Reading Africa in Waugh

by James Panero

What Evelyn Waugh can tell us about contemporary Africa.

Life here is inconceivable—quite enough to cure anyone of that English feeling that there is something attractive & amusing about disorder. . . . Public castration which is the usual punishment for most infringements of law has been stopped until the departure of the distinguished visitors. I have rarely seen anything so hysterical as the British legation all this last week. . . . I go to very stiff diplomatic parties where I am approached by colonial governors who invariably begin «I say Waugh I hope you aren’t going to say anything about that muddle this morning.»

«Evelyn Waugh writing to Henry Yorke, November 1930, Hotel de France, Addis Ababa

It was around 1973 that my grandfather ran into some trouble in Somalia. He had moved to the plains a few years earlier intending to establish a game-hunting lodge. «If it is done in Kenya,» he announced, «why not Somalia?» This was a mistake. One night, with his guards off-duty, my grandfather was joined in his half-built hotel by two gentlemen. They were carrying machetes, and one of them had decided to place his machete in my grandfather’s eye. My grandfather managed to kill one of the marauders, scare off the other, and drag his own bleeding body out of the hotel and up the street, where he collapsed in a ditch. Yet in a twist of fate, my grandfather survived, thanks to the care of a Russian doctor—part of the Soviet team in Somalia that had caused the region’s destabilization in the first place (and led to the eventual loss of Hotel Panero):

«The patriotic cause in Ishmaelia is the cause of the coloured man and of the proletariat throughout the world. The Ishmaelite worker is threatened by corrupt and foreign coalition of capitalist exploiters, priests and imperialists. As that great Negro Karl Marx has so nobly written»

That was Evelyn Waugh, writing in the 1938 Fleet Street caper Scoop, eight years before the start of the Cold War, and many more before the Soviets staked their full African claims.

After his «Rumble in the Jungle,» back in Sese Seko’s kooky Zaire, Muhammad Ali was famously asked «Champ, what did you think of Africa?» to which the Champ replied, «Thank God my granddaddy got on that boat.» It could have been a line out of Evelyn Waugh. Waugh, who showed
no greater compassion than to unleash his full contempt, made a number of visits to black Africa. A trip through East Africa in late 1930 yielded *Black Mischief* (1932) and the travelogue *Remote People* (1931). A reporter's war assignment in Ethiopia in 1935 and 1936 produced the dead-aim of *Scoop* and another notebook, *Waugh in Abyssinia* (1936). A final visit in 1958 and 1959, in the last gloom of the Empire, gave us *Tourist In Africa* (1960).

What Waugh alit on during these brisk visits was not merely the failures of the British colonial system, of Envoys Extraordinary and Ministers Plenipotentiary. Waugh also knew the media’s thirst for blood: "The Beast stands for strong mutually antagonistic governments everywhere. . . . Self-sufficiency at home, self-assertion abroad\(^c\). Fleet Street’s approach to small wars could have come out of the board room at CNN: "The British public has no interest in a war which drags on indecisively. A few sharp victories, some conspicuous acts of personal bravery on the Patriot side, and a colourful entry into the capital. That is the Beast Policy for the war\(^c\)."

Perhaps most remarkably, Waugh foresaw the bloody future that was in store for the post-colonial continent. Waugh gets more than communism right. He deflated the trappings of modernity that attracted just about every one of Africa’s post-colonial autocrats (except perhaps for Idi Amin, who didn’t bother with pretense in his slaughter)\(^c\) airplanes, the telephone, vitamins, railroads, \(^c\) the tank\(^c\): "My dear boy, you can’t take a machine like that over this country under the sun. The whole thing was red hot after five minutes. The two poor devils of Greeks who had to drive it nearly went off their heads. It came in handy in the end though. We used it as a punishment cell\(^c\)."

Then there was tribalism\(^c\) can we even use that word now?\(^c\) so inscrutable and so aimless (a belief in pan-Africa is like believing in the happy reunification of Yugoslavia):

> I spent one day with the Masai. . . . Unlike W. they paint themselves with ochre & spend all day doing their hair & bedizening themselves. They all carry spears & shields & clubs & live in mud bird-nests and are only waiting for the declaration of independence to massacre their neighbours. They had a lovely time during the Mau Mau rising. They were enlisted & told to bring in all the Kikuyus’ arms & back they proudly came with baskets of severed limbs.

(Letter to Laura Waugh, March 1959, Tanga, Tanganyika).

Boris Johnson, editor of the (London) *Spectator*, recently found himself contributing a piece on "Blair, Bush and Iraq" to the op-ed people at the *New York Times*. Johnson was elated to be working for the Gray Lady, and he finished the piece within an hour. In a now-famous telephone exchange, recreated in the March 27, 2003 *Spectator*, Johnson detailed his conversation over galley pages with his amicable *Times* editor, whom we shall call Tobin, because that is his name:\(^*\)

Johnson begins:

> I had said something to the effect that you don’t make international law by giving new squash courts to the President of Guinea. This now read the President of Chile.\(^c\) Come again? I said. Qu??
Uh, Boris, said Tobin, it's just easier in principle if we don't say anything deprecatory about a black African country, and since Guinea and Chile are both members of the UN Security Council, and since it doesn't affect your point, we would like to say Chile.

With the battery on his mobile failing, Johnson wondered: How craven and mealy-mouthed can you get? Why is a mild insult more bearable because it is directed at a crisis-ridden Latin American country, rather than a crisis-ridden African country? Is it, heaven forfend, because one country is Hispanic and the other is black?

If you listen to certain views, you might be led to believe that Africa is a succubus in need of debt relief, Prozac, a million pairs of Air Jordans, and We Are the World EPs. It would be uncivilized to suggest, for example, that Africa at times acts uncivilized. You could never, of course, say that the continent has been on a big, long, bloody downturn. Goodness, you should never mention that Africa might have, don't say it, an Africa problem.

What I would like to offer, therefore, is that Africa has a Jimmy Carter problem. Carter is the anti-Waugh. Here is one passage, occasioned by the civil war in Liberia, that Carter wrote for The New York Times in mid-July:

Rosalynn and I began our day at a large open-sided shed near the capital, and we had tears in our eyes when we saw people, overwhelming numbers of registered voters, lined up in the dark, in a steady rain, long before the polls opened. At the end of the day, Charles Taylor received about 75 percent of the total vote because of strong support of people whom he had dominated in the rural areas and because others in Monrovia felt that he might resort to violence if he lost.

Tears? Registered voters? An open-sided shed? In the rain? Early? It might lead you to start a march on Selma. But what really delights in this passage is of course the concession that others in Monrovia felt that he might resort to violence if he lost. Open and free elections can bring tears to anyone's eyes.

The road to hell is paved with Jimmy Carter's good intentions. The blood of Africa may be rising, but at least Jimmy and Rosalynn shed tears. The killing fields of Rwanda? AIDS? Kabila in the Congo? Mugabe in Zimbabwe? Savimbi in Angola? Taylor in Liberia? Many, many tears. The reports of violence from Monrovia and the City of Buchanan may have resembled a presidential history lesson from hell, but where's Jimmyville? Most likely somewhere near Waugh's Laku.

I spent the summer of 1992 in East Africa, nearly twenty years after my grandfather returned to the United States. Nothing much so terribly life-threatening came my way, save some dysentery and a malcontent baboon. What I witnessed was Africa from other side of Waugh's point of view: the backward Cold War alliances, bogus elections, increased violence, recriminations against the United States and the CIA, and President Daniel T. Arap Moi's cult of personality. Moi's mug stared out above every cash register; his profile was on the Kenya Shilling;
his name plastered on roads and airports. It was straw man stuff, and it couldn’t be good. One day my sharp guide in Nairobi arched his eyebrows and warned me not to photograph the Presidential Palace. Then, in a haunting moment of pro-American sentiment, he turned to the American Embassy nearby and boasted that we could take pictures of that building. Six years later, of course, from nearby where we stood, al-Qaeda terrorists detonated a truck bomb that burst the windows of the embassy and leveled the Kenyan office buildings around it, mainly killing Kenyans. A similar attack went off that day in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Africa had a new suitor:

Majesty, consider the distinguished general’s position. What would he do? He might conquer Seyid and your majesty would reward him, or he might be defeated. If he joins Seyid, Seyid will reward him, and no one can defeat him. How would you expect a distinguished gentleman, educated in Europe, should choose? (Black Mischief)

I could only assume that the way to Africa’s heart is either through strength or murder. Africa has its fill of murder. What about strength, including the conviction to confront Africa fairly?

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