

military assessments of the situation to getting the Soviet Union into the Far Eastern war, just as the Soviet Union, on its part, was determined to get in before the spoils could be shared without its participation. The American desire was, of course, largely based on the view that the Japanese still retained, in the Kwantung army in Manchuria, a powerful fighting force which would have to be overcome. This, however, was an illusion. The Kwantung army, writes Professor Butow, was "now nothing more than an empty shell." The Supreme Command's devotion to the idea of a final decisive battle on the shores of the homeland had "long since robbed the garrison in Manchuria of its

troops and war equipment and had left it stranded there with little more than the 'spiritual power' to resist."

People who believe in determinist philosophies of history might well ponder the lessons of this sad chronicle of misunderstandings and miscalculations on both sides, and the dominance throughout of the personal elements, even if these elements could only be understood in the light of national traditions as different as those of the Soviet Union, the United States, and Japan. Among recent contributions to contemporary history, this work—marred only by a rather clumsy prose style—stands very high indeed.

Max Beloff

## BLACK-AND-WHITE AFRICA

IT IS not only the quantity, it's the quality of fiction coming out of Africa during the last thirty years that is so impressive. Since the publication of Mr. William Plomer's *I Speak of Africa*, the library of serious novels and stories based on the south of that continent must be larger, in proportion to its literate population, than that of any other land on earth. And the more fearful the racial and political tension there, the greater, it seems, grows the spate of books.

Among these many authors it is unlikely there's a man or woman alive better equipped with knowledge and experience to write of his country than Colonel Laurens van der Post. His *Venture into the Interior* should be enough to qualify him for this position. The publishers describe *Flamingo Feather*\* as "a story of adventure." I suppose it is. Take Rider Haggard, W. H. Hudson, add a dash of John Buchan, sprinkle with fresh Koestler caviare, then drop the mixture into the African jungle in 1948—and you may have some idea of the flavour of *Flamingo Feather*. But only some. For this is a very serious book—one, moreover, with a message. This tragedy in which so many brave men lost their lives would not have occurred, writes Pierre de Beauvilliers, the narrator, "had we [white men] not closed our hearts to the black people in Africa. . . ." In fact these frightful

events, he points out, will "all recur again with fuller, more desperate orchestration unless we change, not Russia, but ourselves."

*Flamingo's* Communist element—Moscow's secret arming of fifty thousand African natives from a ship plying between Capetown and an uncharted bay off the Indian Ocean—I took with a cellar of salt. I don't say it's impossible, but one knows it to be fiction. Yet the great merit of this novel is not that so much of it rings true—it *is* true, or, if you will, based on fact. We know, for example, that the author, like his narrator, spent years in Japanese prison camps. As for the remoter regions of Africa, we do not have to be reminded that he knows them as the Englishman knows the interior of his own home.

It is doubtful if any writer has depicted the climate, the veld, the forests, the Dead Land of the tsetse fly and sleeping sickness, the character of the Zulu, above all the birds, beasts, and flowers of South Africa, as they are painted in these pages. From passages on the animals alone (some of which had not been seen before) a small volume of quotations could be made.

*The hippopotamus*: "Slowly the doomed old gentleman came towards us with his lumbering rolling retired Admiral-of-the-Fleet's gait. . . . His head was so big that he nearly toppled over with it, yet his ears were tiny and coral pink as a woman's."

*The zebra*: "A great prince, looking as if he had walked straight out of a royal coat of arms, was making urgent love to a noble lady."

\* *Flamingo Feather*. By LAURENS VAN DER POST. The Hogarth Press. 12s. 6d.

*The cobra*: "The wide hood flared and flashed full out and with head swaying in the grass like a strange somnolent yellow poppy among harvest corn. . . ."

*The baboon*: "I saw a very old and very big baboon, sitting with his back to me in a toga of sunlight, his broad shoulders rounded, his head well tucked in and a long neurotic, oddly pedagogic finger, nervously scratching his head."

And here in a sentence is black-and-white Africa in the shape of a Madonna and Child:

"A child with snow-white face, tears not yet dry on its cheek, eyes shut, little fist of putty tightly clenched, was tugging like a puppy at her full breast, a fabulous aubergine in the sun."

*Flamingo Feather* is the perfect present for a boy—or am I being too subjective? Must one accept it as a fact that among the youth of today the interest in "space travel" and "scientific" fiction has taken the place of the passion earlier generations have felt for the little-known areas of the world?—a curiosity which in my case drew me to every book about the jungle I could lay my hands on, calling me out of England into Africa before the age of consent. Whatever the answer, I feel sure I would have enjoyed *Flamingo Feather* more at fifteen than I do now at the critical (in both senses of the word!) age of fifty. In my teens I know I should have hero-worshipped unreservedly Pierre de Beauvilliers, that indefatigable, indestructible gentleman adventurer with his power of endurance greater than the black man's and his intelligence, his foresight capable of outwitting (usually at the gallop or by air and invariably in the nick of time) the men of ill-will. Today, however, admire him as I must, I find the gent a bit of a prig and a know-all, a trifle too patronising and superior towards those less fortunate, less experienced, and physically weaker than himself.

WITH the Africa of Mr. Jack Cope we come figuratively down to earth, in reality to much the same earth over which de Beauvilliers flew in his desperate attempt to locate the Russian ship "Star of Truth." *The Fair House*\* reminds me of one of my father's favourite anecdotes about how, during the Boer War, he happened to see in one day on the veld Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Baden-Powell, and Edgar Wallace. Here, on that

\* *The Fair House*. By JACK COPE. MacGibbon and Kee. 13s. 6d.

same veld, separated by a couple of pages, are two of these now famous men—Gandhi, "a slender little lawyer . . . ranked as a sergeant-major" leading a corps of Indian stretcher-bearers; and the sole survivor Churchill, "the new Colonial Minister—a Radical who used to be a Conservative," answering a protest in the House of Commons about the use of the dum-dum bullet in "civilised war."

That was just half a century ago, during the Zulu Rebellion of which *The Fair House* is a first-rate historical account in the form of fiction. For his central character, Mr. Cope, himself a South African, has chosen Tom Erskine, an officer in the militia, son of a wealthy, influential British landowner in Natal; and for heroine, Linda de Wet, an Afrikaner girl whose father has been massacred by the Zulus during the Boer War. To complicate relations further, and yet at the same time to show historically how and why South Africa has become the land of seething hatreds it is today, Mr. Cope has given Tom Erskine "a sort of blood-brother"—a Zulu boy called Kolombe who, having been brought up with and educated by Tom, fails one day to report for *isibalo* (compulsory road service). As a result Kolombe has been "kicked off" the Erskine estate, has gone into hiding, and is sought by the police as "a criminal type." He is also being sought by Tom, because in Kolombe, the symbol of his race, the young white officer—an all-too-rare South African who thinks with his heart and not with his skin—sees his only chance of "warning his own people they are being led into a trap." Here is a situation wherein lies the awful dilemma of the white man whose loyalties are not once but thrice divided: by allegiance to his country, to his Afrikaner fiancée, and to the Zulu whose life and history are part of his own. When Tom does find Kolombe it is to discover that his blood-brother has already been stealing arms from the whites. What is Tom to do? Report him, and thereby send not only Kolombe to certain death but "have every virgin who is dark and lovely . . . held down and raped" by white men? Or keep his secret, resign his commission, commit treason, and lose the girl he is planning to marry?

This all-too-brief summary may suggest, I'm afraid, that *The Fair House* is a short and simple story. It is on the contrary long and complicated, containing a list of no fewer than

thirty principal characters. The events leading up to the Rebellion, as well as the "campaign" itself, with its ghastly gun-and-assegai fighting and hideous atrocities, are clearly founded on fact. The novel is distinguished, moreover, by a remarkable lack of bitterness and for its description of the heroic last stand of the Zulus in the hills of Natal—a magnificent piece of writing. *The Fair House* is as convincing an exposition as I know of a country split in bleeding parts as a direct result of what Colonel van der Post calls "the white man's terrible failure to integrate the displaced, detribalised, the bewildered African into [his] community." For a first novel this book is a very considerable achievement.

**R**USSIAN ROULETTE\* is another first novel, also of great promise—if by now that much-abused phrase does not spell a book's immediate death! Mr. Anthony Bloomfield's world bears as much resemblance to South Africa as the climate of that country does to England's. As dreary as the back streets of Blackpool on a winter's Sunday, *Russian Roulette* is perhaps a little too reminiscent of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*. It also reminds me of the friend who never left his home with a bad hangover, in the certain knowledge that if he did so he would be drawn like a magnet to the sight of someone or something that would make him physically sick. Reeking of saloon bars and boarding houses, and certainly no dish for the squeamish, this novel tells nevertheless a taut, often terrifying tale.

Carr (Mr. Bloomfield spurns Christian names) is a middle-aged journalist who spurns journalism as "the profession of the second-rate." This morbid, sinister character has indeed little use for anything or anyone save his estranged wife and a young Corporation clerk called Robinson (more often referred to as "the boy"), who throughout the swift, sordid story is suspected of having murdered a tart. Robinson, in fact, was the last man Jean McCarless slept with before, that same night, she was found in bed, naked and strangled.

*Russian Roulette* is really a study of self-destruction played to its violent and somewhat improbable climax in a northern seaside resort of unparalleled squalor. The book, however, is also a portrait of a disappointed man who

\* *Russian Roulette*. By ANTHONY BLOOMFIELD. The Hogarth Press. 12s. 6d.

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*author of Islanders, etc.*

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HART-DAVIS

transfers his affections from a dead woman to her lover and suspected murderer, a youth through whom he, Carr, proceeds to live a vicarious life. At the same time it is inevitable, even logical, Carr being what he is, that he should also wish, if only half-consciously, to destroy the new object of his affections, the obsessional shadow of his former self. This youth, Robinson, is a character no less cleverly drawn. Hypnotised by the elder man, he is nevertheless capable of falling in, or rather of drifting into, love with a "nice" girl called Alice. Here again, as the plot thickens, it is inevitable that Carr, seeing Robinson moving out of his grasp, should step in and start cautiously to ingratiate himself with the girl. The most extraordinary passages for a young man to have written are those in this novel in which Robinson, in utter despair, is faced with the choice of either surrendering himself for a crime he *has* committed or taking his own life. Mr. Bloomfield's descriptions of the emotions of a man in mortal terror, his insight into human nature at its lowest ebb, are quite uncanny.

**A**FTER slaughter in South Africa and murder in the north of England it comes as a relief to turn to what must surely prove to be the year's best-tempered book. To readers under the impression that the Deep South of the United States is one large Faulknerian sanctuary or a land populated by Capote freaks and McCullers cripples, *The Untidy Pilgrim*\* should come as both a pleasure and a surprise. Which is not meant to suggest that this is a book about "ordinary people": everyone in it, from the coloured retainers and the gloriously uninhibited girls to the solemn nameless narrator, is as zany and unpredictable as only Southerners can be. The difference is that the whole crazy crew from Mobile, Alabama are free and fearless human beings whose common belief is that life should be enjoyed. All they ask is ample opportunity to talk—a chance which Mr. Eugene Walter certainly gives them.

The most formidable as well as the friendliest of this lovable set of eccentrics is old Miss Fifield, or Fiff, whose one ambition in youth was to become a bareback rider and in old age still has "sweet anarchy in her soul." Fiff also has the habit, when wishing to change the subject of conversation, of staring off into space

\* *The Untidy Pilgrim*. By EUGENE WALTER. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 12s. 6d.

and saying: "It must be lovely in New Zealand today." She is only a little less direct and downright than the old artist Kosta, a grand Augustus John-like figure who mourns for nothing but his dead poodle and keeps "a special hate-file of people who never see the difference between a pet and a beast-companion."

*The Untidy Pilgrim* is the sort of comedy

which, in the hands of an artist less pure than Mr. Walter, could so easily have disintegrated in woozy Southern whimsy. As it is, the book radiates the joy of living and, in its story of a youth growing up, contains passages which linger in the memory because they are moments of truth expressed with frankness and compassion.

James Stern

## LIFE AMONG THE VIRUSES

APRIL 1945; ten years ago, in Moscow. We were having dinner. One of the maids waiting on us suddenly burst out crying and ran out of the room. I went out to ask her what was the matter. Have you bad news about your husband from the front? No. Are your children ill? No. What, then, is wrong? Slowly between the sobs it came out: she had been ordered to go to the NKVD after dinner that night to report on my movements. She was indignant at the disloyalty of having to spy on her employers. Are you not (she said) our allies? And I had to reassure her that it was the custom of her country and that we would not think ill of her for doing her duty; indeed we would be glad to help her in any way we could. With this encouragement she was comforted and she went off a few minutes later to make her report.

Anyone who has had this experience, and a score of others like it, is not likely to doubt either Dr. Borodin's integrity or his essential accuracy in this book.\* But the reader unfamiliar with Russia needs some such assurance, because Dr. Borodin has written his autobiography in a peculiar style. He is a man of about fifty. He went to school in Tsarist Russia. During the famine of 1921 he was a boy of sixteen. He was a university student in the chaotic early days of Bolshevik rule. He recounts from these turbulent times the precise words of long conversations, verbatim accounts of speeches, particulars about clothes and food and furniture, which even Tolstoy, with his photographic genius for detail, could not have remembered. It would be a pity if, on this account, one were to doubt the reliability of

Dr. Borodin's story. Although he has (in my view unwisely) chosen to present his autobiography in the form of a fantasia, he undoubtedly does convey an accurate and undistorted impression of what it was like for an intellectual, a biologist, a good patriot, to grow up under Soviet rule.

IT IS a fascinating story, full of naïve optimism and senseless cruelty, illuminated every now and then with the deep humanity and spirituality which the Russian people have preserved through all their trials. Listen to this introduction to a lecture "on an anti-religious subject" delivered by Borodin in his student days, as a social duty to the local village (and for which he was given a present of a hundred eggs):—

"As you well know, comrades, we have now, thank God, the Soviet Power, which abolished the former God and replaced Him by Science. Science is better because it is more reliable. For instance, in the past, our former priests used to offer prayers for rain in summer, but not always with any result. Now science should soon reform such tricks and every old thing will be able to make his own rain, just by pushing a button. We shall soon live, comrades, better than was promised by the former church, the silly paradise where one does not eat or drink, but only sings and praises. Therefore, comrades, let us listen to our comrade from a town." After this short speech, some of the audience crossed themselves.

In that last sentence you have the tragedy (and the hope) of Soviet Russia.

Dr. Borodin suffered under the crazy pre-Bubnov era of Soviet education, when syllabus, teaching, and examinations in the University were all subject to control by a Party committee on which students themselves sat. One of the grave handicaps of Soviet science is the

\* *One Man in His Time*. By N. B. BORODIN. Constable. 21s.