

## HAZARA: ELEGY FOR AN AFRICAN FARM

by JOHN CONYNGHAM

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IN an interview in 2003, John Conyngham asked, 'While we have evolved through four generations in Natal, becoming more African generation by generation, are we getting any closer to Africa accepting us?'<sup>1</sup> The themes of identity and belonging constitute an enigma that has possessed him for years, and which he has sought to understand first through three volumes of fiction and now through a non-fictional account of his own family. Fiction allowed him to use techniques not normally available to the historian. All three novels make heavy use of irony. The first two, *The Arrowing of the Cane* and *The Desecration of the Graves*, employ the narrative device of metafiction and also the supernatural, and the third, *The Lostness of Alice*, employs intertextuality, in which the narrator finds himself in the 'wonderland' of post-1994 South Africa.<sup>2</sup> But if readers expect Conyngham's non-fiction to be in contrast a ruthless, stripped down exposé of white settlers, they are mistaken. *Hazara* is no ordinary chronicle: it is, as its subtitle indicates, an 'elegy'.

Conyngham traces the history of three branches of his family: his father's, his mother's biological family and her adoptive family. (A genealogical table would have been helpful; and some awkward sequencing of material is confusing.) He himself appears in the first person only in the Prologue and Epilogue; when it is his turn to be born he appears as 'John'. The context in which he finds himself is both a wider one, through family members and acquaintances who at times

farmed, fought, nursed and policed in Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and various parts of Africa, and that of affluent white sugar cane farmers on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The latter were defined by their world of farming, socialising in their small community and as far as Durban, government through administering rural areas, nursing in hospitals in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and the private schools of Durban and the Midlands to which they sent their children. This provides the scope for him to meditate on the nature of the British Empire and its decline and the fate of whites in South Africa.

Conyngham sees his family as typical of white settlers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even their neighbours on the cane farms of the North Coast had wide connections around the Empire. For example, he remarks that of a group of children photographed swimming in a river on a neighbouring farm, one was born in Mussoorie, one in Secunderabad and one in Kuala Lumpur. Over the years they had tried farming various crops found in other colonies – cotton, coffee, tea. His own ancestors had farmed cotton in the Umkomaas valley with Cecil and Herbert Rhodes as their neighbours. When that venture failed and the local farming community scattered, the Rhodes brothers' departure for the diamond fields provided a link with another aspect of the colonisation of South Africa.

Conyngham does not go into great detail on the everyday work of farming

or the minor events of their lives; rather he recalls in flowing prose the rhythms of their lives. Hence he does not give detailed references to his sources. Outside the work of cane growing, the communities of African and Indian labourers hardly feature, which no doubt reflects the consciousness of the whites. We read of the routine of early morning rides through the whispering cane, sundowners and dressing for dinner, and in the evenings listening to records of Wagner, reading or solitary drinking. At the weekends there would be tennis and parties. For atmosphere, he gives many short descriptions (obviously drawn from personal experience) of the settings of gardens, farmlands and natural bush and forest. He is particularly fond of birdcalls and other sounds. The passages are beautifully evocative:

She was mesmerised by the birds, as in the dense foliage starlings and lories and hoopoes and flycatchers bobbed and fluttered as if vying for her attention ...

Each evening ... outside on the lawn crickets would be shrilling, and from far away at the dam a frog chorus would just be audible, providing a platform of sound on which the squalls of a bushbaby and the chatter of monkeys would bounce momentarily and then be gone.<sup>3</sup>

As a product of the years of research that Conyngham put into the book we are rewarded by the profusion of black-and-white photographs, many of them intimate snapshots. He is brilliant at deconstructing their iconography in a manner reminiscent of the historian Paul Fussell in his essays on historical photographs.<sup>4</sup> For example, of his mother aged thirteen, in fancy dress, recently adopted and crossing the equator on her way to a new life in

Africa: ‘In the withering heat she looks small and sad;’<sup>5</sup> and of a group at a party: ‘Some of the men ... have the characteristic two-tone face, pale above and ruddy below, that is a hallmark of fair-skinned people who wear hats in the sun.’<sup>6</sup>

In writing sympathetically about his subjects, Conyngham knows what he is doing. He refuses to argue for leniency in our judgement of them by virtue of relativity – of saying that that was how things were done at that time. For example, recounting a complaint before the Protector of Immigrants of harsh treatment of an Indian servant, he writes, ‘That a life so subsumed by toil was taken for granted was perhaps typical of the times, but John’s unconcern is damning.’<sup>7</sup> Throughout the book there are sentences remarking that the political situation in South Africa was changing.

Possibly the biggest dilemma for him in writing the book was how to explain and handle his parents’ decision to sell their farm and move to the Isle of Man. He is restrained in hinting at how the loss of the farm hurt him personally, and he loyally tries to understand his father’s motives – his fear that there would be no place for whites in the new South Africa. A photograph of the dreadful little box with no garden in Andreas, Isle of Man, that Conyngham can’t help calling a ‘soulless suburban house’ leaves the reader stunned at the contrast that they had let themselves in for. Nor is he critical or triumphalist in recording that they returned to South Africa after four years. Instead in his Epilogue he describes how on completing the book he made a sentimental tour of the places of his childhood – but he could not bring himself to go further than approach the very centre of their

lives. He ends on a road where ‘in the middle distance was the homestead’. ‘The real farm would contaminate the mythological one that for years I had been piecing together.’<sup>8</sup>

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NOTES

- 1 Blair, Peter, ‘Of lostness and belonging: Interview with John Conyngham’, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 15(1), 2003, p. 85.
- 2 John Conyngham, *The Arrowing of the Cane* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1986); *The Desecration of the Graves* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1990); *The Lostness of Alice* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1998).
- 3 *Hazara*, pp. 48, 200.
- 4 Fussell, Paul, *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 5 *Hazara*, p. 44.
- 6 *Hazara*, p. 33.
- 7 *Hazara*, p. 93.
- 8 *Hazara*, pp. 241, 244.