public knows about Africa, in spite of the fact that this continent has rarely been out of the news for the past decade. Reporters in the daily press, as well as columnists in the weeklies, may perhaps be excused for paying attention principally to rapid change or abnormality, since they take this to be their function. Perhaps too the reading public, however educated it may be, has been conditioned to expect the spectacular and the violent; the main features of living, largely constant, shifting only gradually in character and emphasis, do not make news.

There was something very distasteful about the way Ghana's preparations for independence were watched by the daily press; it was clear that reporters expected a disaster when Africans took over the government of a state after so much shorter a period of tutelage than had been given to India and Pakistan. 'Barely a lifetime of British rule.' people found themselves thinking, 'it's bound to lead to civil strife, and the collapse of order. Then I suppose we'll have to go in again to clear up the mess'. But the Ashanti people didn't revolt; Ghana has remained internally at peace, though the methods she has used have caused dismay in Britain. This dismay need in many cases not have arisen. If some newspapers had tried more conscientiously to give an account of the social and cultural forces that made two-party democracy an unsuitable, in fact an unstable, form of government in Africa at the present time, readers would have been less alarmed or less despondent about the collapse of parliamentary opposition in one country after another.

In general, however, reporters were sent in search of news to each country as it approached and then obtained independence. Baulked in Ghana, disappointed in French-speaking West Africa, frustrated in Nigeria, newsmen found instead that a routine of independence celebrations appeared to be growing up. The same scaffolding, platforms and bunting, so it seemed, moved across Africa as freedom from colonial rule reached two or even three countries a year: Somalia, Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Malawi, the Gambia. Reporters fell into the spirit of the affair by writing stock accounts of a stock event.

The outcome of all this is that, in general, we have come to recognize a number of African names, and are able to fasten some

sort of facile character tags to a few of the leaders whose image newsmen are generally agreed about: Dr Nkrumah is a fascist and a megalomaniac; Dr Nyerere is sincere, but a hothead and an extremist. The reading public has also been made aware of a few facts about Africa's economy. Hydro-electric dams are important, and there has been international friction about financing them: Aswan, Volta and Kariba are names which, in their various ways, have made some impact. It is known too that there is copper on the Copperbelt and (now) that tobacco is grown in Rhodesia; cocoa may perhaps be associated with Ghana and coffee with Kenya. The rest of what many people know about Africa is a personal rag-bag of information and images, amongst which violence – the Congo, Algeria, Sharpeville – is likely to be prominent.

Good articles do, however, appear. Dr Nyerere's lucid statement in *The Guardian* in early December of how Tanzania viewed the Rhodesian issue, and his explanation of why he was prepared to break off diplomatic relations with Britain, spoke directly and convincingly to the reader. In this issue of *New Blackfriars* there is an excellent article on the political and social scene in Africa today, written not by a professional journalist but by a secular priest who has put himself at the service of a diocese in South-western Uganda and has lived in Africa at first hand. Journalists, after all, have the disadvantage of experiencing what they write about at second hand, as outsiders in some sense. Even if they are as well informed and widely travelled as Colin Legum, they do not experience situations directly; they are not personally involved in the pain and anxiety of particular changes, and therefore need to talk with people who are vitally caught up in events in order to transmit to the reading public their assessment of what is happening.

Daily and weekly newspapers then, as a rule, give an interpretation of changing features in a country, especially when the nature of these changes can be shown forth through an individual or in a particular event. In providing this service, they satisfy the reader who is looking for reports of change of the more obvious kind; but they do not furnish him with a guide to the understanding of Africa itself. For this it is better to look elsewhere, to writing done from within a specific setting in the continent. The writer who has grown up within that setting is usually most able to experience it keenly and in depth. We should therefore turn to writers born in Africa. I do not say to African writers, as this might be taken to exclude writers such as Elspeth Huxley, Doris Lessing and Richard Rive. There are others who have engaged themselves in Africa so profoundly and for so long that they can be said to write out of a valid African experience; Trevor Huddleston, Arthur Blaxall, Karen Blixen. To them too we should turn.

One of them, Arthur Blaxall, has just written an autobiography,¹

¹*Suspended Sentence*, Arthur Blaxall, Hodder & Stoughton, 1965; price 16s.

most of which is given to the story of his life and work in South Africa, where he went in 1923 to become curate at St John's Church, Cape Town. He describes how he became passionately involved in founding institutions to help the blind – coloured and African – and even more the deaf. Every page speaks selflessness and love, a love which was able to embrace people of all colours even at the time of his trial, and to see goodness and the warmth of human affection in them. About recent unrest in South Africa, he writes:

'Then began a series of shocking incidents in different parts of the country. Rioting at Paarl, roadside murder near Bashee Bridge, and confusion in Basutoland. Newspapers flared out reports and pictures which played on the worst of human characteristics – self-preservation, fear, even hatred – accusations were made (and people suggested as possible organisers) which came very near to my circle of personal friends. Still I could not find it in me to condemn anyone. The government had immobilized most of the leaders: it would follow that youngsters would get hold of the reins and run amok, and, even, that hooligans and thugs would reap the harvest. . . .

As I sat there . . . the everlasting question pierced my mind – when, oh, when will human beings learn the futility of violence; how can we maintain respect for the persons of those from whom we differ so deeply? The telephone bell rang.

"Is that Dr Blaxall?"

"Yes."

"Captain X of the Fort prison here. An awaiting trial prisoner named Mandela has asked to see you – can you come up?"

"Certainly, if it is permitted."

"You tell the policeman at the gate that Captain X is expecting you."

That was the first of three visits I was allowed to make. I was always impressed by the apparent respect this officer had for the man it was his duty to watch. On the last occasion I said, as time came to an end: "I must go now, Nelson, I will be away several weeks. Your trial begins next week, and may be over before my return: there is no knowing when we will meet again, and under what conditions. May I offer a prayer?" By way of agreement he leapt to his feet, and stood with both hands folded, resting on the table, while I strove to voice some of our deepest longings. We shook hands, and I walked out through the ante-room in which there were two desks. I remember noticing that the police officer at each desk was standing as I walked through, which had not been the case when I went in.'

After his own trial, what he notices is the humanity of men about him:

'After it was all over, and I was waiting below for the police van to take me away, the special branch officer in charge of the

investigating team came down to the cells to shake hands; much as the captain of a victorious football team shakes hands with a battered opponent. Putting his hands through the bars which now separated me from the world I knew, he said: "Sorry Doc, but I had to do my duty: now I shall pray for you every day. . . ." The junior prosecutor was self-conscious as I put out my hand: "Dr Blaxall! Will you really shake hands with me?"

African friends were heart-warming all the time, making furtive AFRICA signs from the public gallery, smiling and greeting me in the passages; a man who was sitting with others in the cage of the police van that was to take me to the Fort, recognised me as I started to climb into the seat reserved for whites, and shouted: "Halloa, Father Blaxall, what have you got?" and when I replied, whistled and said: "Well, face it with a brave heart, Father."

Arthur Blaxall hasn't written a great book; but his openness and sincerity have allowed him to experience with special clarity, and therefore perhaps with all the more pain, the human tragedy of South Africa. Here is the one part of the world where human beings of the black, white, brown and mingled 'races' will in the end be compelled to live together, at first in co-existence, but gradually in human respect and understanding so that colour no longer serves as a convenient criterion for registering an assumed difference in culture. In Southern Africa it is useless to talk in terms of any communities in the population being driven out of the country; the peoples are there in such proportions that the scene is set for a fusion of cultures that can be the magic crucible to show mankind the way to the one world towards which we are all moving – *ut unum sint*. But instead of the spirit of courage and trust in which this endeavour should be undertaken, the diseases of suspicion, fear and hatred attack the people of South Africa and make the minds of men and women sick, no longer able to see clearly, to assess truly, to understand and to love.

Dr Blaxall describes this fear in the hearts of the Africans, and then of the Afrikaans-speaking whites:

'Visiting the homes from which some of the refugees had fled, I was warmly received, but conscious all the time of a growing fear. Fear of writing lest letters be read; fear of telephoning lest harmless plans assume sinister proportions; fear of being anything but a steady, plodding, working "Bantu" people who are perfectly happy until agitators come from outside and disturb them!

Africans, I found, responded generously to friendship, but most Afrikaans-speaking people became more and more difficult. Whether it is sheer apathy, ignorance, or a primitive urge for self-preservation, I am not prepared to say: the predominating impression which lingers in the mind when you are away from South Africa is that of a people gripped by unconscious fear, and mesmerized by an imaginary solution.'

Three years ago I was staying with my wife and children at a country hotel in Natal at the foot of the Drakensburg mountains. The manager welcomed all his guests one evening to a slide show of a trek he and others had made up the mountains; as he described the trip, his homely, patriarchal warmth came out to us all, and we responded. Next morning the hotel arrangements were all awry; a servant explained that one of the African staff had died during the night up in the domestic quarters. The manager, deeply upset, had no time for us; he was concerned to see that all the proper arrangements were made for the funeral.

As we drove away, I was thinking that here, in the country, love and respect still transcended the sad, frightened barriers that people have set up in towns in South Africa: barriers of barbed wire around densely built-up African locations; and outside the wire, a barrier of space between the location and the rest of the town. That evening, at twilight, we drove into Bloemfontein: under the immense awesome beauty of a sunset on the veldt, that begins in gold, shifts into a strange pink and deepens rapidly into an apocalyptic magenta – you want to crawl away and hide from so fierce, so powerful an omen of tragedy.

For tragedy – involving bloodshed on a major scale – is what most liberals in South Africa now foresee. Perhaps, living on the edge of the possible in South Africa, they are gifted with a keener intuition of things to come than others. Or perhaps their visions are charged with an exaggeration that comes from living too long under threat. Most South African whites do not believe they are moving towards a bloodbath; liberals such as Laurence Gandar are a minority, and very few present-day British emigrants to the Republic join the Liberal Party. Within a year to eighteen months, most of them give qualified support to apartheid, and can be counted on to vote for the United Party, whose policy is thoroughly muddled by shifting compromise. A few of the emigrants who had at first boldly intended to voice liberal views, perhaps in fear of police surveillance and possible loss of work, join instead the Progressive Party, which believes in a gradual approach to multi-racialism.

Some people of marked integrity and courage are to be found amongst the Progressives. One of them is Mrs Helen Suzman, whose forthrightness as a Member of Parliament has occasionally made the British press. She was quite the most impressive speaker of the panel of six – two Nationalists, two United Party, a Progressive and an Independent – who discussed a comprehensive piece of apartheid legislation at a political meeting in Cape Town in May 1963. It was an open, frank, hard-hitting debate, much clearer and more outspoken than many in Britain; speakers here often befuddle the issue by sheltering behind outworn protocol or by wrapping up untidy thinking in the heavy stale language of official statements. The

freedom of speech at the meeting was striking; so was, at the time, the relative freedom of the press in South Africa. It is gratifyingly easy, in the United Kingdom, to view South Africa through liberal eyes; to flatter oneself that of course, if one were there, one would be in the forefront of the fight, with Blaxall, Gandar, Mandela and Luthuli. But figures show that most of us wouldn't, if we went to live there; moreover, to think of these four men as a group would be a sign of ignorance, for considerable differences of attitude separate them. Ignorance in the United Kingdom about South Africa – as about the rest of Africa – is in fact, in different ways and degrees, one of the main difficulties of countries in that continent. Uneasiness at this ignorance led the South African government to buy advertising space some years ago in leading British papers, to publish some of the facts that do not reach the reading public here. Of course, this action was regarded by the British as propaganda, as white-washing. They were right to suspect its one-sidedness, its selectivity, but the South African government wasn't trying to give a survey, merely to redress what is regarded as an unfair balance of news against it. The effort was clumsy and had little effect, other than to alienate people still more.

A much more serious attempt to provide comprehensive information about South African has been made by John Cope in a recently published work.² The author, born and educated in South Africa, served on the *Rand Daily Mail* and edited *The Forum* for fifteen years before being elected, in 1953, to represent a Johannesburg constituency as a Member of Parliament. He was a founder member of the Progressive Party in 1959 and lost his seat by a narrow margin on a progressive programme in the General Election of 1961. A very different background from Blaxall's, but a man committed to society and to human welfare, who can say:

'No country in the world is more absorbing to the student of inter-racial affairs than South Africa. No country suffers so stubborn a problem of human relationships, yet offers so tantalizing a prospect of progress and development. Here is a vast country, largely underpopulated, blessed with a healthy and temperate climate, extravagantly endowed with natural resources, yet full of uncertainty and fear. All the qualities are there, among the different peoples of the Republic, to mould a sturdy, enterprising, confident nationhood . . . The one ingredient that is lacking is the willingness to share, and the one disturbing element that prevents a rich amalgam is racial prejudice.'

Mr Cope has set out to answer the question of why the South African crisis has occurred by giving a historical, economic and sociological account of the situation. He has not sought to praise or condemn, but relies instead on the eloquence of facts. Facts, un-

²*South Africa*, John Cope, Ernest Benn, 1965; price 37s. 6d.

fortunately, are not eloquent unless they are made so by comment, and there is too little comment in Mr Cope's book. Facts and figures are not significant until assessed, and most readers do not have the background against which to make the assessment. It is useful to have the facts, but when there are so few indicators as to why the author has made the selection he has, the reader misses the sauce that would make digestion easier. Moreover he finds himself wondering why there is so much stress on historical background; more concentration on the present situation and on its sociology might have produced a less full but a more coherent picture. There are undeniably good parts, such as the dramatic account of the rise and influence of the Broederbond, which may be said to have given the world Dr Malan and Dr Verwoerd. But the general effect is of too many facts and too few guidelines.

A much less self-effacing guide to South Africa is Leo Marquard, whose work *The Peoples and Policies of South Africa* (O.U.P.) reached paperback popularity in its third edition in 1962. In this book, as the title suggests, there is not so much of history but instead a critical survey of society and government in present-day South Africa, with the author consistently showing his condemnation of apartheid policies and exposing their effects, especially on the African community. Because the reader knows where he is going, he will find this an easier work to take up: Mr Marquard is also more aware of European ignorance than Mr Cope, and knows when the reader needs to be brought from the distance of a different socio-economic system gradually up to the principal features of a South African situation. There are times, it is true, when the reader may feel he is being manhandled along and made to see things from just Mr Marquard's angle, and the guide begins to speak in the tones of a pundit. But on the whole he will be grateful.

Born in the Orange Free State, a Rhodes scholar, Leo Marquard closes his book with the question that everyone asks about South Africa:

'Africa and the world are anxiously, and with growing impatience watching to see whether she (South Africa) will overcome the political difficulties that beset her or whether she is going to wait in fear, bogged down in past grievances and sorrows, until overwhelmed by disaster.'

Unless there is co-operation between the races, the result will be: 'a resort to violence that will impoverish the country, and the ruthless suppression of the conquered, whether it be white or black'.

John Cope, too, forecasts explosions, though he does not think that there will be a big explosion unless tensions build up very much more than at present. But all three writers, Blaxall, Cope and Marquard, make the chief character of the situation out to be fear. Three people, so profoundly committed to South Africa in different ways, cannot be entirely mistaken in their judgment. The fact that

fear exists in all societies makes it all the more difficult for European readers to understand the especially insidious quality of the kind of fear that underlies the whole of living in a country like South Africa. It is a fear of something much more devastating than hunger or personal extinction. It is fear, not so much of what each other is, but of what each other may become – of others as a force that may crush the world to which one thinks one belongs. It takes hold gently, rationalizes its way with our mind and then touches our heart with its cold finger: soon the barriers of space are between us, a no man's land without contact.

The topography of this fear is little known or understood in Britain. It is beginning to show itself faintly in Smethwick and Southall. Some of its contours are much more starkly mapped by Doris Lessing in *The Grass is Singing*, in which a white woman on a Rhodesian farm develops a horrified fascination for her African houseboy. Racial thinking corrodes society, distorts its values and produces a fear so subtly pervasive that it seems almost impossible to neutralize, much less remove. It is vain to imagine that the restoration of British rule in Rhodesia will dispel such fear, for communal fear, not merely between one race and another, takes many forms in Africa and cannot be cured by reversion to a form of government that in African eyes has become no more than a sterile safeguard. Unless people in the United Kingdom are prepared to explore the principal features of African life and aspirations, to recognise the deep uneasiness with which all countries, not merely South African, view the future, British attitudes about Africa will continue to dismay because of their lack of understanding, and to repel because of their smugness.

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