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Book reviews

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Book reviews

Abstract

Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*,

Yasmine Gooneratne, *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family*.

David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: history and ideology in Kenya*.

Book Reviews

Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*.

A new novel by Chinua Achebe has been in prospect for almost as many years as I have been interested in African literature, but it had increasingly come to seem a chimera. Achebe has been fully occupied in the twenty-one years since *A Man of the People*, not least as a Commonwealth Poetry Prize winner and an influential essayist, but it is in fiction that his greatness lies. I don't think that I dared believe that the novel, when it came, would be as good as *Anthills of the Savannah* obviously is, as complex as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in its registers of English and more intricate than either in its narrative form.

Years ago I wrote an article for *The Literary Half-Yearly* suggesting that Achebe's four novels before this one should be read as a quartet chronicling the creation and decline of modern Nigeria. To this quartet the bleak Civil War novella *Girls at War* was a kind of coda. *Anthills of the Savannah* continues the chronicle, for like *A Man of the People* it is set at the time of its publication in a fictionalised though attributable West African state. The reviews so far have concentrated on its themes of corruption and waste, out of which, at the end, there is a guarded hope that beautiful ones might yet be born. It is certainly true that Achebe continues the theme of his polemical essay *The Trouble with Nigeria*, with its morally desolate view of modern African leadership. *Anthills of the Savannah* is the story of three men who were at school together and who end up as President, Commissioner for Information and newspaper editor in a country on the verge of civil disorder. The tensions in their relationship bring tragedy to them all as the nation veers towards total despotism.

By emphasising the political themes of this careful and mature novel, however, there is a real risk that equally important themes will be lost. Achebe has, for example, always been deeply interested in the nature of story-telling. How fiction is made, what is the true version of a story, how to hang on to memories after the source of them is dead, whether the language used to describe an experience affects our perception of its reality and the almost Pirandellian matter of how best to adjudicate between versions of the same events — these issues are at the heart both of the oral tradition and of post-modernist fiction. Achebe does not always confront them with absolute clarity, but he certainly entices us into the labyrinths of interpreting history and experience.

But *Anthills* is neither politically dogmatic nor philosophically abstruse. It is sometimes quite funny. It gives a more central place to women than in any earlier novel, with the slightly too neatly counterbalanced heroines representing the extremes of education in modern Nigeria. Above all, the novel is going to reward the scrutiny of those who have long regarded Achebe as one of the true innovators in the use of modern English. I have no doubt that this will be one of the enduring works of modern literature. To speak from a purely British point of view for a moment, it is a shame that the judges of the 1987 Booker Prize, who had the wisdom to shortlist it, should in the end have passed over a novel of international value.

ALASTAIR NIVEN

Yasmine Gooneratne, *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family*. C. Hurst & Co., London; St. Martin's Press, New York. 288 pp. £12.95.

The dimension of the distant past is beyond the experience of most Australian biographers. Yasmine Gooneratne brings the deep perspective of historical time to her reconstruction of the lives of her own family and forbears in a narrative extending beyond the centuries of Sri Lanka's colonial past to the days of the Singhalese kings.

Relative Merits is a personal story built upon family lore retold with lingering affection. The memories of childhood are lovingly recalled with an intimacy that makes the exotic world of Ceylon before independence less strange. With the distant fondness of an expatriate for home, she remembers the games she played, the holiday homes where she stayed, the smell of favourite food; and the sweetness of her memories makes that alien world seem like our own.

If it were no more than the genealogy of an extraordinary family, *Relative Merits* would be a remarkable book. It weaves its way through the tangled family tree of the Diases, the Obeyesekeres, the de Liveras, the Pierises and the D'Alwises without bewilderment, avoiding the inevitable confusion of attempting excessively precise definition of relationships. The origins of the Bandaranaike family are traced back to a Brahmin High Priest in the Singhalese court; through the years of Dutch and Portuguese rule to the one hundred and fifty years when the British were the admired and respected over-lords, and eventually to the coming of independence. For those who demand to know, an extensive genealogical table traces eight generations of the clan, the most notable of whom are presented in a gallery of family portraits observed with pride, affection and, sometimes, gentle irony; but in drawing on the oral history of her ancestors, Yasmine Gooneratne also gives us a unique view of colonial experience.

It is not the familiar story of imperial glory told by the British historians of more heroic times, nor the brave memoirs of life among the natives recounted by those who also served in the far flung realms of the Empire. *Relative Merits* is an unselfconscious chronicle of a class to which colonization brought power, honour and wealth; the more persuasive because it remains innocent of any attempt to be socially significant. Loyal subjects of the British Crown, those generations of Singhalese gentlemen and their gracious ladies are the warrant of imperialism.

To them the English language became more familiar than their mother tongue; an English accent was essential; Oxford or Cambridge, every young man's goal; the Grand Tour, Royal Ascot and Presentation at Court, the height of each young lady's ambition. British customs, and the dress and manners of London were adopted enthusiastically by succeeding generations. Decent standards of genteel behaviour were firmly established in the moral tales told by revered uncles, and the admonishments of maiden aunts as forbidding as any from Victorian England.

We see the process of acculturation taking place just as it happened. It is observed with meticulous accuracy and recorded without shame or praise. That is the way things were. Yet it is the very substance of cultural history — the process by which invasion, colonization and imperial dominion everywhere have left their mark upon subject peoples long after the armies have retreated and the empires dwindled to insignificance — as the Roman Empire did; or the Mongol invasions; or the Norman occupation of England, or the Moorish Mediterranean conquests. Yasmine Gooneratne has given us a rare eyewitness account of the historical process taking place, as if social evolution were captured in her glass.

The work begun by her sister in 1961 was abandoned because no one would believe the eccentricities of her wide-spread clan. In this account they are made endearingly human, with all of the frailties of their humanity. Yasmine Gooneratne's long labour of love has borne fruit in the year when the Government of Sri Lanka has chosen to restore the civil rights of the best-known member of her family, Mrs Sirimano Bandaranaike, the world's first woman Prime Minister. But there is little in the history of her husband's family that explains how one from such a background could have evoked the spirit of revolutionary nationalism with such passion that it continues today to divide the country.

There is irony in the fact that it was the same passions for which her uncle, the assassinated Prime Minister, Solomon Bandaranaike, is blamed, that drove Yasmine Gooneratne to escape to the relative freedom of her adopted homeland, Australia.

RIC THROSSELL

David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: history and ideology in Kenya*. Zed Press, London, 1985. 284 pp.

In his preface the writer explains that he is concerned with 'the use that is made of fiction as an instrument of propaganda' (p. ix). Having finished the book the reader might feel inclined to retaliate: 'What about criticism as an instrument of propaganda?' The central weakness of *Land, Freedom and Fiction* is that it tries to bully the reader into accepting its Marxist view of the Mau Mau. Its strength is the obverse side of this; it is brilliant in its exposure of 'liberal' claptrap and is never pusillanimous, unlike that 'mainstream metropolitan criticism' which has a political position but pretends not to have, with such watchwords as 'balance' and 'universality'.

Dr Maughan-Brown uses Althusser's phrase, that fiction is a 'rendering visible' (p. 12) of ideology, and suggests that 'it is the act of criticism which brings ideology to the surface by probing the work's «unconscious» to reveal the social determinations which the work has sought to efface by giving its surface structure a veneer of naturalness and inevitability' (p. 13). This together with his use of the word 'unmasking', conveys the rather melodramatic sense of the critic as counsel for the prosecution that pervades the book, and may incline the reader to look below the 'veneer of naturalness and inevitability' of Maughan-Brown's accounts of Kenyan history, to do some unmasking on his own account. The chapters on the Mau Mau movement and on colonial settler ideology analyse incisively the myths and stereotypes underlying many white reactions to the movement; a former governor reveals a complex of prejudices when he writes: 'Most of the strikes were fomented by the usual type of sorry rogue masquerading as Trade Union organisers' (p. 76). Maughan-Brown undercuts his own persuasive argument with occasional knee-jerk reactions of a similar kind, so that the fact that the colonial government did not simply dispose of Kenyatta is not presented as a matter of principle but as reluctant conformity with the 'Rule of Law' in the metropolis.

The chapters on colonial and metropolitan fiction about Mau Mau are subtle, and alarming in what they reveal about the implied reader as they pander to crude stereotypical notions of black men as virile, mindless and barbaric and whites as restrained, humane and civilised. A characteristically iconoclastic reading of most post-colonial

Kenyan fiction follows, with Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* seen as a sycophantic praise-song for Kenyatta. *A Grain of Wheat* becomes a 'crisis text' in that Maughan-Brown considers Ngugi to be trapped by a liberal humanist aesthetic so that he cannot make the novel an adequate vehicle for his ideology. The discussion arises out of a perceptive reading of the text and, unlike much metropolitan criticism, it has the intellectual complexity that the novel demands. One need not agree with the argument to find it stimulating.

Land, Freedom and Fiction is vigorous, irritating, and essential reading for anyone interested in African fiction and its criticism, which a recent essay described as typified by 'lucid dullness' (Robert Green, 'The Banality of Cannibalism', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. xix, No. 1, 1984, p. 53). The essay protests against the lack of adventurousness in the criticism and specifically against its obliviousness to fundamental questions about the literary text's relations with society. Dr Maughan-Brown's book might have been written in response to these complaints: it is not always lucid but it is never dull.

ANGELA SMITH

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CHINUA ACHEBE is a major African novelist whose works include *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*. RUSSELL McDOUGALL teaches at Adelaide University, Australia. FUNSO AIYEJINA teaches at the University of Ife, Nigeria. TOLOLWA MARTI MOLLEL is a Tanzanian writer and academic who now lives in Canada; his short stories have been broadcast on the BBC. BODIL FOLKE FREDERIKSEN teaches at Roskilde University, Denmark. GARRY DISHER is an Australian writer. His published and forthcoming books include two novels and two collections of short stories. His short stories have won numerous awards in Australia, including the National Short Story Award in 1986. PETER McCONNELL is an Australian short story writer and poet. JOHN TITTENSOR is an Australian living in France. His work has been widely published in Australia and his book *Year One* was published by Penguin. IAN ADAM teaches at the University of Calgary, Canada. KUSUM BHAMBRI studies at the University of Exeter, UK. SHAUNT BASMAJIAN is a Canadian poet living in Toronto. JACK HODGINS is one of Canada's major writers of fiction. His novel, *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* won the Canadian Governor General's Award for fiction. MANUEL FERNANDES is an Indian writer. Apart from writing fiction he also writes for the theatre and is involved in directing and acting in plays. CAROL MACLENNAN teaches at The University of East Asia, Macau.